

Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Mohawks: A Novel. Volume

1 of 3



Мэри Элизабет Брэддон

Mohawks: A Novel. Volume 1 of 3

«Public Domain»

Брэддон М.

Mohawks: A Novel. Volume 1 of 3 / М. Брэддон — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	16
CHAPTER III	20
CHAPTER IV	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

Braddon M. E. Mary Elizabeth Mohawks: A Novel. Volume 1 of 3

CHAPTER I "ONE THAT DOTHT WEAR HIMSELF AWAY IN LONENESS."

"Nothing?" asked the farmer, standing upon a heathery knoll, with his gun under his arm, and his two clever spaniels, Nell and Beauty, crouched dutifully at his feet.

"Nothing but this," answered the farmer's man, holding up a bundle of papers – pamphlets and manuscripts – dirty, crumpled, worn as if with much carrying to and fro over the face of the earth. They were tied up in a ragged old cotton handkerchief, and they had been carried in the breast-pocket of yonder wayfarer who lay stark and stiff, with his dead face staring up at the bright blue sky of early morning. A little child, a mere baby, lay asleep beside him, nestling against the arm that would never again shelter or defend her.

It was a bright clear morning late in September, just one hundred and seventy-seven years ago, the year of the battle of Malplaquet, and the earth was so much the younger and fairer by all those years – innocent of railroads, speculating builders, gasworks, dust-destructors, sewage-farms, and telephones – a primitive world, almost in the infancy of civilisation as it seems to us, looking back upon those slow-pacing days from this age of improvement, invention, transmutation, and general enlightenment.

It was a year for ever memorable in history. The bloody battle of Malplaquet had but just been fought: a deluge of blood had been spilt, and another great victory scored by the allies, at a cost of twenty thousand slain. Brilliant as that victory had been, there were some who felt that Marlborough's glory was waning. He was no longer in the flush and floodtide of popularity. There were those who grudged him his well-won honours, his ducal coronet, and palace at Woodstock. There were those who feared his ambition, lest he should make himself a military dictator, a second Cromwell, or even aspire to the crown. If ever England seemed ripe for an elective monarchy or a republic, it was surely just at this critical period: when widowed, childless Anne was wavering in the choice of her successor, and when poor young Perkin, the sole representative of legitimate royalty, was the chosen subject for every libellous ballad and every obscene caricature of the day.

Very fair to look upon was Flamestead Common upon that September morning, purple with heather, flecked here and there with golden patches of the dwarf furze that flowers in the late summer, and with here and there a glistening water-pool. The place where the dead man lay, stretched on a bank of sunburnt moss and short tawny turf, was at the junction of four roads. First, the broad high-road from London to Portsmouth, stretching on like a silvery ribbon over hill and valley, right and left of the little group yonder – the dead man and the sleeping child, and the two living men looking down at them both, burly farmer in stout gray homespun, and his hind in smock-frock and leather gaiters, a costume that has changed but little within the last two hundred years.

The labourer had left his bush-harrow in a field hard by the common at the call of his master, shouting from the little knoll above the road. Matthew Bowman, the farmer, trudging across the common in the dewy morning-tide, bent on a little partridge-shooting in the turnips on the other side of this heathery waste, had lighted on this piteous group – a tramp, lying dead by the wayside, and an infant, unconscious of its desolation, lying asleep beside him.

What was to be done? Who was to take care of the dead, or the living? Neither could very well be left by the wayside. Something must be done, assuredly; but Matthew Bowman had no clear idea of what to do with father or child. He had made up his mind that the baby owned that dead man as father.

"You'd best take the little one home to my missus," he said at last, "and I'll go on to Flamestead and send the constable to look after this."

He pointed to the gaunt, ghastly figure, with bony limbs sharply defined beneath scantiest covering. A vagrant wayfarer, whose life for a long time past must have been little better than starvation, and at last the boundary-line between existence and non-existence had been passed, and the hapless wretch had sunk, wasted and famished, on the king's highway.

"What are you going to do with that baby, Bowman?" demanded an authoritative voice on the higher ground above that little knoll where the farmer was standing.

Bowman looked up, and recognised one who was a power in that part of the world; all the more powerful, perhaps, because his influence rarely took a benignant form, because it was the way of his life to hold his fellow-men aloof, to exact all and to grant nothing.

This was Squire Bosworth, Lord of the Manor of Flamestead and Fairmile, owner of the greater part of the land within ten miles of this hillocky wilderness, and a notorious misanthrope and miser; shunned by the gentlefolks of the neighbourhood as half-eccentric and half-savage, feared and hated by the peasantry, distrusted and scrupulously obeyed by his tenants.

His horse's hoofs had made no sound upon the sward and heather, and he had come upon the little group unawares. He was a man of about forty, with long limbs, broad slouching shoulders, strongly-marked features of a rugged cast, reddish-brown eyes under bushy brows, a determined chin, and a cruel mouth.

His voice awakened the child, who opened wide wondering eyes of heavenliest blue, looked about with a scared expression, and anon began to cry.

Mr. Bowman explained his intentions. He would have taken charge of the child for a day or so at his own homestead, while the authorities made up their minds what to do with it. The father would find a resting-place in the nearest churchyard, which was in the village of Flamestead, half a mile Londonwards.

"Let me look at the little one," said Bosworth, stretching out his hand, and taking the infant in his strong grasp as easily as if it had been a bird.

"A pretty baby," he said, soothing it with uncouth unaccustomed hand as he held it against his horse's neck. "About the size of my motherless girl yonder, and not unlike her – the same blue eyes and flaxen hair – but I suppose all babies are pretty much alike. Take it to Fairmile Court, fellow, and tell my housekeeper to look after it."

He handed the little bundle of humanity to the farm-labourer, who stared up at him in amazement. Kindness to nameless infancy was a new and altogether unexpected development in Squire Bosworth's character.

"Don't stand gaping there, man!" cried the Squire. "Off with you, and tell Mistress Layburne to take care of the child till further orders. And now, Bowman, what kind of a man is this, d'ye think, who has taken his last night's gratis lodging on Flamestead Common?"

"He looks like a beggar-man," said the farmer.

"Nay, Bowman, that is just what he does not look. A vagabond, if you like, a scapegrace, a spy, a rebel – but not a bred-and-born vagrant. There is the brand of Cain upon his forehead, friend; broken-down gentleman, the worst breed of scoundrel in all Britain."

The farmer looked down at the dead face somewhat ruefully, as if it hurt him to hear evil spoken of that clay there, which those locked lips could not answer. It was, indeed, by no means the kind of face common on the roadside – not the sturdy bulldog visage of tramp or mendicant. Those attenuated features were as regular in their lines as Greek sculpture; those hands, cramped in the death throe, were slender and delicate. The rags upon that wasted body had once been the clothes of

a gentleman – or had at least been made by a fashionable tailor. The man had perished in his youth – not a thread of silver in the rich chestnut of the abundant hair, long, silken, falling in loose waves about the thin throat and pallid ears.

"A well-looking fellow enough before want and sickness came upon him," said the Squire. "Did you find anything about him to give a clue to his name or his belongings?"

"Nothing but this," said Bowman, handing his landlord the papers in the cotton handkerchief.

Squire Bosworth sat with thoughtful brow, looking over pamphlets and manuscripts.

"Just as I thought," he said at last: "the fellow was a plotter, a tool of the Muggite crew, a hack scribbler, sowing the seeds of civil war and revolution with big words and fine sentences, a little Latin and a little Greek. He found he could not live upon his trash – was on the tramp for Portsmouth, I dare swear, meaning to get out of the country, to make his way to America, perhaps, before the mast; as if his wasted carcass would be worth board and lodging where thews and sinews are wanted! Poor devil! a sorry end for his talents. I'll ride to the village and tell the constable to send for the body."

"And the baby, Squire?" urged Bowman. "Do you mean to adopt it?"

"Adopt! That's a big word, farmer, and means a good deal. I'll think about it, friend, I'll think about it. If it's a girl, perhaps yes. If it's a boy, decidedly no."

He rode off with the bundle of papers in his pocket, leaving his tenant full of wonder. What could the Squire, whose miserly habits and want of common humanity were the talk of the county, what could such as he mean by taking compassion upon a nameless brat picked up on the wayside? What magical change had come over his disposition which prompted Roland Bosworth to an act of charity?

Nothing was further than charity from the Squire's thoughts as he rode to Flamestead; but he was a man of reflective temper, and he always looked far ahead into the future. Ten months ago his fair young wife had died, leaving him an only child – a daughter of half a year old – and now the child was sixteen months old, and her nurse had told him that she began to pine in the silence and seclusion of a house which was like a hermitage, and gardens which were gloomy and lonesome as a desert wilderness. He had poohpoohed the nurse's complaint. "'Tis you, woman, who want more company, not that baby," he had said; but after this he had been more observant of his daughter, and he had noticed that the baby's large blue eyes shone out of a pale old-looking face, which was not what a baby's face should be. The eyes themselves had a mournful yearning look, as if seeking something that was never found.

