

Fenn George Manville

# Friends I Have Made



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# George Manville Fenn

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### Chapter One. My Life

May I ask your patience while I introduce myself – the writer of the following chapters? I am sitting before the looking-glass at the end of my room as I write, I not from any vanity, you will readily perceive that as you read on – but so that I may try and reflect with my ink the picture that I wish to present to you of a rather sad – I only say *rather*, for, upon the whole, I am very cheerful, – thin, pale, careworn-looking woman, with hair that has long been scant and grey – whiter, perhaps, than that of many people at eight-and-forty.

Eight-and-forty! What a great age that seems to the young; and yet how few the years, save in one period of my life, have appeared to me! At times I can hardly realise that I am decidedly elderly, so busy has been my life, so swiftly has it glided away, thinking so much as I have of other people and their lives as well as of my own.

I never knew how it was, but, somehow, those with whom I came in contact always seemed to look upon me, because I had had trouble, as one in whom they could confide. I never sought their confidence, but when some weary wayfarer in life's journey has held out a hand to me, asking help or advice, it has grown into my pleasure to try and aid or counsel as far as in me lay. And it is strange how relieved some have been, what a quiet solace it has seemed, to pour out into my sympathetic ear the salient passages of their troubled lives. "You have suffered, so you can feel," has always seemed to be the thought, expressed or unexpressed, of their hearts, and hence, without being inquisitive, I have been made the storehouse, so to speak, of that which I without any breach of confidence propose to tell.

I should first, though, tell you of myself, for why should I lay bare the sorrows of others without prefacing them with my own?

A strangely quiet, uneventful life mine has been; its incidents simple, its troubles many, and its pleasures – I was about to say few, but that would be false, for its pleasures have been great. They have not been the boisterous joys that fall to the lot of some; but, feeling, as I do most thoroughly now, that the greatest delights, the purest and most unalloyed are those which are unselfish, I can think and believe that my pleasures have been many.

I will, then, tell you my own little history first, slight as it is, and you may, in reading, find that it is the key-note to the simple chords that I afterwards strike in passing, and perhaps it will explain why others have come to me to tell me what they knew.

It is a tale of early sorrow, but you shall hear, and you will bear with me when I tell you that the wound has never healed, and if I put my hand above it, the place still throbs, even as it will beat and ache till kindly nature says to me, "Sleep, poor weary one, and rest." And then peacefully, trustingly, and with a simple hope of forgiveness, may I sleep that long sleep which they say so flippantly has no end; but which has a waking, as every lesson which we learn in life persists in teaching.

You will smile, perhaps, when I tell you that I was once what people call pretty – that this pale, lined face was once plump and rosy, these sad eyes bright, and this grey scant hair golden-brown, long, and flowing. But why should I think you would smile? Do I not know that you must have seen the gay young plant putting out its tender leaves in spring, growing green and luxuriant of foliage in summer, ripe and ruddy in autumn, and grey, bent, and withered in age? And should I be pitied because I have but followed in the way of nature? Surely not. It is not for that I ask your sympathy,

but for the blight that fell upon the young plant, and seared and scathed it so that it seemed for months as if it would die; but it lived, as I have lived to tell you this.

Do you know that wondrous feeling which comes in the early year, and that strange sense of keen delight, that elasticity of spirit, when, full of youth and hope, the very tears of joyous sensibility start to the eyes as you wander amidst the trees and flowers in spring? I remember how I felt, oh! so well, even though it is now thirty years ago, and I was but eighteen.

Jack and I were engaged. It was all such a simple, homely affair. We had known one another for years – the children of neighbouring farmers. Jack – I still call him by the simple old pet name of those days – Jack had been away at a good school, and being bright, and shrewd, and clever, he had won his way on, taking to engineering instead of his father's farm life; and now it had come to this, that he had been staying at home for a month, previous to going out to a good appointment in Melbourne.

That month in spring, how it passed! We had met again and again, and in his honest, manly way he had asked me to be his wife.

"You know, Grace, that I have always loved you," he said; "and now I have hopes and prospects, it cannot be wrong to ask you for your promise."

We were walking by the river-side as he said this, and how well I can picture it all – the soft gliding water mirroring the trees on the opposite bank, the young green buds just breaking from their cases, and, above all, the soft tender blue of the spring sky – the blue, he had told me, that was like my eyes.

"Do you want me to promise, Jack?" I said, simply, as I looked up in his face.

"No, darling; I am satisfied," he cried, as his strong arms held me to his broad breast, and that was all. No oaths could have bound me more tightly to him. I felt that I was his wife when he should come to claim me some day – when?

We were late that evening, and entered the house shyly, for there had been so much to talk of and plan. In a month's time Jack was to sail for Melbourne; then he was to work very hard for three years, and come and fetch me to be his wife.

That month glided by, and the last day had come. It was, as I told you, spring-time – joyous spring-time, with the hawthorn's snowy blossoms, the apple-trees pink; and the pear-trees pearly with their pyramids of flowers. Every meadow I passed was starred with golden buttercups, and from every spray the birds trilled or jerked forth their merry songs of hope and love.

I could not feel sad, even though I was going to meet Jack for the last walk before he went away; but mingled with the feeling of ecstasy there was a strange tearfulness of eye, and my breath would come at times with a sob.

He was by the stile, waiting for me – the stile down by the long mead, half-way between the two farms – and as he took my hand in his, we neither of us spoke, but stood gazing away over woodland and meadow, all clad in their wondrous beauty, and listened to the birds. Now it was the soft tender coo of the stock-dove from the wood, now the jerked-out twittering song of the linnets; then, soft and mellow, from the thick hedgerows floated towards us the fluty notes of the blackbird, while far on high trilled away the larks, singing one against the other to their mates, sitting in the tall grass of the golden meads.

We could not talk, our hearts were too full, for Jack was to be off at daybreak the next morning. But there was no need for words. We loved each other in the simple nature-taught way that has been since the world began, and we knew that every joyous song around that thrilled upon our ears meant love, and even in our sorrow we were happy.

"Only three years, darling," Jack whispered to me, "and then –"

The tears rose to my eyes as I tried to answer him, but I could not speak a word.

"And you will let me find a long letter when I get there?" he said tenderly.

"Yes, Jack, I promise," I said, and then it was time to return, for the hours had glided by, how we could not tell.

Jack spent the evening with us at home, and then he left us hurriedly, for our farewells had been said in the wood, and it was one hearty kiss, given and taken before the old people, and then good-bye.

But I saw him pass soon after daybreak, and he saw me, and waved his hand, for I had sat by the window all night, lest I might let him go by, and I asleep.

And then time glided on sadly, but pleasantly as well. Mine was a busy life, for soon my father took to his bed, ill – a bed he never left again, for he gradually sank and died, leaving my poor mother in very indifferent circumstances.

It was a hard blow for us both, for he had been one of the kindest and truest of men; but while poor mother pined and waited, I had my hopeful days in view, and from time to time letters from dear Jack, all so frank and honest, and full of trust in the future, that I felt as if I could not repine, even when greater troubles fell upon me.

For at the end of two years I was standing by the bedside where lay poor mother sinking fast. She had had no particular ailment, but had literally pined and wasted away. The bird had lost its mate of many years, and when at last she kissed me, and said, “Good-bye,” it seemed to me to be in a quiet rest-seeking spirit, and she spoke like one looking hopefully forward to the meeting with him who had gone before.

But she could think of me even then, and almost the last whispered words were —

“Only eleven months, Grace, and then he will be back to fetch you.”

Poor mother! she would not have passed so peacefully away if she had known that which I withheld – namely, the news that had come to me from our lawyer. For, through the failure of the enterprise in which my father’s savings had been invested, and which brought us a little income of sixty pounds a year, I was left penniless – so poor, in fact, that the furniture of the cottage in the little town, to which we had moved when we left the farm, had to be sold to defray the funeral expenses.

It was very hard to bear, and for a month I was terribly depressed; but there was that great hopeful time ever drawing near – the end of the three years, when Jack would come to fetch me to be his wife.

It was now for the first time that I remember feeling particular about my personal appearance, and I studied my glass to see if Jack would find me looking careworn and thin, and my glass told me truly – yes.