"Babies never thrive in a house where there are no children," said the nurse; and the Squire began to believe her.

The child sickened soon after this with some slight infantile ailment, and Mr. Bosworth took occasion to question the doctor as to the nurse's theory. The medico admitted that there was some reason in the woman's view. Children always thrive best who had the society of other children. Fairmile Court was one of the finest places within fifty miles of London, but it was doubtless somewhat secluded and silent – there was even an air of gloom. Mr. Bosworth had allowed the timber to grow to an extent which, looked at from the point of view of health and cheerfulness —

"I am not going to cut down my trees to gratify any doctor in Christendom!" cried the Squire savagely; "but if you say my little girl wants another little girl to play with her, one must be got."

This had all happened about a fortnight before that September morning when the fatherless baby was found sleeping so peacefully beside the dead. The Squire had shrunk from introducing a stranger's brat into that stately desolate home of his, which it had been the business of his later years to keep closed against all the world. In his solitary rides he had reconnoitred many a farmer's homestead where children swarmed; he had looked in upon his gamekeeper's and gardener's cottages, where it seemed to him there was ever a plethora of babies; but he could not bring himself to invite one of these superfluous brats to take up its abode with him, to lie cheek by jowl with his dead wife's fair young daughter – a child whose lineage was alike ancient and honourable on the side of mother and

father. His soul revolted against the spawn of the day-labourer or even of the tenant-farmer; and he hated the idea of the link which such an adoption would make between him and a whole family of his inferiors.

Thus it happened that the finding of that friendless child upon the common seemed to Squire Bosworth as a stroke of luck. Here was a child who, judging from the dead father's type, was of gentle blood. Here was a child whom none could ever claim from him, upon whose existence no greedy father or harpy mother could ever found a claim to favours from him. Here he would be safe. The child would be his goods, his chattel, to deal with as he pleased – to be flung out of doors by and by, when his own girl was grown up, should it so please him, or should she deserve no more generous treatment.

He saw the village constable, arranged for inquest and burial, and then put his horse at a sharp trot, and rode back to Fairmile Court as fast as the animal would take him. The house lay some way from the high-road in a park of considerable extent, and where the timber and underwood had been allowed to grow as in a forest for the last half-century. The result was wild but beautiful; the place seemed rather a chase than a park. The fine old gardens surrounding the house had also been neglected, one gardener and a boy sufficing where once seven or eight men had laboured; but these gardens were beautiful even in neglect. The hedges of yew and cedar, the rich variety of shrubs, testified to a period when country gentlemen deemed no care or cost too much for the maintenance and improvement of their grounds – men of the school of Evelyn and Temple, with whom horticulture was a passion.

The house was a gloomy pile of gray stone, built in the reign of James I. Tall gables, taller chimney-stacks, heavily mullioned windows, and much overhanging greenery gave a picturesque air to the exterior; but within all was gloom – a gloom which had been deepening for the last ten years, when, after leading a wild life at the University, and a much wilder life in London, Roland Bosworth sobered down all of a sudden, left off spending money, renounced all the habits and all the acquaintances of his riotous youth, and began to look after his patrimonial estate. In order the better to do this he took up his abode at Fairmile Court, going up to London by the coach once a week to look after his business in the City, where he was a person of some importance on 'Change. The political arena offering few allurements to a man of his temperament, he had taken to stock-jobbing, which had lately come into fashion. By education he was a High Churchman and staunch Tory, as his father and grandfather had been before him, and his adherence to the tenets of Laud and Atterbury was all the more disinterested, as he rarely entered a tabernacle of any kind. He affected to be warmly attached to the exiled king, and he was one of those lukewarm Jacobites who contrived to carry on a mild philandering kind of connection with Saint-Germains, so cautious that it could be disavowed at any moment of danger – a feeble and wavering partisanship which helped to keep the cause of the Stuarts alive, and prevented it from ever succeeding.

Things had been going to ruin at Fairmile Court during his absence, money had been squandered by old servants, and his gamekeepers had been sleeping partners with a thriving firm of poachers. But the Squire introduced a new *régime* of strictest economy. He dismissed all the old servants, and was a hard taskmaster to the diminished household which he established in their place. At thirty years of age he had turned his back upon the town, a soured and disappointed man. At forty he had nearly doubled his fortune by successful speculations in the City, whither he went very often by coach or on horseback, as the fancy moved him. At seven-and-thirty he married the youngest daughter of a needy peer, whose father's necessities flung her into his arms. The uncongenial union, which involved parting from one she devotedly loved, broke the girl's heart, and she died ten months after the birth of her first child. On her death-bed, when weeping mother and conscience-stricken father stood beside her, sensible of the wrong they had done, she had no complaint to make against the hard, cold-hearted man whom she had sworn to honour and obey. He had not been unkind to her. He had loved her after his fashion, and he sat a little way off with covered face and head bowed in

grief. He had loved her: but he had loved his money better, and he had done nothing to brighten her young life or to reconcile her to a forced marriage.

"You will be kind to Rena," she said faintly, with white lips, presently, as he bent over her, watching for that awful change which was to part them for ever. In his mind there was no ray of hope to light that parting hour. He was materialist to the core; the things which he valued and believed in were the hard realities of this world. The ethereal had no existence for him.

"You will be kind to Rena?"

Rena, short for Irene: that was the baby's name.

"Kind to her? yes, of course. She is all that will be left me."

"Except riches. O Roland, do not care more for your money than for her."

"She will be a great heiress," said Bosworth.

"Riches do not always bring happiness. Love her, be kind to her!"

Those were the last words the dying lips uttered. She dropped asleep soon after this, her head resting against her husband's shoulder, and so out of that dim land of slumber passed silently into that deeper darkness which living eyes have never penetrated.

The Squire flung his bridle to a groom who had been hanging about the drive watching for his master's return, and stalked into the stately old hall, panelled with age-blackened oak, adorned with many trophies of the battle-field and the chase, and further embellished with the portraits of Mr. Bosworth's ancestors, which he valued less than the canvas upon which they were painted. He was as proud as Lucifer, but his was not that kind of pride which fattens itself, ghoul-like, upon the dead. The captains and learned judges looming from those dark walls were to him the most worthless of all shadows. The hall was spacious and gloomy, and opened into a still more spacious dining-room, where the Squire had never eaten a dinner since he came of age. A noble saloon or music-room, painted white, and furnished exactly as it had been in the days of Charles II., opened on the other side of the hall; but the only apartments which the Squire occupied on this ground floor were three small rooms at the end of a long passage, which served him as dining-room, study, and office. A steep narrow little staircase built in the wall, which stair had once been a secret means of communication between upper and lower stories, conducted to the Squire's bedchamber and dressing-room. His child and her nurse had their abode in the opposite wing; and thus all the state rooms, constituting the centre and main body of the house, were given over to emptiness.

The establishment was on the smallest scale. There were less than half a dozen servants where there had once been twenty.

No portly powdered footman came to Mr. Bosworth's summons, but a little old man in a very shabby livery shambled along the passage at the sound of his master's bell.

"Has there been a child brought here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Send Mrs. Layburne here."

The man shambled out again. The Squire flung off hat and riding-gloves, and seated himself by his solitary hearth. There were some logs smouldering there, for the September mornings were cool, and the Squire was of a chilly temper. The table was laid for a frugal breakfast of tea and toast; not by any means the kind of meal which would have satisfied the average country gentleman of that era; a scrivener's or a garreteer's breakfast rather.

The Squire poured himself out a cup of tea, and sat sipping it with an absent stir, and his eye upon the door.

It was flung open abruptly, and a woman entered, tall, with noble neck and shoulders, and the carriage of Dido herself – a magnificent ruin. No one could doubt that the creature had once been eminently beautiful; there were traces still of those vanished charms: eyes of velvety brown, full, fiery, splendid, and the outline of fine features. But the skin was withered and yellow, the raven hair

was grizzled, some of the teeth had gone, and nose and chin had both become too prominent. The queen had degenerated into the hag.

She was shabbily and carelessly dressed in a black stuff gown, with laced bodice and muslin kerchief. She wore no cap, and her coarse unkempt hair was gathered into a loose knot on the top of her head.

"An extinct volcano," thought the student of character, as he looked at that haggard countenance, with its premature wrinkles and unhealthy pallor. "A slumbering volcano, rather," he might say to himself upon closer scrutiny.

"Well," said the Squire, "I sent you home a child."