But I had to be up and doing, and before another month was over, through the kindness of people whom we had known, I was placed where I could work contentedly for the bread I must earn till Jack should come to fetch me away.

It was at a large West-end dressmaker’s, and it was hard work to get used to the hurry and excitement of the place, where there were twelve girls living in the house, and as many more came every day.

There were all kinds of petty pieces of tyranny to submit to at first, and I suppose some of the foolish girls were jealous of me and my looks, so much so that I found they nick-named me “The Beauty.” Poor girls! If they had only known how little store I set by my looks, they would have behaved at first as they did later on.

The first thing that won them to me was when Mary Sanders was taken ill with a terrible fever. Madame Grainger was for sending her away at once, on account of her business, and the infection; but the doctor who was called in, a young, impetuous, but very clever man, told her that it would be at her peril if she did so, for Mary Sanders’ life was in danger. So the poor girl was shut up in her bedroom, without a soul to go near her except a hired nurse, and after the first night this woman stayed away.

No one dared go near the poor girl then, so I timidly asked leave to nurse her, for I felt no fear of the infection, and it seemed so hard for her to be left there alone.

I obtained leave, and went upstairs, staying with her till she recovered; and from that day there was always a kind look for me, and a kiss from every girl in the place.

What was more, oddly enough, perhaps because I was so quiet and restrained, first one girl and then another came to make me the confidante of her love-secrets, and ask my advice.

I gave it, such as it was, though heartsore myself, for Jack's letters to me had suddenly ceased. We had corresponded so regularly; but it had struck me that his last two letters had been formal and constrained; they were full of business matters too, and he had hinted at its being possible that he should not be able to keep time about the three years, in consequence of some contract.

I did not think this when I first read these letters, for then I had kissed and cried over them; but when no reply came to my last, I re-read them, and the coldness seemed apparent.

But I waited and waited, and then news came from the country. Jack's father, a widower, had died suddenly; and I said to myself, with throbbing heart, as I longed to be at his side to try and comfort him in his affliction, "Poor Jack, he will come home now."

But he did not come, neither did I get any reply to my last two letters. Another month, and the three years would be up; and as I sat over some work one spring morning by the open window, with a bunch of violets that one of the girls had brought me in a glass, the soft breeze that came floating over the chimney-pots and sooty roofs, wafted to me the scent of the humble little blossoms, and my eyes became full of tears, for in an instant the busy work-room had passed away, and I was down home by the river-side, listening to dear Jack, as he asked me to be his wife.

Only a month! only a month! my pulses seemed to beat; and as it happened we were all busy upon a large wedding order, and I was stitching away at the white satin skirt intended for the bride.

I tried so hard to bear it, but I could not, the rush of feelings was too great. Another month, and he was to have fetched me to be his wife, and I had not had an answer to my last fond and loving letters.

As I said, I tried so hard to bear it, but I could not, and stifling a sob, I hurried out of the work-room to reach my attic, threw myself upon my knees by the bed, and burying my face in my hands, I sobbed as if my heart would break.

For the terrible thought would come now, fight against it as I would – "Jack has grown tired of waiting, and has married another."

I fought so hard with the disloyal thought, but it would come, and I was sobbing passionately, when I felt a soft arm steal round my neck, a tender cheek laid to mine, and I found my poor tear-dewed face drawn down upon the bosom of Mary Sanders, who had stolen out of the work-room, and come up to try and comfort me.

"Pray, pray, don't fret, my darling," she whispered. "Madame will be so cross. Those wedding things must be in by to-night, and they want you to help try them on."

I don't know how I got through that day and night, but I believe I did such duties as were expected from me mechanically, or as if I had been in a dream, and at night I lay wakeful and weary, with aching eyes and heart, thinking of that dreadful idea that was trying to force itself upon me.

I waited till the three years had expired, and then, with what anguish of heart no words could tell, I wrote to Jack again – my fourth letter – begging him, imploring him to answer me, if but to tell me he was weary of his promise, and wished to be set free; and then, making a superhuman effort over myself, I waited, waited, month by month, for an answer, though I knew that it must be at least six months before one could come.

I had given up expecting one in the interim, and I was too proud to send to his relatives – distant ones, whom I had never seen, and who had probably never heard of me. The thought had taken root now, and grown to a feeling of certainty: but I waited for my answer.

Three months – six months – nine months passed away, and hope was dead within my heart. They said I had grown much older and more careworn. Madame said I worked too hard, and the sharp business woman became quite motherly in her attentions to me. It was then I learned for the first time how good and true a woman was she whom I served. Her battle with the world had made her keen and firm in her dealings with her work-girls, for hers was no life of ease. The ladies she had to toil for were exacting and thoughtless to a degree, and constant business worries had made her at



times most cold and strict, but she was always a lady, and more than once I felt that she must have moved in a sphere superior to my own. She had of late become most kind to me and pressed me to have a holiday. But I would not take any change, for work was like balm, it blunted my thoughts; and knowing that I was daily growing pale and thin, I still waited.

I knew the girls used to whisper together about me, and think me strange, but no one knew my secret – not even Madame, who had more than once sought my confidence; and so twelve months passed away – four years since Jack had left me.

It was not to a day, but very nearly to the time when he had parted from me, and it was almost two years since I had heard from him. I was trying hard to grow patient and contented with my lot, for Madame Grainger had gradually taken to me, and trusted me, making me more and more her companion, when one glorious spring morning, as I was coming out of the breakfast-room to go upstairs to work, she called me into her little room, where she sat as a rule and attended to her customers' letters, for she had an extensive *clientèle*, and carried on business in a large private mansion in Welbeck Street.

"Grace, my dear," she said, taking me in her arms, and kissing me, "it worries me to see you look so ill. Now, what do you say to a fortnight in the country?"

A fortnight in the country! and at her busiest time, with the London season coming on.

I thought of that, and then, as I glanced round at the flowers and inhaled their scents, the bright fields near Templemore Grange floated before my dimming eyes, a feeling of suffocation came upon me, and the room seemed to swing round. I believe that for the first time in my life I should have fainted, so painful were the memories evoked by her words, when a sharp knock and ring at the door echoed through the house, following instantly upon the dull fall of a letter, and the sharp click of the letter-box.

It was like an electric shock to me, and without a word I darted into the hall, panting with excitement, and my hand at my throat to tear away the stifling sensation.

But it was a letter. I could see it through the glass in the letter-box, and I seized it with trembling hands, inspired as it were by some strange power.

"Jack! dear Jack at last!" I gasped as I turned it over, and saw it was a strange, blue, official-looking letter, formally directed to me.

Even that did not surprise me. It was from Jack, I knew, and I tore open the blue envelope.

Yes, I knew it! The inner envelope was covered with Australian post-marks, and, ignorant as I might be of its contents, I was raising it to my lips to cover it with passionate kisses, when I saw it was open.

Then a mist came over my mental vision for a time, but only to clear away as, half stupefied, I turned the missive over and over, held it straight for a moment; and then, with a sigh of misery and despair, I stood mute, and as if turned to stone.

"Grace, my child! In mercy's name tell me –"

It was Madame, who passed her arm round me, and looked horror-stricken at my white face and lips. The next moment I dimly remember she had caught the letter – his letter – my letter – from my hand, and read it aloud: "Mr John Braywood, Markboro, R. County Melbourne," and then, in her excitement, the great official sentence-like brand upon it – "Dead!"

## Chapter Two.

### The Sorrows of Madame Grainger

I tried so hard to bear up, to keep secret my loss, but it was all in vain. My long days of waiting for that answer had weakened and undermined my constitution, so that I had not strength to bear up against the shock, and the result was a very serious illness during which I was given over by the doctors, but somehow they were wrong. The change was long in coming, but it came, and by degrees I was convalescent, but only the shadow of my former self.

Poor Madame, as we always called her, the French title as she laughingly used to tell me, bringing her ten times as many customers as would have fallen to her lot had she called herself Mrs Grainger, she tended me through my long illness as if she had been my mother, and I believe she loved me dearly. At times I had hinted at being sent away; at the expense and trouble I must be, but she used to lay her hand upon my lips and kiss my forehead.