"You sent me some beggar's daughter, I should say, by her rags. I have washed her, and dressed her in some of Rena's clothes. What put it into your astute head to interfere with the people whose duty it may be to take charge of vagrants?"

"I don't usually act without a motive, as I think you know, Barbara. If the child is sound in wind and limb – a healthy child – I intend to adopt her. Rena wants a companion, I am told – "

"Nurse Bridget's fancy. I wonder you lend your ear to an ignorant country wench."

"The country wench is sustained by the doctor, and by facts. Rena has been drooping of late. Another baby's company may enliven her. Have you put them together?"

"Not I," protested Barbara; "it would have been more than my place is worth to act without orders. I never forget that I am a servant. You ought to know that."

"You tell me of it often enough," said the Squire, shrugging his shoulders. "The misfortune is that you never let me forget you were once something else."

"O, but the memory of it never ruffles your peace," sneered the woman, with a flashing glance at the stern, cold face. "It was so long ago, you see, Squire, and you have a knack of taking things coolly."

"Come and let us introduce the children to each other," said Bosworth, rising; and he followed Barbara Layburne to the further end of the house, where the sound of a crying baby indicated the neighbourhood of the nursery.

It was not the friendless waif who thus bewailed her inarticulate misery. The little stranger was asleep in Barbara's room on the upper story. It was the heiress who was lamenting her infantine woes. Buxom, apple-cheeked Bridget was marching up and down the room, trying to hush her to sleep.

"She's cutting another tooth, sir," she said apologetically.

"She seems to be everlastingly cutting teeth," muttered Bosworth, with a vexed air; "I never come to see her that she is not wailing. Fetch me the other child, Barbara; I want to see them together."

The other child was brought, newly awakened from the refreshing slumber that had been induced by her bath. Her large blue eyes explored the unknown room, full of a pleased wonder. There were bright-coloured chintz curtains, worsted-work shepherds and shepherdesses framed and glazed upon the flowered wall-papering. The nurseries were the brightest rooms in the rambling old house; had been brightened by the young mother before the coming of her baby.

The nameless child had a sweet placidity which appealed to the Squire.

"I suppose *she* has teeth to cut, too," he said, "but you see she doesn't cry."

"She cried loud enough while I was dressing her," retorted Barbara.

"Put them on the floor side by side," ordered the Squire.

The two infants were set down at his command. They were both at the crawling stage of existence, that early dawn in which humanity goes upon all fours. They seemed about the same size and age, as nearly as might be guessed. They had eyes and hair of the same colour, and had that resemblance common to pretty children. The heiress had a sicklier air than the waif, and was less beautiful in colouring.

"They would pass for twin sisters," said Bosworth; "come, now, Mistress Bridget, do you think you would know them apart?"

Bridget resented the suggestion as an insult to her affection and her intellect.

"I should know my own little darling anywheres," she said; "and this strange child ain't half so pretty."

"There's a mark she'll carry for life, anyhow," said Barbara Layburne, taking up the stranger, and baring the baby's right arm just where it joined the shoulder. "A burn or a scald, you see, Squire. I can't say which it is, but I don't think she'll outlive the scar."

Bosworth glanced at it indifferently.

"A deep brand," he said, and that was all.

He was watching his own child, who was staring at the intruder with looks of keenest interest. She had left off crying, and was crawling assiduously towards the baby-waif, whom Barbara Layburne had set down upon the floor a little way off. The two infants crawled to each other like two puppies, and climbed and tumbled over each other just as young animals might have done, obeying instinct rather than reason.

Presently the little lady uplifted her voice and crowed aloud, and then began to talk after her fashion, which was backward, as of a child brought up amidst gloom and silence.

"Gar, gar, gar!" she reiterated, in a gurgling monotone.

The other baby looked about her, and murmured piteously, "Dada, dada!" and seeing not him whom she sought, she began to cry.

"Another fountain!" exclaimed the Squire, turning upon his heel.

He stopped on the threshold to look back at nurse and children.

"You have had your whim, Mistress Bridget," he said, shaking his forefinger at her; "look you that no harm comes of it;" and with that he stalked away, and went back to his den, without so much as a word to Barbara Layburne, who looked after him with strangely wistful eyes.

Then, when the sound of his firm tread had died into silence, she too left the nurse and the babies, and stalked away to her own den.

"A pretty pair," muttered Bridget, as she squatted down upon the ground to play with her charges; but whether she meant the two babies, or the Squire and his housekeeper, remains an open question.

There had been a time when the presence of Squire Bosworth's housekeeper at Fairmile had caused some vague murmurs in the way of scandal; but time accustoms people to most things, and after ten years Mistress Barbara Layburne, with her flashing eyes and her unkempt hair, her majestic figure and her shabby gown, her imperious manners and her menial capacity, came to be accepted as only a detail in the numerous eccentricities of the Squire. Only such a man could have had such a housekeeper.

The tradition of her first appearance at Fairmile was still talked of, and sounded like a fairy tale. She had arrived there late at night, in a coach and four, during a thunderstorm which was still remembered in those parts. So might Medea have come to Jason in her fiery car drawn by dragons, said the parson, who was an Oxford scholar, and loved the classics. She had arrived in a velvet gown and jewels, with all the style of a lady of fashion. She had been closeted with the Squire for an hour, during which time the sound of their alternate voices in scorn and anger had never ceased. The storm within had raged no less furiously than the storm without. Then had the door been flung open by the Squire, and he had come out into the hall, where he gave an order that a room should be got ready for his unexpected visitor: and, the order given, he had dashed out of the house, mounted into the coach which was waiting before the portico, and had driven off upon the first stage to London, leaving the stranger mistress of the field.

The Squire did not return for a month, during which time the lady had gradually settled down into the position of housekeeper, her status assured by a letter in which Mr. Bosworth bade his old butler obey Mrs. Layburne in all matters connected with the interior of Fairmile Court. So henceforth it was Mrs. Layburne who gave the cook her orders, and who paid all the bills, and who doled out

wages to coachman and gardener. She was every whit as great a niggard as her master, people said; and under her rule the miserly ways of the house began to take a settled form and consistency. Every superfluous servant was dismissed, all luxurious living was put down with a high hand, and the gloom which had fallen upon the abandoned house while Roland Bosworth was leading a life of riot and dissipation in London only grew deeper now that he had returned, a reformed rake, to the hearth of his forefathers.

He came back to Fairmile Court at the end of a month, nodded curtly to Mistress Barbara as he passed her in the hall, and took no more notice of her than of any other hireling. She had established herself in his house; but whatever claim she might have upon his friendship was but little honoured. There were occasional conferences in the little red parlour in which the Squire passed most of his indoor life; there were occasional storms; but there was never any touch of tenderness to provoke the scandal of the household as to the present relations of master and servant. As to what those relations had been in the past, the neighbourhood, from parson to innkeeper, from high to low, had its opinions and ideas; but nothing ever occurred to throw any clearer light upon the antecedents of the lady who had come to Fairmile in velvet and jewels, which she was never seen to wear again after that night of tempest. She seemed to age suddenly by twenty years within the first few months of her residence in that melancholy house. Her oval cheeks grew hollow, her complexion faded to a sickly sallow, her ebon hair whitened, and deep lines came in the wan face. She never left the boundary of the park; she never had a friend to visit her. A cloistered nun's life would have been far less lonely. If she was by birth and breeding a lady, as most people supposed, she had not a creature of her own grade with whom to hold converse. To the servants she rarely spoke, save in the way of business. She had her own den, as the Squire had his: she read a good deal; and sometimes of an evening, when the heavy oak shutters were all closed and barred, she would open the spinet – an instrument which had belonged to her master's mother – and sing to it in a strange language, in a wonderful deep voice, which thrilled those who heard her.

The Squire's marriage made no difference in Mrs. Layburne's position, and brought no diminution of her authority. Lady Harriet had no longing for power, and was content to let the house be managed exactly as it had been before her coming. She saw that avarice was the pervading spirit of the household, but she made no complaint; and she was too innocent and simple-minded to have any suspicion of evil in the past history of her husband and his strange housekeeper. It was only when Lady Harriet was about to become a mother that she asserted herself so far as to insist upon some small expenditure upon the rooms which her baby was to occupy. Under her own directions the old nursery wing, in which generation after generation of Bosworths had been reared, was cleansed, renovated, and decorated, in the simplest fashion, but with taste and refinement.

The result of the little stranger's presence fully justified Mrs. Bridget in her opinion. Rena improved in spirits, and even grew more robust in health, from the hour of her little companion's advent. The two children were rarely asunder: they played together, fed together, slept together, took their airings in the same baby-carriage, which Bridget or the gardener's boy dragged about the park, or rolled and crawled together on the grass on sunny autumn mornings. Rena, who had been backward in all things, soon began to toddle, and soon began to prattle, moved by the example of her companion, who had a great gift of language. Bridget was proud of her sagacity, and speedily grew fond of the adopted child, though she always professed to be constant in her affection for Rena, who was certainly a less amiable infant. The little stranger was called Belinda, a name which the Squire had found in one of the dead man's manuscripts.

"It may have been her mother's name," said the Squire, and that was all, though he might have said more had he pleased.

Among those pamphlets and political manuscripts he had found three private letters, which to his mind suggested a domestic history, and which served to assure him that his daughter's companion

was of gentle birth. He desired to know no more, and he had no intention of inquiring into her antecedents.

The wanderer had been lying in his nameless grave for a little over three years, and his orphan daughter had thriven apace in her new home. The two children had but rarely passed the gates of the park during those years, but they had been utterly happy together in that wooded wilderness, too young to languish for change of scene, renewing every day the childish pleasures of yesterday. They had not yet emerged from the fairyland of play into the cold arid world of work and reality. They played together all day long on the sunlit grass or under the dappled shadows of the trees in spring, summer, and autumn; in winter making a little paradise for themselves in the day nursery before the cheerful fire, into which they used to peer sometimes, with dilated eyes, seeing gnomes and fairies, and St. George and his dragon, and all the Seven Champions of Christendom, in the burning logs. The shining brass fender seemed to them like a glittering golden gate shutting in fairyland.

How did they know anything of St. George and his dragon, King Arthur, Melusine, and the gnomes and the fairies, at this tender age, when they hardly knew their letters, and certainly could not read these dear old stories for themselves? Easily explained. They had a living book in which they read every evening, and the book was Bridget. Mistress Bridget had more imagination than most of her class, and had spent her superfluous cash with the pedlar, in whose pack there was generally a department for light literature – curious paper-covered books, printed on coarsest paper, and with the roughest and rudest of illustrations; but the Seven Champions and all the old fairy tales were to be found among these volumes, and Bridget had gradually possessed herself of the whole realm of Robin Goodfellow and the fairies.

In the evening, when the stealthy shadows came creeping over the window, and shutting out the leafy wilderness beyond, the two children used to clamber on to Bridget's knee and ask for stories, and Bridget related those old legends with the uttermost enjoyment. That twilight interval before candles and bedtime was the pleasantest hour in her day.

So the children were happy, having, as it seemed, but one friend in the world, in the person of buxom Bridget. Mrs. Barbara Layburne but rarely condescended to enter the nurseries, and looked askant at the children if she happened to meet them in the corridors or hall. She did not even pretend to be fond of her master's daughter, and for the alien she had nothing but contempt. The Squire himself was at best an indifferent father. He seemed quite satisfied to hear that his daughter was well and happy, and seldom put himself out of the way to see her. Sometimes, riding across the park, he would come upon the two children in their play, and would pull up his horse and stop for a few minutes to watch them. There could not be a prettier picture than the two golden-haired children, in their white frocks and blue sashes, chasing each other across the sunlit sward, or squatted side by side in the deep pasture grass, making daisy-chains or buttercup-balls. Belinda looked the stronger of the two, the Squire thought. He knew her by her somewhat darker hair and rosier cheeks. His own motherless child had always a delicate air, though she had never had any serious illness.

It was late in the October of that third year when the children's peaceful days came to an end, like a tale that is told, never hereafter to be any more than a sad sweet memory of love and happiness that had been and was not.

The twilight was earlier than usual on that October evening, and night came up with a great threatening cloud like the outspread wing of a bad angel. Mrs. Barbara Layburne stood at the hall-door watching that lowering sky, and listening to the sough of the south-west wind, and thinking of that night just thirteen years ago – that night of tempest and gloom upon which she had first seen yonder elms and oaks in all their garnered might of foregone centuries, standing stern and strong against the threatening wrack. She thought of her life as it had been before that night, of her life as it had been since.

"Would anybody in London – those who knew me in my glory – believe that I would endure such a long slow martyrdom, a death in life?" she asked herself. "Well, perhaps they would believe, if they could fathom my motive."

The sound of footsteps startled her. Peering into the darkness of the long avenue, she saw a lad running under the trees, sheltering himself as best he might from the driving rain. She watched him as he came towards the house, and hailed him as he drew near. He was the son of the old gardener who lived at the lodge.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"There is a man at the lodge very ill – dying, mother thinks – and he sent this for you, ma'am, and I was to give it into your own hands."

He handed her a scrap of paper, folded but not sealed. It was scrawled over in pencil, with a tremulous hand.

"Come to me at once, if you want to see me alive. – Roderick."

That was all.

"Is he tall, with dark eyes and hair?" she asked.

"Yes. You'd better come at once if you know anything about him. He's mortal bad. And mother said you'd best bring some brandy."

Barbara Layburne went hastily to the store-room, where everything was kept sternly under lock and key. Half the business of her life was to unlock and lock those presses and store-closets, doling out everything to the submissive cook, who still contrived somehow to have her pinch out of this and that. Barbara filled a small bottle with brandy, fetched her cloak and hood, and then went back to the hall, where the boy was waiting.

She went along the avenue, muffled in her gray cloth cloak, a ghostlike figure, the boy following her as fast as his legs would carry him. He declared afterwards that he had never seen any one walk so fast as Mrs. Layburne walked that stormy night, though the wind and rain were beating against her face and figure all the way.

There was a light burning dimly in the lodge as they drew near. The door was open, and the old gardener was standing on the threshold watching for them.

"Is he – dead?" gasped Barbara.

"No; but his breath is short and thick, just as if he was near his end, poor wretch. He ain't anybody belonging to *you*, is he, madam?"

"Not he," answered Barbara promptly; "but I know something about him. He's the son of an old servant who lived with me in my prosperous days. Where is he?"

"In the kitchen. He was shivering, so the missus thought he'd be better by the fire be-like."

The ground floor of the lodge consisted of two rooms, parlour and kitchen. Barbara went to the kitchen, which was at the back, the common living-room of the family. The parlour was for ornament and state – temple and shrine for the family Bible and the family samplers, laborious works of art which adorned the walls.

The sick man was lying in front of the fire, with an old potato-sack between him and the flagged floor. Barbara knelt beside him, and looked into his face, half in the red light of the fire, half in the yellow flare of the tallow candle.

His eyes were glassy and dim, his cheeks were flushed, his breath laboured and rattled as it came and went. Barbara Layburne knew the symptoms well enough. It was gaol fever – a low form of typhus. That tainted breath meant infection, and the gardener's cottage swarmed with children. He must be got away from there at once, unless they were all to die. Typhus in those days was always master of the field where he had once set up his standard.

The dim eyes looked at her piteously: the lips began to murmur inarticulately.

"Leave us together for a few minutes, Mrs. Bond, while I hear what the poor creature has to say, and think over what I had best do with him. There is no room for him here."

Mrs. Bond retired, shutting the door behind her.

CHAPTER II

"A TEDIOUS ROAD THE WEARY WRETCH RETURNS."

Mrs. Layburne poured out half a tumbler of brandy, propped the sick man's head upon her arm, and put the glass to his lips. He drank eagerly, gasping as he drank.

"Good!" he muttered, "that does me good, sister."

"Hush! not that word here, for your life."

"Not much use in saying it, eh! when it's no more than a word? Give me some more."

"No, you have had enough for the present. How long have you been out of prison?"

"How do you know I have been in prison?"

"Do you think I don't know gaol fever and gaol clothes? You have got them both upon you. You have escaped out of some gaol."

"Guildford, last night. I was in the infirmary; got out at midnight, when nurse and warder were both asleep. I had shammed dying, and they had given me over and made themselves comfortable for the night – toppers both. I tore up my bed-clothes and let myself down out of the window, dropped into the governor's garden, as neatly as you like for a sick un, and trudged along the roads till daybreak, when I hid behind a haystack, dozed there, and shivered there, and had bad dreams there all day; then, with nightfall, up and on my legs again till I got here. And now perhaps you'll find me a corner to lie in somewhere."

"He must not see you, or you'll soon be in gaol again."

"Curse him!" growled Roderick, "bears malice, does he?"

"He is not likely to forget that you tried to murder him."

"I was in liquor, and there was a knife handy. Yes, if luck had favoured me that night, Squire Bosworth would have come to an early end, and your wrongs would have been righted."

"I would rather right them myself."

"Ah, but you are of a slavish temper, like all women, however high they pretend to hold themselves. You can live here, eat his bread, and be called his servant, you who for years had him at your feet, led him like your lap-dog. I have heard what the village people say of you. This is not the first time I have been in your neighbourhood."

"No, I thought as much. 'Twas you robbed the London coach last December."