“Don’t be silly, my child,” she said. “You know I make money fast, and how could I spend what little you cost better than in taking care of you.

“Grace, my child,” she said one night, after a feeble protest on my part, “sorrow brings people closer together. You are a widow now like I am, although you never were a wife. We two, my dear, must never part.”

I could only kiss her hand and cry silently, as I lay back in my easy chair, thankful that if I could live my lot would be made less hard to bear. For all through my weak and weary illness, when I was not thinking of dear Jack, the thought that I must be up and doing was for ever intruding itself, and that thought of going out to battle with the world once more seemed to keep me back.

I need not have troubled about my future, for that was to be my home. With returning health came greater intimacy, and by degrees I learned that Madame Grainger’s troubles had been greater, perhaps, than mine, for after a brief spell of married happiness her husband, a clergyman, had succumbed to poverty and overwork, leaving her almost penniless, to drift at last into the life she had led and become a busy thriving woman.

“Yes,” she said to me more than once, “I have often regretted the society in which I used to move, but it is better to depend upon oneself, Grace, than to be a burden upon one’s friends. I offended many by taking to this life, but I should have ceased to respect myself had I remained a poverty-stricken widow existing on the charity of those who blame me the most for my course.”

“You must have had a hard fight,” I said.

“I did, my child,” she replied, “a very hard fight, and it was at a time when I used to think that it would have been better to have lain down and died, as just one year before, my poor husband had closed his eyes.”

“How well I can recall it all,” she said dreamily, “long as it is ago. You told me your little life Grace, let me tell you mine. Did I ever say to you that Mr Grainger was a clergyman?”

“Yes,” I said, watching her intently, “you told me so.”

“Poor fellow!” she said with a sigh, “he asked me quite suddenly one day to be his wife.

“I was astounded, and yet pleased, and in a moment I had said quietly that it was impossible.

“Mr Grainger rose from his seat, looking inexpressibly pained, and walked slowly up and down the room, while I sat back in my chair by the window, with my heart beating violently, and a sense of suffocation upon me that was absolutely painful. But I was pained, too, for him: grieved that he should ever have asked me – more than grieved to have caused him sorrow. For in his suffering he looked so calm and gentle – he, the tall, stalwart man, with his fast-greying hair, and countenance marked with the lines printed by maturing age and thought. He had been so kind and friendly, too, ever since he had been at the parsonage, and in our daily work we had been drawn so imperceptibly

together, that I had hoped ours was to be a firm and lasting friendship; and now this meeting seemed to have brought it to an abrupt conclusion. Suddenly he stopped before me again, and stood looking down, while I crouched there almost fascinated by his gaze.

“‘Miss Denison – Laura,’ he said, in a low soft voice, ‘you must forgive me, and if you cannot accede to my proposal, let us be as we have been during the past happy year.’

“‘I tried to speak, but he held up his hand.

“‘Hear me out, dear friend,’ he said, ‘and let me speak again, for I still hope that I may have taken you by surprise. I have known you now for a year.’

“‘I tried to speak once more – to beg of him that he would let me leave the room – that he would bring our interview to an end; but my heart went on still with its heavy beat, and the suffocating sensation was still at my throat, so that I half lay there with my eyes closed, listening to his words, every one of which seemed to wake an echo, and increase the heavy throbbing of my heart.

“‘I had a love-dream once,’ he said; and his voice became very rich and soft. ‘I was tutor in a noble house. There was a daughter there whom I could have loved, had I but dared. Honour, position, all forbade it. She was heiress to thirty thousand pounds, and I was the young tutor to whose care the education of her brother had been trusted. She never knew my fancy, and I saw her married to a nobleman – happily, I hoped – while I – I returned to my books.’

“‘He paused again, and I sat up watching his half-averted face, as in those few words – so few but so pregnant of meaning – he laid bare to me his heart; and as he sighed, the heavy throbbing in my breast began to subside, and a strange feeling of pity for him to grow.

“‘I thought it but fair to tell you this,’ he said sadly, ‘to show you that I have no youthful first love to lay before you; but I felt that here, in this village, if your lot were joined to mine, the downhill of life would be made happy for me, as God knows I would try to make it ever green and pleasant for you, while those around us should be taught to bless us for the help we gave. It is no romantic offer,’ he said, more cheerfully. ‘It is very matter-of-fact, I know, but it was upon these grounds, dear friend, that I asked you to be my wife.’

“‘He looked down at me once again, and as our eyes met, something within me seemed to say, ‘Withdraw your refusal, and lay those trembling hands in his, for he is a man that you could love.’ But I only shook my head sadly, as I murmured —

“‘No, it could never be!’

“‘You are agitated,’ he said tenderly, as he took my hand and reverently kissed it. ‘I will leave you now. Mine is too solemn a proposal for us both to be replied to without consideration. Let all be as it was for a month, and then I will renew my suit. If, after this lapse of time, you shall think as you do now, believe me, I will never pain the woman whom I hope to retain as my best and dearest friend, by the faintest allusion to that which we will agree to bury in the past.’

“‘No,’ I said, with a firmness which surprised myself. ‘Stay Mr Grainger. Let me speak.’

“‘He bowed his head in his old pleasant manner and took his seat once more.

“‘I must undeceive you now – at once,’ I faltered. ‘It would be cruel to you – to us both, to let this rest only to be renewed at the month’s end,’

“‘He bowed his head still lower, and my heart gave a throb of gratitude as I saw the tender consideration with which he averted his gaze from my agitated face.

“‘There was again a terrible silence in the room, broken only by the distant murmur of the sunlit sea, as it broke upon the fine shingle three hundred feet below. There was a soft rustle, too, amongst the leaves around the window, and – I remember it so well – the pale pink petals of a rose kept falling slowly, fluttering down like the withered hopes of my past sad life, as I struggled hard for the calmness that should enable me to speak.

“‘There was no other man living to whom I could have made this confession, and not even to him an hour before; but after the way in which he had bared the secrets of his own heart to my gaze, a bond of sympathy seemed to have joined us, and something within me forced me to speak –

agitatedly at first, but with a growing calmness, that was even piteous to me, as I seemed to listen to my own words, and once more grieved over my sorrows, as if they had been those of another.

“‘Ten years ago,’ I said, ‘when I was in my nineteenth year, my mother in her widowhood and sorrow took this quiet cottage by the sea, to end her days in calmness and repose.’

“‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I know, she died two years ago, beloved by all.’ This in a tone of sympathy that seemed to give me strength.

“‘When we first came, we found that there were frequent mistakes made, for at the great house there was another family named Denison, and little confusions arose about our letters.’

“‘Yes, I have heard of them,’ he said pleasantly. ‘I have studied up the past history of the village. They were very wealthy, and there was a beautiful daughter, an heiress.’

“‘Yes,’ I said, ‘you are quite right, she was very beautiful and very rich. She used to call on me, and we were very friendly, for she was not spoiled by her position, and would have been my inseparable companion but for the duties I owed to my mother.

“‘As it was, we used to sit for hours in the nooks of the cliff, reading, or she would spend her evenings at the cottage, till Mr Denison fetched her himself, and playfully bantered me, telling me how jealous he was of her affection for the cottage and its occupants.

“‘Those were very bright and happy days, and the Isle seemed to us both a very Eden, though it is as beauteous now as it was then. But our dream was to be broken, for in consequence of Mr Denison’s failing health, their medical men ordered a change to a more bracing atmosphere, and the family left to spend a few months in Scotland.

“‘On the morning when I parted from Julia, I was so low-spirited that it was hard work to keep back my tears; but I fought with my folly, and getting the better of my trouble, I took some work and a book to go along the cliff path, and sit in one of our favourite nooks far above the sea.

“‘It was a dangerous place, inasmuch as the way was along a narrow sheep-track, and the slope down to the beach was very steep; but we were so accustomed to the giddy cliffs that the idea of danger never crossed our minds any more than it did those of the village children, who would run along the edges or scramble down the rock-face where there seemed hardly foothold for a goat.