"What! you knew my hand, did you, Bab?" he cried, with a hoarse chuckle. His glassy eyes shone with a new light: the brandy seemed to have rekindled the spark of life in him. "Yes; it was neatly done, wasn't it? That knoll above the road was a capital station, and the old fir-trunks hid us. There were only two of us, Bab, and we got clean off with the plunder. But it was my last lucky hit. Nothing has gone well with me since that night. I turned fine gentleman for a month or two on the strength of that haul, and let my hand lose its cunning. And then for the pettiest business you can conceive, a fopling's purse at the Opera, as skinny a purse as you ever saw, Bab, I got quodded, and narrowly escaped a rope. It was only one of your old admirers, who came forward and spoke to my character, who saved me from the gallows."

"Are you too ill to go on to some safer shelter, if I were to give you some money?" asked Barbara meditatively.

She was puzzled what she could do with him, if he must needs remain on the premises. She knew that Roland Bosworth would show him little mercy. They had always been foes, and one particular scene was distinctly present to her mind's eye, as she knelt there by the kitchen fire, looking down at the pinched face, with the glassy eyes and hectic cheeks.

It was a scene after supper, in a gaily-lighted room, cards and dice lying about on the tables, and on one a punchbowl, some lemons, and a big clasp-knife. The guests were gone, and they three were alone, and a quarrel had come about between Bosworth and Layburne, a quarrel beginning in a dispute about gains and losses at cards, and intensifying through bitterest speech to keenest, cruellest taunts, taunts flung by the brother in the face of his sister's lover; and then hatred took a more desperate form, and Roderick Layburne snatched up the Spanish knife – his own knife which he had produced a while ago to cut the lemons – and had tried to stab Bosworth to the heart.

The Squire was the bigger and stronger man, and flung his assailant aside – flung him out of the room and down the steep London staircase, to ruminate on his wrongs at the bottom; and from that night Mrs. Layburne's brother had never been admitted to her lodgings in the Haymarket.

This had happened just eighteen years ago, in the days when Barbara was a famous actress, known to the town as Mrs. Belfield, and had titled admirers by the score. They had never been more than admirers, those dukes and lords who applauded her nightly, and thought it honour and felicity to lose their money at hazard or lansquenet in her luxurious lodgings. The only man she had ever cared for was Roland Bosworth, though he had never been either the handsomest or the most agreeable man among her followers. But women who are admired by all the world have curious caprices; and it had been Mrs. Layburne's fancy to sacrifice herself and her career to the least distinguished of her admirers. She had her tempers, and did not make her lover's life a bed of roses. Thrice he had been upon the point of marrying her; and each time some wild outbreak of passion or some freak of folly had scared him away from the altar. Then the time came when he wearied of her storms and sunshines, and left her. She followed, content, as her brother said, to become a slave where she had once been a queen.

Roderick groped with his hand for the tumbler, and his sister poured out a little more of the brandy and gave it to him.

"That means the renewal of life," he said, "but not for long. No, Bab; not if you were to offer me a thousand guineas could I budge another mile, on foot or on horseback. I'm on the last stage of my last journey, Bab. The gaol doctor was right enough when he told them yesterday morning it was all over – only he didn't know what stuff I was made of, or how long it would take me to die. Lungs gone, heart queer – that was his verdict. And gaol fever for a gentle finisher. You must find me a corner to die in, Barbara: it's all I shall ever ask you for."

She thought deeply. Take him into the house by a back door, hide him in some room near her own? That might be done, but it would be too hazardous. And when the end should come, there would be the difficulty. It would be more perilous to remove the dead than to admit the living. And then to let putrid fever into the house? Who could tell where the evil would stop? Disinfectants and precautionary measures were almost unknown in those days. Fever came into a house and did its fatal work unopposed.

But there was one vast block of buildings at Fairmile Court, given over to emptiness, buildings which no one ever explored. The old hunting stables, where Roland Bosworth's grandfather had kept his stud, had been disused for the last half-century. Loose boxes, men's rooms, saddle-rooms, dog-kennels: there was space enough for a village hospital.

"If I can but make one of those rooms fairly comfortable!" she thought, remembering how bleak and desolate the rooms had looked when she explored them soon after her first coming.

"I must go and see what I can do," she said after a pause. "It is early yet, not eight o'clock. I will have you comfortably lodged by ten."

"The sooner the better, for it isn't over-pleasant lying on these stones. If it had not been for that taste of cognac I should be dead before now."

Barbara hurried away, begging the gardener and his wife to keep close till her return, and to be ready to help her then. They were neither now nor at any future time to breathe a word to mortal ears

about anything which had happened or which might happen to-night. Then she hastened back to the house with those swift steps of hers, borne onward by the fever of excitement that burned within.

All was quiet at Fairmile Court. The Squire was luckily in London, not expected back till the end of the week. The few servants were snug in the kitchen, with closed doors. Barbara provided herself with a lantern and a bunch of keys, and went out to the old hunting stables, which were further from the house than those smaller stables now in use. She investigated room after room, little dens in which grooms had been lodged, until she found one that suited her. It was in a less dilapidated state than the others, and was provided with a fireplace, which the others were mostly without. The window looked away from all the other stables and the offices of the Court, and a light burning within would hardly attract notice. The smoke from the chimney would be almost hidden by the roof of a huge old brewery in the rear; and as the brewery was now used as a laundry, and fires almost always lighted there, the smoke from the lesser vent would in all probability be mingled with that from the tall and capacious shaft, and provoke no questions.

With her own hands, Barbara carried coals and wood and tinder-box, mattress and pillows, blanketing and linen, from the house to the groom's bedchamber, where the old furniture – a stump bedstead, a chest of drawers, and a chair or two – still remained. With her own hands she swept the chamber, lighted the fire, and made up the bed. The room had almost a comfortable look in the red glow of the fire. She toiled thus for nearly two hours, with many journeys to and fro in the wind and rain, and before the first stroke of ten, all was to her satisfaction. She had brought food and drink, all things that she could think of, for the sick man's comfort. It could hardly be much more luxurious than the prison infirmary from which he had escaped, but it had been his fancy to come there to die, and she could but indulge him. He was her junior by eleven years, and there was a time when she had loved him passionately, almost with a maternal love.

She went back to the lodge, and the gardener and she contrived a kind of impromptu ambulance out of an old truck, and a blanket which she had carried with her. The sick man's limbs seemed to have stiffened since he had crawled to that door, and had sunk exhausted upon that hearth.

"There isn't a crawl left in me," he said, as they lifted him on to the truck, and wrapped the blanket round him.

For nearly a fortnight he lay in that lonely room, his sister attending upon him, stealing to his lair again and again every day, often sitting up all night with him, nursing and ministering to him with inexhaustible patience. Her apprehension was of the hour when he should die, and there would be the business of removing him or of accounting for his presence in that place. It was an intense relief, therefore, when after a fortnight of unwearying attention, with a liberal use of brandy and strong soups, at an expenditure rare in that pinched household, Roderick so far recovered that he was quite capable of being moved to another shelter.

The hand of death was upon him – death's impress visible in hollow hectic cheeks, glassy eyes, and difficult breathing. Consumption was doing its subtle work, but typhus had been subjugated by good nursing.

No sooner had the fever left him than Mrs. Layburne planned how to get rid of the patient. She had the rickety, blundering, old family coach at her disposal whenever she wanted to go to the market-town to buy groceries and other necessities for the household. Roderick was well enough to put on a suit of old clothes, some cast-off garments of the Squire's which had seen hard service. She helped him to dress, and then directed him what to do. He was to walk as far as he could along the avenue towards the park-gates – or, if he had strength enough, beyond the gates – and was to sit down by the roadside as a wayfarer who had sunk from fatigue. She would stop the coach, and, affecting to take compassion upon him as a stranger, would offer him a lift to Cranbrook, the market-town. Here she would set him down at the Lamb, a humble little inn she knew of, where, furnished by her with funds, he might remain till he was well enough to resume the struggle for existence. In her heart of hearts she knew that for him that struggle was nearly over, and that it was doubtful if he would ever

leave the Lamb. She would have done all she could do for him, and Fate or Providence, God or the Devil, must do the rest. Mrs. Barbara's spiritual ideas were of a very obscure order, and ranked about as high as the tenets of the Indian Devil-dancers, or the Fetish-worshippers of the South Seas.

Roderick assented to her plan. What could he do but assent, having not another friend in the world, and being very anxious to leave that den in the old rat-haunted stables? The coach went lumbering along the avenue one fine afternoon while the Squire was up in London. Roderick had started a good hour before the coach, and he had contrived to tramp the whole length of the avenue, and pass the gardener's lodge, before the vehicle overtook him.