“‘I suppose I must have been there about two hours, not reading or working, but thinking of how long the time would be before Julia Denison returned, and there I sat watching the passing vessels far out on the blue water where it seemed to melt into the sky.

“‘My musing came to a sudden end, for I felt that it was neglectful of me to stay away so long, and I began to hurry back.

“‘To reach the road above, after climbing a zig-zag path, I had to pass round a bold bluff of chalky rock which projected from the cliff, and effectually concealed the path on the other side.

“‘I was so used to the way that I almost ran round, when to my horror and astonishment I came roughly in contact with a gentleman walking in the opposite direction.

“‘I hardly know how it occurred, but partly from the collision, partly in consequence of my hasty step back, my foot slipped over the edge of the path, the crumbling stones gave way, and I fell.

“‘It would have been no very terrible fall, only a severe scratching and a sprain, for the cliff there was only a steep slope; but I was saved by the gentleman catching my wrist, and at the expense of a severe wrench, dragging me back to the path; and before I could recover from the surprise and the sick faint feeling that came over me, he was carrying me along the path to a grassy slope, where he tenderly laid me down, and poured between my lips a few drops of spirit from a flask.

“‘Lie still,’ he said, in a low, sympathetic voice. ‘Thank Heaven, my poor child, you are safe!’

“‘There was such a tone of command in his voice, and he seemed to imply that I had been saved from such a terrible danger, that in my weak state I accepted it all, and with a girl’s romantic folly began to feel gratitude to my preserver, as I lay there blushing glancing at the handsome face so full of solicitude that was hanging over me.

“There was something in his words that went to my heart every time he spoke, and at his wish I did not attempt to move for some time, till he yielded to my solicitations, and agreed that I was sufficiently recovered to walk home.

“‘You are more hurt than you think, you brave little woman,’ he said tenderly. ‘There take my arm and I will see you home.’

“‘Indeed I can walk,’ I said, but a faint cry of pain escaped me as I tried, for my ankle was slightly sprained, and I was glad to lean upon him, and accept his escort home.

“‘Am I right in thinking I am speaking to Miss Denison?’ he said on the way.

“‘Yes,’ I said, surprised at the knowledge on the part of a stranger; ‘but how did you know?’

“‘Know!’ he said laughing; ‘did you suppose that in this little Isle of Wight a beautiful flower could blossom without its fame reaching through its length and breadth?’

“I started, hardly knowing whether to feel pleased or annoyed, and my replies were in monosyllables, till we reached the cottage, greatly to mamma’s surprise and alarm. Here, with the most gentlemanly consideration, my companion took his leave, and I was helped to the sofa, where my little sprains were seen to, and the pain soon forgotten.

“Recollect I was but nineteen, and such attentions were quite new to me. I think, then, I may be excused for listening the next day with fluttering pulses to a voice that I heard through the open window, inquiring after my health; then feeling something very near akin to pain as I heard the retiring footsteps; while when mamma took from the servant a card and read aloud, ‘Captain Hansleigh, Raypark Barracks,’ a vivid blush overspread my cheeks, only to deepen as I caught her searching gaze and heard her sigh.

“I know now how foolish I was to let my weak young heart go forth to the first fowler that laid for it his snares, but I was innocent and unskilled then. I was but a girl in ways and thoughts, and the brave, handsome young officer, who had been in India, and bore a scar upon his forehead, made the poor weak heart beat whenever he approached. For what was I – was my argument – that this man, who could pick and choose in society, should be ever coming over to our cottage to seek me out?

“Then I was, as I said, but young and vain, and in a few short weeks Julia was almost forgotten in this new, strange, wondrous feeling of love.”

Mr Grange’s head went down upon his hand, but I hardly noticed it as I proceeded, wound up now by a strange desire to tell him all, even though my heart was torn by the old recollections that were so vivid as I recalled them from the past.

“Captain Hansleigh was constantly calling. His manner won mamma to his side, and at, last he told her that he was but a poor officer who loved his profession and hoped to rise, as he begged her leave to tell me how he loved me.

“How he loved me! He had already told me a score of times, and I, weak child, believed and loved again with all my fond young heart, sitting day after day book in hand, pretending to read, but understanding never a word, as I listened by the open window for the easy, careless step on the gravel beneath the vine-clad verandah, till he came by in his easy *nonchalant* way, perhaps pretending not to see me as he passed on towards the door.

“I used to think afterwards that what befel me was a punishment for my selfish happiness. For I was happy then, listening to the music of his words, while we wandered along the cliff. The sea with its rich deep undertones seemed to sing of endless love and joy; there was music in the very air, sweet music that filled my heart with delight, and I was blind to all else but the one belief that I breathed in thankfulness with my prayers from my knees at night, again as my eyes unclosed to the bright morning, and felt ever beating in every throb of my pulses – ‘He loves me! he loves me! he loves me!’

“Three months fled like magic, and still my dream was unbroken. He had left me, as he won from me my confession that I would be his, and his alone – that I loved him with all my heart – and then I had in the sorrow of my parting gone down upon my knees, to thank God for giving me the love of that great, strong, brave man.

“His regiment was called away to another part, but he had said that he would be always near in thought, and had questioned me about our family, and papa, who had died so suddenly; though I did not think it was strange then, and the recollection of it all did not come to me till long afterwards.

“His head-quarters were two hundred miles away; but letters would constantly be passing to and fro, and as soon as the bitterness of the parting was over I began to look forward to our next meeting, and to write down my loving thoughts; besides which, I felt how neglectful I had of late been towards mamma and my ordinary duties. I redoubled then my efforts, and in these busy occupations the time glided on.

“I wrote almost daily, covering page after page with my fond happiness, feeling disappointed that the replies were few and short, but reading the words and investing them with rainbow hues, as I treasured each expression of fondness, and excused him on the score of his military duties. ‘And besides,’ I said, ‘men never write as a woman does; it is not right they should.’

“It was long before distrust crept into the heart so full of love. There was no room for other than loyal thoughts. Letters grew fewer and more brief, but there were always excuses ready, and I wrote to him the more. But at last constant sapping began to undermine, and though I fought long and hard, till my cheek was sunken and pale with my sleepless nights, distrust and doubt carried the citadel one day, when I had written many letters in a month, and only had one brief reply, telling me in answer to my agonised inquiries that he was quite well, but busy. Those two enemies to my peace carried the citadel at last, for the question now in my mind was – ‘Does he love me?’

“I could not bear it at first, and an agonising week passed by, during which I wrote to him again, and then again, imploring him to come to me if he could, or else to write to me at length, or my heart would break.

“Another week of misery passed away, during which my heart seemed to sink and wither, while the fount of my tears, long since drained, dried up. I went about the place like a ghost, or sat watching the lane through which the postman came.

“At last a letter; I knew that there was one, for seeing me at the window, instead of looking another way as had been his custom of late, as soon as he came in sight the postman gave me a friendly nod, and the next moment waved a letter in the air.

“I darted out to meet him, with feverish haste, caught the letter from him, and saw that it was in the well-known hand. My mother was in the passage as I rushed in.

“‘From Arthur, mamma, from Arthur!’ I panted joyously, and I hurried into the little parlour, kissing the paper with delight, as I told myself that here was balm for my sore aching heart – and then a strange fit of trembling came over me, and I felt cold and as if seized by a chill.

“I did not dare for a time to open my letter, but at last with my eyes dim, and dread feeling of sickness upon me, I made the effort and tore open the envelope. How my thin white fingers trembled as I took out the enclosure! But my strength came back with the effort I made, and I read the few lines it contained in the midst of what seemed to be a deadly calm, wherein feeling and sound were frozen up, and I was as it were alone.

“The words were very few, saying in measured terms that it would be better that the engagement should be at an end, for it had been commenced in error, and could never end in happiness for me. In short, he had during his absence tried his heart and found that he did not love me as it would be his duty, and therefore the present course would be the best for both.

“I remember that I gave a hysterical laugh as I finished the heartless lines, and then I mocked at myself. But that hard feeling passed away, and I sank down by the window softened – broken – and as my head went down upon my hand, I asked for help to bear the bitter, bitter blow that had bruised and beaten me to the earth.