Barbara stopped the coach, and played her little drama of womanly compassion and charity. Old John Coachman wondered at this unaccustomed beneficence in the housekeeper; wondered still more when she opened the coach-door, and invited the tramp to ride beside her. So well had the gardener and his family kept madam's secret that the house-servants had heard nothing about that strange visitant of Mrs. Barbara's.

She pulled up her coach at the Lamb, and committed her brother, with payment in advance for a month's board and lodging, to the tender care of the landlady, who was a good homely soul, and so left him, with five guineas in his pocket, and the promise of future help, would he but lead an honest life, and keep out of gaol. Then she drove to the market-place, and did her shopping in the sleepy, low-ceilinged, old-established shops, where the tradesmen lived in a semi-darkness, and made a profit of from thirty to fifty per cent upon everything they sold.

"Thank God I am clear of that trouble!" ejaculated Mrs. Layburne, as the coach passed the Lamb again on its way out of the town.

She congratulated herself somewhat too soon, as she had not seen the end of evil; albeit the sick man only lingered for a few weeks longer, before he was carried to his nameless grave in Cranbrook Church.

CHAPTER III

"AND TO THE VIEWLESS SHADES HER SPIRIT FLED."

It was a habit with the two little girls, when the weather was bad and they could not ramble far afield in the spacious park, to take their exercise anywhere they could about the old rambling house, chasing each other up and down the corridors, skipping and dancing in the great unused reception-rooms, penetrating into every nook and corner, fearless, inquisitive, full of life and fun; but the sport which they enjoyed most of all was a game of hide-and-seek in the offices, the wood-sheds, and breweries, and disused coach-houses, kennels, and stabling. This was their sovereign domain, a region in which no one had ever interfered with their rights. Here they could be as noisy and as boisterous as they pleased, could give full indulgence to the riotous spirits of childhood. Mrs. Bridget was a kind nurse, but she was by no means a watchful one. The doctor had told her that it was good for children to run wild, most especially for little Rena, whose brain was in advance of her years; and Bridget acted upon this advice in a very liberal spirit. She was an arrant gossip, and would spend hours in the kitchen, with her arms folded in her apron, talking to the cook and housemaids, while her charges amused themselves as they listed in the house, or in the offices outside the house.

"They can't come to any harm," said Bridget. "They are not like mischievous boys, who would go climbing out of windows and getting into dangerous places. My little dears only run about and play prettily together."

A shout, a rush of little feet, and a peal of childish laughter in the passage outside the great stone kitchen would emphasise Bridget's remark.

No, they had never come to any harm in those rambling desolate stables, brewhouses, and wood-houses, till about three days after Roderick Layburne's departure, when, in a grand game of hide-and-seek, which had lasted over an hour, Linda, flushed and breathless with exercise and excitement, crept into the room which the sick man had occupied, and seated herself to rest upon the bed he had lain upon for fourteen weary days and fourteen restless nights.

She wondered a little at the tokens of recent occupation, such as she had never seen in any of these rooms before: ashes in the grate, a pipkin on one hob and a saucepan on the other, empty cups and jugs on a little table, and blankets on the bed where she was sitting.

She was too young to reason upon these evidences.

"Some one lives here," she told herself simply, but had no fear of the unknown personage. She waited so long for Rena to discover her hiding-place that she fell asleep at last, nestling down among those fever-tainted blankets. Rena found her there slumbering soundly, half an hour later, after having examined every hole and corner in her search, and crying with vexation at the difficulty of the quest.

It was not till ten days later that the evil result began to show itself. First Linda began to droop, and then Rena, each falling ill with exactly the same symptoms. The old doctor shook his head solemnly, "Scarlet fever, with the rash suppressed," he pronounced like an oracle; and immediately began to starve and to physic them, almost as if he were voluntarily working in unison with that deadly fever which was burning up their young blood.

The Squire was in an agony when he heard of his daughter's danger. He had seemed a careless and an indifferent father, and had seen very little of his child in those infantile years. He had no sympathy with childhood, could not understand its ways and ideas, knew not what to say to his little daughter or how to amuse her. It had been sufficient for him to know that she was near at hand, and that she was thriving.

But at the idea of peril he was like a madman. Barbara Layburne was surprised at the violence of his feelings. She looked at him with a curious air of suppressed cynicism.

"I had no idea you were so wrapped up in that baby," she said.

"Then you might have known as much. What else have I in this world to care for – to toil for – "

"Pray be reasonable, Mr. Bosworth. We all know that you love money for its own sake – not for those who are to come after you."

"Yes, but to know that when I am gone my wealth must be scattered to the four winds – that no grandchildren of mine will inherit all that I have slaved for; that no grandson of mine will assume my name, and hand it down to his son with the wealth. I have amassed, and which he should increase! Money fructifies of itself when there is but common prudence in the possessor. It is to my daughter's children I look for the reward of all my toils, the perpetuation of my name: and if she dies, the cord snaps, and all is over. I shall have to leave my money to a hospital or an almshouse. Horrid thought!"

"Horrid thought, indeed, for Squire Bosworth to contemplate his fortune as a means of blessing to the helpless!"

"You have a scathing tongue, Mrs. Barbara, and I sometimes think you have a malignant mind to set the tongue wagging. I never met but one woman who was true and pure and noble to the heart's core, and that was the sweet saint whom Fate snatched away from me."

"And who never loved you," sneered Barbara. "That is to the credit of her wisdom."

"Ay; but she was better to me than the women who have pretended to love me – women whose love has been a curse. Do not speak of her. Your lips befoul her."

And then he went to the chamber where the children were lying in their two little beds side by side. It had been impossible to part them; they would have fretted themselves to death in severance. And as they were both sick of the same fever, there seemed no need for keeping them in separate rooms.

The windows were curtained, the room kept in semi-darkness, as was the fashion in those days. Invalids were supposed to thrive best in the gloom. Every breath of air was excluded, and a large fire burned merrily in the grate, where divers messes and potions were stewing. An odour of drugs pervaded the room. The Squire could hardly draw his breath in that stifling atmosphere. But fresh air in a fever! Heaven forbid!

Bosworth sat by his child's bedside for a few minutes, holding the little burning hand in his, suffering an agony of helplessness and apprehension. What could his hoards do for her? Cræsus himself could not have bought an hour's respite for the little life that seemed ebbing away. How thick and laboured was her breathing!

"Surely she would do better with more air," said her father; but the nurses assured him that a puff of cold wind would be deadly. They dared not open a window. The nurses were Bridget and a woman from the village, who had a reputation for skill in all diseases. But the chief nurse was Barbara Layburne, who had taken up her abode in a room adjoining the sick-chamber, and who scarcely ceased from her watching by day or night.

She had heard the history of that fatal game at hide-and-seek, and how Rena had discovered Linda fast asleep on a bed in one of the rooms in the deserted stable. She knew too well what the fever meant, with its suppressed eruption – knew that she was to blame for the evil, by her carelessness after the sick man's departure. She had kept so close in her own den, had taken so little notice of the children, that she had never known of their occasional inroads upon the disused stables. Had she known more of children's ways, she would have known that it is just in such deserted regions that they love to play. Imagination is free amidst emptiness and solitude; and a child's fancy will convert a barn or a wood-shed into an enchanted palace.

"I will post to London and get the cleverest doctor in the town," exclaimed Bosworth.

It was the one only thing his money could do for that perishing child. He bent down and kissed the dry lips, inhaling the putrid breath, almost wishing that it might poison him if *she* were not to recover, and that they two might be laid in the same grave with the young mother. And then he left the sick-room, ordered a horse for himself, and another for his groom. The groom was to gallop on

ahead to the market-town, and order a post-chaise to be in readiness for his master. The Squire was in London soon after nightfall, and at his club, inquiring for the doctor who was cleverest in fever cases. He was told of Dr. Denbigh in Covent Garden, a youngish man, but a great authority on fevers; and to Covent Garden he went between eleven o'clock and midnight.

Dr. Denbigh was a student, and given to working late. He answered the door himself, in dressing-gown and slippers, and on the Squire's urgent entreaty consented to start at once, or as soon as post-horses could be got ready. He could return in the morning early enough to see his gratis patients, who came to him in flocks. He was known in all the vilest slums and alleys of London, and was the beloved of the London poor.

It was a three hours' journey, with good horses and short stages, to Fairmile Court; and it was the dead of the night when Bosworth and the physician stole softly into the children's sick-chamber, where nurse Bridget was dozing in her armchair, while Mrs. Layburne sat bolt upright beside Rena's bed, watching the child's troubled slumbers.

"What an atmosphere!" cried Dr. Denbigh. "Draw back those curtains, madam, if you please; open yonder window."

"The doctor forbade us to open door or window."