“I fell into a dreamy state then, from which I was aroused by my poor mother, who came and knelt beside me. I was quite calm, and placed the letter in her hands with a sad smile, rising when she had read it, and kissing her before sitting down and taking up my work.

“I was not ill, but for the next month seemed dull and stunned, trying to bear all patiently; the greatest pang being when I heard from Julia Denison that the error of Captain Hanleigh had been that he had mistaken me for the heiress, to whom he afterwards proposed, and was indignantly refused.”

“That is my story, Mr Grange,” I said, rising and standing flushed and trembling before the second suitor of my bitter life. “It was right that you should know; and now, good-bye!”

The strength that had sustained me through my narrative was fleeting fast, and my heart had resumed its painful throbbings, as he stood before me and took my hand.

“I knew that there must have been some terrible grief,” he said in a low voice full of emotion; “but, Laura, can you tell me truly, for your own future happiness, and for mine, that this gentle heart can never love again?”

A thousand thoughts flashed through my mind of endless loving-kindness, of gentleness to the suffering, of watchful nights by sick couches, of the many acts of this man for whom the deadliest diseases had no terror even when others fled. I knew him to be the soul of truth and honour, and he, had told me of his love. Could I then say that this heart could never love again, when in spite of sadness, sorrow, and the past, it had leapt to him even as it had leapt once before? I struggled hard asking myself if this was not self-deceit, but there was none, and I knew that if I said no it would be a lie.

He saw it all and knew, for a calm sweet smile of ineffable joy overspread his face, and the next moment I was sobbing gently on his breast.

“My dream of happiness was more than fulfilled, Grace,” continued Madame Grainger, “but it was too joyous to last. Two years glided away and then I was alone once more with a future before me that was one weary blank. Ah! Grace, how little the world knows of others’ sorrows, and what histories are hidden often behind a smiling face.”

## Chapter Three.

### My little hero

It was not long after that Madame Grainger gave up business on account of her ill-health, and the kindness she had rendered to me I was able to return, nursing her constantly, till one sad day when I found myself alone – a very dear friend had passed away, almost her last coherent words being an assurance that I was beyond want; and so I afterwards found when her solicitors told me that she had left me all of which she died possessed.

It was some time before I could realise the fact that I possessed an independence; and at times I hesitated as to whether I should not refuse to accept what was to me a fortune, but a little consideration showed me how I could be, as it were, the steward of that which I held in trust, and there were plenty of ways in which I might dispense help to those around.

One of my first friends who seemed to ask was little Bill, a boy I used to meet in my visits to the solicitor's in the City. He was a diminutive, sharp-faced boy, carrying a bit of stick covered with india-rubber rings, which, in a shrill, piping voice, he called at a penny a dozen.

I knew Bill, not personally, but well; and for quite two years we had often encountered, and sometimes done a little business together. For Bill had not always sold india-rubber rings, but was engaged in a good many commercial transactions in our big city, while trying very hard to solve that most difficult of problems: Given a mouth: how to fill it. It was Bill who used to shriek after me, "Box o' lyats," and would not believe that I never smoked and had no use for the cascarilla scented vesuvians. It was Bill who used to make me nervous to see him in front of the Mansion House at three o'clock of an afternoon, paddling barefooted in and out of coach, carriage, cab, and 'bus, like a muddy imp; now under a wheel almost, now amongst the horses' legs, now nearly run over, and taking it as a matter of course; but ever fearless and busy, darting in and out to vend the newspapers beneath his arm.

Up on 'bus steps, beside Hansoms, splashed, earnest, and busy, it was Bill that was eagerly seeking to earn the universal penny – that foundation of fortunes. It was Bill that set up an opposition box, and shrieked, "Clean yer boots, sir. Hey, ear yer are, sir," till the competition and ferocity of the brigade proved too much for him. It was Bill who used to run about with three oranges in his hand till they were sold for a penny. In short, it was Bill, who puzzled me to count up the sum of his commercial transactions, or the many phases in which he had presented himself to my notice.

Yes, we were old friends, Bill and I, and to do him justice, I never saw the boy idle. An old-fashioned boy was he – quite a man in his way. Used to knocking about, and being knocked about in the streets, his experience of London life was something startling. Living so much in the mud and amongst the dregs of our busy city, he always reminded me of an eel, and well he acted up to his part – little, lissome, and quick, he would wind in and out of a crowd, no matter how dense, and somehow or another Bill grew to be one of the "common objects of the shore" of that busy sea of life – London.

A quiet, earnest, pale face, sharp, dark eyes, and an old, careworn look, that seemed to whisper of the pinchings of hunger, while – yes, there certainly was more dirt than looked good for him.

I had dealt with little Bill several times before we became intimate enough for questioning, but at last, after a purchase, I asked him where he lived.

"Down by Brick Lane, mum, and mother does mangling. Three brothers and two sisters, and they're all younger nor me. I'm the only one as goes out to work."

"And what does your father do?" I asked.

"Father, mum? Ah, he's dead, mum. Fell off a scaffle, and they took him to the 'ospital, where mother and me used to go to see him till one day, when I had to take mother back, for she said she was blind, and held her head down and kept her hands over her face till I got her home, when she did



nothing but cry for three days. It was then as mother got the mangle, and Tommy and Sam helps turn, only they're such little chaps, and don't do much good. I always turns when I gets home o' nights, and have had my tea, and that's after I've done selling the papers."

"I've got my living for three years now, and never makes less than sixpence a day, and sometimes I've cleared a shilling; and mother says it's so useful, for the t'others eat so much bread that a quartern loaf's gone directly. But mother says she reckons that what I bring home always pays the rent and keeps me – which helps, you know."

And this was all said with such a quiet ease, free from want or desire to show up the family troubles to a stranger: though being perhaps something more, almost one of a familiar face, Bill did not scruple to talk of the family affairs and his own prospects.

"I'm going to have a barrer some day, when I gets big enough to manage one. That's a fine trade, you know; selling all them beautiful fruits round about the 'Change – waiting and stopping when you gets a chance, for the pleece won't let you stay anywhere. There's Harry Sanders makes ever so much, only he's a big married man, wife and two little 'uns and a dawg. Sometimes it's pineapples his barrer's full off, then it's cherries, or plums, or peaches, or apples, or pears; at early times, strawberries or sparrowgrass, and all done up nicely in baskets or bundles, so as the big City gents will buy them to take home down in the country. But mother says I must wait ever so long yet, 'cos I'm so little for my age."

"Might I come and see you, Bill?" I asked.

"You can cum if you like mum, only our room ain't werry comfortable, and the mangle skreeks so, whilst the two littlest often cries a deal, and makes a noise because Sally don't mind 'em well. How old is she? Oh, Sally's six, only she ain't a useful gal, and always was fond of slipping out and playing in the court with the other gals and boys, as always comes up to play because there's no carts and 'busses coming by. You'll come some day, then, mum? Don't you go when I ain't at home. Good-bye, mum. Don't want another indy-rubber ring, do you?"

Another day and I was looking out near the Mansion House for my little hero, when my heart sank at the sight of a gathering crowd, generally a danger signal, in that busy way.

"What's the matter, my man?"

"Matter? Why it's a wonder it don't happen five hundred times a day. That's what it is – a runnin', an' a dodgin', an' a bobbin' about in amongst the 'osses' feet, and a gettin' runned over, as a matter o' course, at last."

Yes, at last, as I found on elbowing my way through the gaping crowd, feasting their eyes upon the sight of a little muddled bundle of clothes, above which appeared a little, old-looking, scared, quivering, and pain-wrung countenance, while two muddy hands tightly clutched a dirty parcel of evening papers to his breast.

"He ain't much hurt, bless you," said a policeman. "You're all right, ain't yer, old man? Now then, try and get on yer legs."

The little muddy object stared wildly round at the many faces, and his lips moved, but no sound came; while as the policeman tried to lift him up, a low, sobbing, heart-wrung cry came from the poor child's breast, and drew a compassionate murmur from the crowd.

"It's them Hansoms, you see," said a man beside me; "they cuts along full roosh; and one of 'em caught the poor little chap, threw him down, and the wheel went right over him."

"Well, where does it hurt, eh?" said the policeman, not unkindly.

The dim eyes were turned up to the speaker; the papers clutched tightly to the muddy breast; the poor child's lip quivered for a moment, and then Nature was kind to the little sufferer, and he fainted.

"Fetch a cab," I said, kneeling down beside the little fellow, and gently touching the leg which showed the mark of the cab wheel.

"Is it broke, mum?" said the policeman.

I nodded; the cab came up; and there, with the little fellow supported between us, the policeman and I were rumbling over the stones, and on our way to Guy's Hospital. But it is no such easy task to make your way amidst the dense throng of vehicles crowding the bridge, and some time elapsed – time enough for the poor boy to revive a bit, and look about him in a confused, half-stunned way, as if not able to realise his position. At last he spoke:

"I hadn't sold 'arf of 'em," he cried, looking at his dirty newspapers, "and no one won't buy 'em, now;" when the mental pain proved harder to bear than the bodily, and the boy began to cry.

"There, don't do that," said the policeman; "that won't do no good. But here we are."

"Does it hurt you much, Bill?" I said gently, and the boy looked wonderingly at me, as if asking how I knew his name.

"Not so worry much," he said, with the bottom lip still quivering; "but mother will be in such a way. Don't let them hurt me any more."

Bore it like a hero he did, and then I left him bright and cheerful, asking a nurse how long it would be before he could run again and sell his papers, while to me he said: "Tell her it ain't bad, mum please, and that she ain't to cry much, and as soon as I get better I'll sell twice as many papers to makeup for it; and you'll give her that sixpence I took out of my trousers, and I think I must have lost a penny when I got – knock – knock –"

The quivering of the lip began once more, for the recollection of the accident was too strong for the little fellow's fortitude, and soon after I was once more amongst the hurrying footsteps on my way to execute my sorrowful commission by Brick Lane.

A thickly-inhabited part – thickly inhabited by our poorer brethren, by disease engendering smells, by fogs, by smoke, by misery and wretchedness unutterable. Dirty butchers' shops, dirty bakers' shops, open shops where wretched vegetables are vended, shops for sheep's heads and faggots, tripe and sausage shops, brokers' so replete with dirty, time-worn furniture that chairs and tables and stump bedsteads are belched forth upon the narrow pave. Here was a chair with a crick in its back, there a lame table; higher up a cracked looking-glass, while lower down was a wash-tub and four rusty flat-irons. Great Eastern carts and waggons were blocking the way, and now and then side streets revealed the busy mysteries of the goods department. Now I put my foot into an old iron tray full of rusty keys. Extricating myself, I kicked against some jangling iron work, and then hurried on past the shop where the best price was given for old bones; and now I came to a small red board, hung by a string to the bolt of a parlour window-shutter. There was a painting in yellow upon the board – a painting of a very gouty-legged, heavy-bodied mangle; while beneath it was the legend: —

"Mangling Done Here."

At the door a bottomless chair was laid sideways to restrain the inquiring dispositions of a treacly-faced child, playing with an old brass candlestick, which it ever and anon sucked with great apparent relish; while upon my knocking loudly, the child howled furiously until a woman, with crimply white hands and steaming, soap-suddy arms, made her appearance.

"Does Mrs Perks reside here?" I said.

"Oh, bother; no, she don't," was the answer; and then I stood alone.

I was wrong, for I had evidently hit upon a rival establishment where mangling was done; but a little more searching brought me to where I could hear the creaking and groaning of the stone-burdened machine as it slowly rolled backwards and forwards in sight of the passer-by, and I soon had a pale face, clean-looking window sobbing bitterly as I told of the mishap.

"But you're not deceiving of me; he's not worse than you say? Oh, my poor, poor boy!"

There was the mother spoke in those last words – the mother's heart asserting itself, and showing that the love of the poorest and most uneducated is, after all, but the same as may be found amongst the greatest of our land.

"You see, he is so good, and old, and kind, and earns so much, that since my poor husband died he's been such a stay. And now for him, too, to be in a 'ospital it does seem so hard! I can't

help taking on a bit, about it; for he never seemed like other boys, playing and liking to run about the streets; for all he thinks about is to earn money and bring it home. Once he brought me five shillings and three-pence halfpenny in one week, as much as I can make myself some times with the mangle; and then, poor boy, he'd pull off his jacket and wet soppy boots, and turn away at that handle, after tramping about through the cold muddy streets all day. He's never tired, he says, and he lights my bit of fire of a morning, and helps wash his brothers, and now – oh! what shall I do?"

But the thought of her boy's suffering made the poor woman dry her eyes, and by the time she was composed we were back again in the street where Guy's Hospital stands, and then, after muttering a hope that Sammy would mind his brother Pete didn't set his pinafore a fire, the mother entered the building, and we parted.

"And how's the leg, Bill?" I asked him some time later.

"A'most well, mum, ony I can't get it quite straight yet, being a bit drawn; but it never hurts now."

"Down by Brick Lane still?"

"No, ma'am; mother lives close by Camberwell, in one o' them streets out o' Walworth Road, and does clear starching now; and as soon as the leg gets quite well I'm a-going to have a barrer."

But his ambition was never gratified, for soon after the little hero was in a respectable situation and doing well.

## Chapter Four.

### A Morning with Misery

I give these as so many random recollections of my life or narratives related to me from time to time, and I have, as being more in keeping with the mood in which they are written, naturally given prominence to those which lean towards the sad and pathetic side of life. My dealings with little Bill encouraged me to visit here and there in the poorer portions of London, at first in fear and trembling, for the rougher men that hung about the entrances to the courts and often blocked the way inspired me with horror and dread, but somehow before long I found that I had become known, and I and my basket were welcome visitors in many a dark home, and at last I had no hesitation in penetrating the worst portions of that doleful district, back of Drury Lane and the portion swept away to make room for the Courts of Justice.

I remember well one morning that I had with misery in its haunts and my search for a house of whose occupants I had been told. I had been considering for some few minutes rather at fault, when I came upon a group of boys engaged in a game of buttons upon the pavement, and my inquiring for Burt's Buildings created quite a little scene of excitement.

"Burt's Buildings, ma'am?" said one, as all rose to stare at me. "It's first turning to the left after you gets down Popper's Court."

"No 'tain't now," cried another, "you let me tell the lady. It's the first turning to the left past old Blacke's where the lamp hangs as Jim Pikehurst broke; and then you goes –"

"No you don't ma'am, it's up this way, ma'am. He means Burt's Court, where they're pulling down. I'll show you ma'am."

"But are you sure you know?" I said.

"No, ma'am," cried half-a-dozen in chorus, "he don't know, ma'am, not a bit."

Here there was a threatening gesture from my would be guide, and a defiant war-whoop in reply, but uttered in retreat, and the next minute I was standing amongst the rags of one of the inns of court, in company with a little sallow skinned boy about ten, dressed in a great deal of trousers and very little shirt. The weather being warm, this completed his costume, if I except the dirt with which he was largely decorated.

In company with a similarly costumed boy of his own age, he was now making a light repast off a piece of black, gristly stuff which they called "fungus;" but whose odour announced it to be the composition of glue and treacle used by printers for their ink-rollers. My boy – that is to say, the one who became my guide – was at the same time forming designs upon the broken pavement by placing one of his bare feet in the black gutter, full of unutterable abominations, and then printing the foot – heel, sole, and toes – upon various dry spots. Now he would contract his toes, now expand them, and then seem to derive much pleasure from making the foul black mud of the gutter ooze up between them in little gushes which met and formed a dirty stream upon his instep.

Whose house did I want? Well, I only wanted leading to the place itself; and after divers wanderings in and out, I stood in Burt's Buildings, and looked about, with more than one curious pair of eyes watching me. On my right were a couple of uninhabited tenements – tenements untenable – the grating in front rusty and worn, the walls foul with mud, every window that could be reached by stick or stone broken, every available ledge loaded with an assortment of stones, bones, cabbage-stumps, oyster shells mingled with those of the cockle, periwinkle, and whelk; while the remaining eight or nine houses in the court were at first sight in the same predicament, though the second glance told that all their windows were not broken, while further inspection showed that attempts had been made in a variety of ways to repair the breaches made by time and the smaller builders of the place. Paper seemed much in favour in some sashes; wood and pieces of slate in others; one gashly breach

was stopped by an old rusty tea tray, which well covered four broken squares; while rags, straw, and a variety of articles which would have required analysis to catalogue, displayed themselves obtrusively at every turn.