"That is a fine old-fashioned style of treatment, madam, which has helped to people our churchyards. You needn't be afraid of the night air. It is a fine dry night, and as wholesome as the day. Pray let those poor children have some fresh air."

Barbara Layburne obeyed, deeming herself the unwilling accessory to a murder. Bridget had rubbed her eyes, and was staring wonderingly at the strange doctor. The village nurse was snoring rhythmically in an adjoining room.

Dr. Denbigh seated himself between the two little beds, and examined the sufferers, each in turn, with ineffable gentleness, with thoughtful patient care.

"The symptoms are exactly the same," he said gravely, "but they are severest here."

It was on Rena that his hand rested. The Squire groaned aloud.

"Shall I lose her?" he asked. "She is my all."

"The child is very ill. What does your doctor call the malady?"

"Scarlet fever."

"Scarlet fever! Why, there is no rash!"

"He tells me that in some cases the rash does not appear – in some of the worst cases."

"This is no scarlet fever, sir. It is typhus – commonly called gaol fever – distinctly marked. It is a low form of putrid fever. Your child and her companion must have been visiting some of the poor folks' cottages, where the disease is often found."

"They have not been beyond the park-gates. You have not taken them among the cottagers, have you, Bridget? You have not disobeyed my strict orders?"

"Never, sir. The little dears will tell you themselves, when they have got their senses back, that I never took them nowheres."

"Have you had any fever case lately among your servants, indoors or out?"

"Mrs. Layburne, yonder, can answer that question better than I."

"No, there has been no such illness," said Barbara.

"Strange," said the doctor; "the fever is gaol fever, and no other."

He wrote a prescription, ordered an entire change of treatment: wine, brandy, the strongest soup that could be made – a chicken boiled down to a breakfast-cupful of broth – and, above all, cleanliness and fresh air. He gave many directions for the comfort of the children, and left within the hour of his arrival, promising to come again in three days, when he would confer with the local doctor. He would write fully to that gentleman next morning, to explain his change of treatment.

"I have no doubt I shall induce him to concur with me," he said.

Mr. Bosworth followed him to the chaise.

"Tell me the truth, for God's sake," he said. "Is there any hope for my child?"

The physician shook his head with a sorrowful air.

"She is very ill; they are both dangerously ill," he answered. "I would not trifle with you for worlds. You are a man, and can meet misfortune with courage and firmness. I doubt if either of those children will recover; but I will do my utmost to save both. If the nurses follow out my instructions exactly, there may be a change for the better within forty-eight hours; if not, the case is hopeless. I would have you prepared for the worst."

They clasped hands and parted. It was some hours before Roland Bosworth went back to the house. He roamed about the park in the cold starry night, brooding over past and future. For the last fifteen years he had given himself up to the pursuit of money for its own sake. He had haunted the City and the Exchange; he had speculated successfully in many a hazardous enterprise at home and abroad. At a period when speculation was but a science in the bud, he had shown himself far in advance of his class. He had added thousand to thousand, gloating over every increase of his capital, every lucky transaction on 'Change; and now it dawned upon him all at once that in the very pursuit of wealth he had lost the faculty for enjoying it; that he had fallen unawares into the miser's sordid habits – had lost all gusto for pleasure, all delight in life. Nothing remained to him but the abstract idea of wealth, and the knowledge that he could leave it behind him as a monument of his own individual greatness when he should be dust. He could only thus leave it – only secure his grip upon the future – through that little child who lay dying yonder within those dimly-lighted windows. Again and again during those melancholy hours he had drawn near the house, had stood for a little while below those lighted windows, looking up at the open lattice, and listening for some sound from within. But there had been nothing – a solemn stillness, as it were the silence of death.

And now, when the first sign of daybreak showed cold and pale above the eastern side of the park, a long gray streak against which the topmost boughs of oak and elm showed inky black, Mr. Bosworth went back to the house from a still wider circuit, and looked up again at the open window. Suddenly as he stood there a long shrill shriek rose on the silent air like a wild appeal to heaven; and then another and another shriek; and then a burst of passionate sobbing.

"It means death," said the Squire, nerving himself like a stoic. "The end has come quickly."

It was Bridget who had screamed. She was sitting on the floor with one of the children on her lap, dead. A handkerchief had been hastily flung over the dead face, upon which Bridget's tears were streaming. Barbara Layburne sat beside the other bed, Rena's bed, soothing the little sufferer.

The Squire stood on the threshold.

"Is my child still alive?" he asked, hardly daring to enter that room of horror.

"Yes. She is a shade better, I think," answered Barbara; "the cold lotions have relieved her head. Poor little Linda changed for the worse soon after the doctor left. We have had a terrible night with her. Her struggling and restlessness at the last were awful. We could not hold her in her bed, and she died in Bridget's arms ten minutes ago."

"O my darling, my darling, my precious pet!" wailed the nurse, with her face bent over that marble face under the handkerchief.

Roland Bosworth gave a long sigh, significant of intense relief; yet this was but a reprieve after all, perhaps. One blossom had withered and fallen from the stem: the other would follow.

"Dr. Denbigh told me that my child was in more imminent danger than the other," he said.

"Ay, but fevers are so capricious," answered Barbara, calm and unshaken in this hour of sorrow, "and with children no one can be sure of anything. Yesterday Rena seemed the worst, but after Dr. Denbigh left Linda began to sink rapidly. We gave her brandy and beaten eggs at half-hour intervals; we cut off her hair and applied the cooling lotion to her head; it was not for want of care that she died."

"What will Rena do without her?" exclaimed the Squire, thinking more of the living than the dead. Linda had never been more to him than a chattel – something bought for his daughter's pleasure.

He went over to the bed, and sat beside it in the faint gray morning light. The candles had guttered and burnt low in the sockets of the massive old silver candlesticks. The morning looked in at the open casement, pale and cold.

They had cropped the child's golden hair close to her head. Pinched with illness and thus shorn of its luxuriant curls, the whole character of the face seemed altered.

"Why did you cut off her hair?" asked the Squire.

"It was by the doctor's orders. Did not you hear him tell us?"

"Ay, to be sure. My wits were wool-gathering."

He bent down and kissed the fevered lips as he had done before. The child was lying in a kind of stupor, neither sleep nor waking.

"Try to save her for me," said Bosworth, as he rose and left the room.

The village nurse was still asleep in the next room; she had watched two nights running, and was indemnifying herself for those two vigils. Bridget and Barbara laid out their dead in another room before they awakened the nurse. The doctor came at nine o'clock, heard what Dr. Denbigh had said, and shrugged his shoulders unbelievably. He was disposed to ascribe Linda's death to that most reckless opening of a window between midnight and morning. He even affected to disapprove of those shorn tresses which lay in a golden heap upon the dressing-table, Linda's and Rena's so near in tint that it was not easy to distinguish one from the other.

"We shall see the effect of this new-fangled treatment," he said, looking at the prescription. "If Squire Bosworth were a man of society, he would not have committed such a breach of manners as to post off to town and bring down a strange doctor without conferring with me."

"He wanted to save his child," said Barbara.

"That is what we all want, madam; but it might just as well be done in accordance with professional etiquette," replied the doctor.

Although huffed by the Squire's conduct, he yet deigned to follow out Dr. Denbigh's treatment: and by a strict adherence to those instructions Rena began visibly to improve, and when the physician came to Fairmile on the third day he was able to give a favourable verdict.

"Your daughter is decidedly better," he said. "I am very sorry we lost her little companion. She was a pretty child – more robust than this one, and, as I thought, in less danger; but these little lives hang by the flimsiest thread."

The child who had been called Belinda was buried in the same churchyard where her unknown father lay in his pauper's grave; but the Squire showed himself unwontedly liberal, insomuch that he ordered a headstone to mark the child's resting-place – a stone upon which this inscription was cut at his own particular order:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF

BELINDA,

A CHILD OF FIVE YEARS,

WHO WAS FOR THREE YEARS THE BELOVED COMPANION OF

IRENE BOSWORTH

Obit October 29, 1712

Irene recovered, but her recovery was of the slowest. The loss of her playfellow retarded her convalescence. She sorrowed with a deeper sorrow than children are wont to feel at the loss of those they love. Fever and delirium hung upon her for nearly a month after her child-friend had been carried to Flamestead churchyard. Dr. Denbigh declared the case one of the most interesting and the most difficult that had come within his experience. There was a period in the history of the case when he began to fear for the little patient's mind; and even after convalescence her memory was found to be weakened, and there were moments of actual hallucination.