By slow degrees little signs showed that, although the inhabitants presented themselves but little, yet there were dwellers here. At one window a bright red and yellow tulip grew in an old black teapot, whose nose and handle evidently helped to form the rubbish heap down one of the gratings. At another window there was a small bird-cage – such a small cage for the restless linnet within, which breasted the wires incessantly, ever twittering and bringing thoughts of far-off blue-arched campaigns, where the trees were delicate with their bright golden green, and the emerald turf was spangled with the flowers of spring. Again, at another window, two or three articles of washed clothing had been hung out to dry, and secured by shutting the window down upon them. While the next instant came a whoop and a yell, and a troop of children swept back into the before silent court, from which they had evidently been drawn by some foreign attraction. The babies were there, tied in the customary drabby, washed-out shawl, swaying in the most top-heavy manner. The mothers were there now, at door and window, to shriek out warning or threat; while now appeared the first male inhabitant in the shape of a closely-cropped man, with a bull head and a black pipe, a villainous countenance, and a little dog which he nursed as he looked out of one of the windows, and stopped at intervals to spit upon one particular broken slab in the court below.

“This here’s Burt’s Buildings,” said my guide; who then spun the penny I gave him into the air, caught at it, struck it upon the edge, when down it fell, and rolled to the grating of an empty house and was gone; but hardly quicker than the little boy had leaped forward and thrown himself down upon his face, to peer between the rusty bars.

Who could have resisted the dismay and misery of that boy’s face as he raised it to mine? or have failed to enjoy the sudden change to hope and delight as the hand which went to a pocket placed another coin in his hand, to send him turning the wheel along the court till he had disappeared; while half a score of the young builders formed themselves into a committee of inspection, and wedged their noses down between the bars in their endeavour to catch a glimpse of the lost coin.

And now I was at Burt’s Buildings, for what had I come, but to see misery; and I saw her, gaunt, and foul, and wan, looking at me from every landing as I slowly ascended step by step the creaking old stairs, which threatened to give way once and for all beneath my weight, as they hung to the wall, while the balustrade seemed to have disappeared a bit at a time for firewood. I saw misery looking out at me from the dark eyes of a woman, who coughed painfully at intervals, as she told me of how she found bread for herself and three children.

“It came hard on me, you see, ma’am, when my poor master died. We were out of the country, and come up here for work, and very good work he got till the accident that laid him up for six weeks. Out-patient of the hospital he was, and they were very kind to him; and though he never took regularly to his bed, he seemed to dwindle away, and he was took. Don’t think me hard-hearted because I don’t cry about it, ma’am; I’ve cried till the tears seem as if they would not come any more, and what one has to do for a bit of bread is so trying at times that one has no time to be fretting.

“You see, children are so thoughtless, and yet you can’t wonder at it – but as long as they have their meal’s victuals that’s all they think about. But then they’re very young, you see, and don’t know any better. That big one’s seven, and she minds the two others while I go out, and I always manage not to be gone more than three hours at a time, though it hinders me a good deal from taking longer beats, for you see I’m out now-a-days in this pleasant spring weather with flowers. I’d do needlework, so as to be at home with them, but, oh! it’s heart-breaking work. It was hard enough, I dare say, before there were sewing machines, but it’s dreadful now, and you may work day and night almost to live. Just fancy being paid so many farthings for making a garment that has taken hours, while the poor children have been fretful and miserably cooped up in this one room – half-a-crown a week I pay for it, because it’s one of the most decent, and I like being up at the top of the house, here, for one seems

to get a little more fresh air, even if it's smoky. The poor bairns didn't seem to breathe down below there, and grew more white and pasty-looking every day till I got them up here.

"I'm not particular what I sell as long as it is in season and people will buy. But it's no matter what one takes to, there's scores about selling the very same thing, and it's quite a fight sometimes for the next penny. Flowers always did, and I suppose always will, sell well, and I do the best I can with mine by sprinkling and keeping them fresh, and setting them out as tasty as I can, so as to catch people's eyes. There's very few people, no matter how hard they are, but what you can make the way to their hearts with a pretty, sweet-smelling blossom or two. I suppose as God made them, He's given them that power, and I've had your hard City men, who make money all the day long, stop in front of my basket with the lines softening out of their faces, and a brightness coming into their eyes that seems to stop for long enough; and if they buy, say, a bunch of violets or a few wallflowers, they'll stop about them, not picking and choosing and beating you down, but pretending to, so that they may hang about the basket, and smell them, and look at their simple beauty.

"I keep at flowers all I can, for it's a good trade for a poor woman like me; and even in that one gets one's regular customers. One simple-looking boy comes and buys rosebuds of me; and I smile to myself, sadly enough though, for it reminds me of old times, when one's eyes were bright, and one's face was smooth and fresh-coloured, and Tom used to say – Well, never mind, ma'am, I won't bother you with that nonsense; but this customer of mine buys those rosebuds to give to some proud girl, I feel sure – one as will never look at him; and the poor fellow always sighs when he buys his roses. One gentleman buys a bunch regularly to take home to his wife; another for his children; and work-girls love them dearly, to keep them in water in their rooms. I call regular at one house, and somehow I always make up my best bunch for there. You see, it's for a sick girl who has been lying months and months, and they tell me she will never get better; while the thought of her seems to remind me of my own trouble, and I feel sorry for her; and after the servant has taken the sweet, fresh bunch, and paid me for it, I seem to picture it all – the poor invalid smiling and brightening up at the sight of the pretty flowers, as she holds out her poor, thin, white hands for them, and perhaps kisses them, and holds them to her poor pale face. I don't know that she does – I only seem to fancy it is so.

"Rich and poor, ma'am, all alike, and ready to be customers for a few flowers; and I often felt cut to see the eager looks some poor creatures give at them, and how ready they are to part with almost their last coin to get hold of them. Why, I've known boys who had perhaps a penny to get a bit of bread-and-butter for their tea come and spend it with me; and once, bad off as I was myself, I could not take the longing little fellow's penny, but gave him the flowers.

"You see, it seems to come into the hearts of all God's creatures, I think, to love the bright country; and when tiny bits of it like are held before them, it sets them longing, and makes them eager to get them. But it's hard work at times to know what to do, for flowers fade and die, and after one has come down to the lavender, and cried that round the streets, it's getting a hard matter to know what to sell. I've come home here o' nights before now, and gone down on my knees by that bit of a bed and cried to be taught what to do next to get a bit of bread for the little ones, whom I've found huddled together fast asleep – after crying, perhaps, for long enough because mother did not come home. And shall I tell you why mother did not come home, ma'am? Well, it was because she had tramped hour after hour, street after street, to find a customer, and then came home disappointed and heart-sick. Then, perhaps it would be the crying, or perhaps better thoughts came into one's ignorant heart; but I've got up better, and somehow the sun would shine a bit for me the next day, so that I could make a few pence; and one way and another we manage to live, while others starve."

Was it one's heart that had grown heavier with listening to the widow's sorrows? Perhaps so; for certainly the stairs creaked more loudly as I went down past misery staring from more than one lair, hollow-eyed and gaunt, as though speaking as the flower-selling widow; and then I stood once more in the court, threaded my way past the children that flocked there, several of whom were fishing with

bits of string for the lost coin, and, on reaching the *embouchure*, encountered young Trousers, who grinned a welcome as I passed, and ceased printing black feet upon the pavement.

“I ain’t spint that there copper,” he shouted after me.

“Haven’t you?” I said. “What shall you do with it, my man?”

“Give it to mother,” said the grimy young rascal, with an earnestness that there was no mistaking; and I passed on, thinking what a fine lad that little fellow would have made if planted in different soil with some one to carefully watch him and tend.