"She owes her life, under Providence, to Mrs. Bridget's excellent nursing," said Dr. Denbigh – commendation which brought sudden tears to Bridget's eyes. This praise was thoroughly deserved, for the nurse had devoted herself to her duties with untiring devotion, and had scarcely enjoyed a night's sleep during the four weary weeks of uncertainty that followed Linda's funeral. She grieved for the child that was gone with a deeper sorrow than might have been anticipated, seeing that her own particular charge, the child she had nursed from its birth, had been given back to her as if from the very jaws of death. She did her duty to the survivor with unstinted devotion; but it would have almost seemed that her heart was in the grave of that child which had been taken.

Squire Bosworth's conduct in many of the relations of life changed in a marked degree after this period of peril, in which his child's life, and as it were his own fate, had trembled in the balance. He became a more affectionate father, a better landlord, and a kinder master. He still appeared on 'Change every week, still speculated and laboured for the increase of his vast fortune, still hoarded and calculated and hung fondly over his piles of debentures and securities, mortgages and New River shares. The very bent and habit of his mind was too deeply engrained in him to be changed at forty years of age; but he became less miserly in many things, and he placed his establishment upon a more liberal footing, although retaining Mrs. Layburne at the head of affairs. For his daughter he spared nothing. He gave her toys, lap-dogs, and a pony, and never allowed a day to pass while he was at Fairmile without spending some portion of it in the little girl's society. For the rest he was as much a recluse as ever, shunning all his neighbours, and never sharing in any of those field-sports which are, and ever have been, the chief bond of union between country gentlemen.

CHAPTER IV

"HOW BRIGHT SHE WAS, HOW LOVELY DID SHE SHOW!"

To be a fashionable beauty, with a reputation for intelligence – nay, even for that much rarer quality, wit; to have been born in the purple; to have been just enough talked about to be interesting as a woman with a history; to have a fine house in Soho Square, and a mediæval abbey in Hampshire; to ride, dance, sing, play, and speak French and Italian better than any other woman in society; to have the finest diamonds in London; to be followed, flattered, serenaded, lampooned, written about and talked about, and to be on the sunward side of thirty: surely to be and to have all these good things should fill the cup of contentment for any of Eve's daughters.

Lady Judith Topsparkle had all these blessings, and flashed gaiety and brightness upon the world in which her lot was cast; and yet there were those among her intimates – those who sipped their chocolate with her of a morning, before her head was powdered or her patches put on – who declared that she was not altogether happy.

The diamonds, the spacious house in Soho Square, with its Turkey carpets and Boule furniture, its plenitude of massive plate and Italian pictures, its air of regal luxury and splendour; the abbey near Ringwood, with its tapestries, pictures, curios, and secret passages, were burdened with a certain condition which for Lady Judith reduced their value to a minimum.

All these good things came to her through her husband. Of her own right she was only the genteelst pauper at the Court end of London. Her blood was of the bluest. She was a younger daughter of one of the oldest earls; but Job himself, after Satan had done his worst, was not poorer than Lord Bramber. Lady Judith had brought Mr. Topsparkle nothing but her beauty, her quality, and her pride. Love she never pretended to bring him, nor liking, nor even respect. His father had made his fortune in trade; and the idea of a tradesman's son was almost as repulsive to Lady Judith as that of a blackamoor. She married him because her father, and society in general, urged her to marry him, and, in her own phraseology, "the matter was not worth fighting about." She had broken just a year before with the only man she had ever loved, had renounced him in a fit of pique on account of some scandal about a French dancing-girl; and from that hour she had assumed an air of recklessness; she had danced, flirted, talked, and carried on in a manner that delighted the multitude, and shocked the prudes. Bath and Tunbridge Wells had rung with her sayings and doings; and finally she surrendered herself, not altogether unwillingly, to the highest bidder.

She was burdened with debt, and hardly knew what it was to have a crown-piece of ready money. At cards she had to borrow first of one admirer and then of another. She had been able to get plenty of credit for gowns and trinketry from a harpy class of tradespeople, India houses in the City and Court milliners at the West End, who speculated in Lady Judith's beauty as they might have done in some hazardous but hopeful stock; counting it almost a certainty that she would make a splendid match and reward them bounteously for their patience.

Mr. Topsparkle saw her at Bath in the zenith of her charms. He met her at a masquerade at Harrison's Rooms, followed and intrigued her all the evening, and at last, alone in an alcove with her after supper, induced her to take off her mask. Her beauty dazzled those experienced eyes of his, and he fell madly in love with her at first sight of that radiant loveliness – starriest eyes of violet hue, a dainty little Greek nose, a complexion of lilies and blush-roses, and the most perfect mouth and teeth in Christendom. No one had ever seen anything more beautiful than the tender curves of those classic lips, or more delicate than their faint carmine tinge. In an epoch when almost every woman of fashion plastered herself with vermilion and ceruse, Lord Bramber's daughter could afford to exhibit

the complexion Nature had given her, and might defy paint to match it. Lady Judith laughed at her conquest when she was told about it by half a dozen different admirers at the Rooms next morning.

"What, that Topsparkle man!" she exclaimed – "the travelled cit who has been exploring all sorts of savage places in Spain and Italy, and writing would-be witty letters about his travels! They say he is richer than any nabob in Hindostan. Yes, I plagued him vastly, I believe, before I consented to unmask; and then he pretended to be dumfounded at my charms, forsooth! dazzled by this sun, into which you gentlemen look without flinching, like young eagles."

"My dear Lady Judith, the man is captivated – your slave for ever. You had better put a ring in his nose and lead him about with you, instead of that little black boy for whom you sighed the other day, and that his lordship denied you. He is quite the richest man in London, and he is on the point of buying Lord Ringwood's place in Hampshire – a genuine mediæval abbey, with half a mile of cloisters, and a fishpond in the kitchen."

"I care neither for cloisters nor kitchen."

"Ay, but you have a weakness for diamonds," urged Mr. Mordaunt, an old admirer, who was very much *au courant* as to the fair Judith's history and habits, had lent her money when she was losing at basset, and had diplomatised with her creditors for her. "Witness that cross the Jew sold you t'other day."

Lady Judith reddened angrily. The same Jew dealer who sold her the jewel had insisted on having it back from her when he discovered her inability to pay for it, threatening to prosecute her for obtaining goods under false pretences.

"Mr. Topsparkle's diamonds – they belonged to his mother – are historical. His maternal grandfather was an Amsterdam Jew, and the greatest diamond merchant of his time. He had mills where the gems were ground as corn is ground in our country, and seem to have been as plentiful as corn. Egad, Lady Judith, how you would blaze in the Topsparkle diamonds!"

"Mr. Topsparkle must be sixty years of age!" exclaimed the lady, with sovereign contempt.

"I believe he is nearer seventy; but nobody supposes you would marry him for his youth or his personal attractions. Yet he is by no means a bad-looking man, and he has had plenty of adventures in his day, I can assure your ladyship. *Il a vécu*, as our neighbours say. Topsparkle is no simpleton. When he set out upon the grand tour nearly forty years ago, he carried with him about as scandalous a reputation as a gentleman of fashion could enjoy. He had been cut by all the straitlaced people; and it is only the fact of his incalculable wealth which has opened the doors of decent houses for him since his return."

"I thank you for the compliment implied in your recommendation of him to me as a husband," said Lady Judith, drawing herself up with that Juno-like air which made her seem half a head taller, and which accentuated every curve of her superb bust. "He is apparently a gentleman whom it would be a disgrace to know."

"O, your ladyship must be aware that a reformed rake makes the best husband. And since Topsparkle went on the Continent he has acquired a new reputation as a wit and a man of letters. He wrote an Assyrian story in the Italian language, about which the town raved a few years ago – a sort of demon story, ever so much cleverer than Voltaire's fanciful novels. Everybody was reading or pretending to read it."

"O, was that his?" exclaimed Judith, who read everything. "It was mighty clever. I begin to think better of your Topsparkle personage."

Five minutes afterwards, strolling languidly amidst the crowd, with a plain cousin at her elbow for foil and duenna, Lady Judith met Mr. Topsparkle walking with no less a person than her father.

Lord Bramber enjoyed the privilege of an antique hereditary gout, and came to Bath every season for the waters. He was a man of imposing figure, at once tall and bulky, but he carried his vast proportions with dignity and ease. He was said to have been the handsomest man of his day, and had been admired even by an age which could boast of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, and

the irresistible Henry St. John. Basking in that broad sunshine of popularity which is the portion of a man of high birth, graceful manners, and good looks, Lord Bramber had squandered a handsome fortune right royally, and now, at five-and-fifty, was as near insolvency as a gentleman dare be. His house at Bath was a kind of haven to which he brought his family when London creditors began to be implacable. He had even thoughts of emigrating to Holland or Belgium, or to some old Roman town in the sunny south of France, where he might live upon his wife's pin-money, which happily was protected by stringent settlements and uncorruptable trustees.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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

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