## Chapter Five. Ruth's Stepfather

I feel a shrinking – a strange kind of hesitation in narrating some of these adventures lest the reader should think me full of egotism, and that I told of my little charities as if proud of what I had done. Pray chase any such idea from your minds, for I can honestly say that no feeling of vanity ever existed in mine. I am merely relating the pleasures of my life, my rambles amongst weeds and flowers – the weeds and sad lined blossoms of our town.

I was much troubled in my mind as to how I could most help the widow of Burt's Buildings, and I knew that I could best assist her by helping her to help herself. One of her great troubles was that she had to leave her little ones so long, and a strange sense of pain had shot through me as she spoke of finding them huddled together as they had cried themselves to sleep. What could I do then?

The thought came: A sewing machine! that which had been her enemy to be now her friend; and the next morning I was in one of our busiest streets in front of a large establishment within whose plate-glass doors I saw a pretty lady-like young woman, busy winding thread upon one of some dozen of the ingenious little pieces of mechanism, and upon stating my wants she led me up to a bluff, sharp-looking, grey man whose face seemed to soften as she spoke before returning to her task.

"Sewing machine ma'am, eh?" he said, eyeing me very sharply. "Own use?"

"No," I said, "I want it for a poor woman to enable her to earn her living."

"Instalments, ma'am," he said sharply.

"I beg your pardon."

"Want to pay for it by instalments?" he said.

"Oh! no, I will pay for it at once, and you can deliver it to her."

"Oh," he said smiling, "that's twenty per cent, discount."

I looked at him wonderingly, for I did not know what twenty per cent discount might be.

"I always take twenty per cent discount off these machines," he said, and I left pleasantly impressed by his ways and those of the young girl he introduced to me as his daughter, and that little new machine was the first of several in which I had Mr Smith's kind co-operation and advice in what were doubtful cases.

The result was a warm intimacy, in the course of which he told me his little history and that of his daughter – stepdaughter he called her – Ruth.

"Mine's a curious trade to have taken to," he said, "and I had plenty of up-hill work, but it has grown to be profitable. Things were at a low ebb with me when I took it up, while now –"

There, I won't boast, only say that I'm thankful for it. Poverty comes in at the door, and love flies out of the window, so they say; but that's all nonsense, or else your poor people would be always miserable, while according to my experience your poor man is often more lighthearted than the man with thousands.

I was at my wits' end for something to do, and sat nibbling my nails one day, and grumbling horribly.

"Don't go on like that, Tom," says my wife; "things might be worse."

"How?" I said.

"Why, we might have Luke at home, and he is doing well."

Luke's our boy, you know, and we had got him into a merchant's office, where he seemed likely to stay; but I was in a grumbling fit then, and there was a clickety-click noise going on in the next room which fidgeted me terribly.

"Things can't be worse," I said angrily; and I was going to prove myself in the wrong by making my wife cry, when there was a knock at the door.



“Come in,” I said, and a fellow-lodger put in his head.

“Are you good at works, Mr Smith?” he said.

“What works?” I said; “fireworks – gasworks?”

“No, no; I mean works of things as goes with wheels and springs.”

“Middling,” I said, for I was fond of pulling clocks to pieces, and trying to invent.

“I wish you’d come and look at this sewing machine of mine, for I can’t get it to go.”

Sewing machines were newish in those days, and I got up to have a look at it, and after about an hour’s fiddling about, I began to see a bit the reason why – the purpose, you know, of all the screws and cranks and wheels; I found out too why our neighbour’s wife – who was a dressmaker, and had just started one – could not get it to go; and before night, by thinking, and putting this and that together, had got her in the way of working it pretty steadily, though with my clumsy fingers I couldn’t have done it myself.

I had my bit of dinner and tea with those people, and they forced half-a-crown upon me as well, and I went back feeling like a new man, so refreshing had been that bit of work.

“There,” said my wife, “I told you something would come.”

“Well, so you did,” I said; “but the something is rather small.”

But the very next day – as we were living in the midst of people who were fast taking to sewing machines – if the folks from the next house didn’t want me to look at theirs; and then the news spreading, as news will spread, that there was somebody who could cobble and tinker machinery, without putting people to the expense that makers would, if the jobs didn’t come in fast, so that I was obliged to get files and drills and a vice – regular set of tools by degrees; and at last I was as busy as a bee from morning to night, and whistling over my work as happy as a king.

Of course every now and then I got a breakage, but I could generally get over that by buying a new wheel, or spindle, or what not. Next we got to supplying shuttles, and needles, and machine cotton. Soon after I bought a machine of a man who was tired of it. Next week I sold it at a good profit; bought another, and another, and sold them; then got to taking them and money in exchange for new ones; and one way and the other became a regular big dealer, as you see.

Hundred? Why, new, second-hand, and with those being repaired upstairs by the men, I’ve got at least three hundred on the premises, while if anybody had told me fifteen years ago that I should be doing this, I should have laughed at him.

That pretty girl showing and explaining the machine to a customer? That’s Ruth, that is. No, not my daughter – yet, but she soon will be. Poor girl, I always think of her and of bread thrown upon the waters at the same time.

Curious idea that, you will say, but I’ll tell you why.

In our trade we have strange people to deal with. Most of ’em are poor, and can’t buy a machine right off, but are ready and willing to pay so much a week. That suits them, and it suits me, if they’ll only keep the payments up to the end.

You won’t believe me, perhaps, but some of them don’t do that. Some of them leave their lodgings, and I never see them again: and the most curious part is that the sewing machine disappears with them, and I never see that again. Many a one, too, that has disappeared like that, I do see again – perhaps have it brought here by some one to be repaired, or exchanged for a bigger, or for one of a different maker; for if you look round here, you’ll see I’ve got all kinds – new and old, little domestics and big trades – there, you name any maker, and see if I don’t bring you out one of his works.

Well, then I ask these people where they got the machine – for I always know them by the number – it turns out that they’ve bought it through an advertisement, or at a sale-room, or maybe out of a pawnbroker’s shop.

But I’ve had plenty of honest people to deal with too – them as have come straightforward, and told me they couldn’t keep up their payments, and asked me to take their machine back, when I’d allow them as much as I thought fair, and ’twould be an end of a pleasant transaction.

The way I've been bitten though, by some folks, has made me that case-hardened that sometimes I've wondered whether I'd got any heart left, and the wife's had to interfere, telling me I've been spoiled with prosperity, and grown unfeeling.

It was she made me give way about Ruth, for one day, after having had my bristles all set up by finding out that three good sound machines, by best makers, had gone nobody knew where, who should come into the shop but a lady-like woman in very shabby widow's weeds. She wanted a machine for herself and daughter to learn, and said she had heard that I would take the money by instalments. Now just half-an-hour before, by our shop clock, I had made a vow that I'd give up all that part of the trade, and I was very rough with her – just as I am when I'm cross – and said, "No."

"But you will if the lady gives security," says my wife hastily.

The poor woman gave such a woe-begone look at us that it made me more out of temper than ever, for I could feel that if I stopped I should have to let her have one at her own terms. And so it was; for, there, if I didn't let her have a first-class machine, as good as new, she only paying seven and six down, and undertaking to pay half-a-crown a week, and no more security than nothing!

To make it worse, too, if I didn't send the thing home without charge! – Luke going with it, for he was back at home now keeping my books, being grown into a fine young fellow of five-and-twenty; and I sat and growled the whole of the rest of the day, calling myself all the weak-minded idiots under the sun, and telling the wife that business was going to the dogs, and I should be ruined.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Tom," she said.

"So I am," says I. "I didn't think I could be such a fool."

"Such a fool as to do a good kind action to one who was evidently a lady born, and come down in the world!"

"Yes," I says, "to living in Bennett's Place, where I've sunk no less than ten machines in five years."

"Yes," says the wife, "and cleared hundreds of pounds. Tom, I'm ashamed of you – you a man with twenty workmen busy upstairs, a couple of thousand pounds' worth of stock, and in the bank –"

"Hold your tongue, will you!" I said roughly, and went out into the shop to try and work it all off.

Luke came back just after, looking very strange, and I was at him directly.

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