

Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

Miser Farebrother: A Novel

(vol. 1 of 3)



Benjamin Farjeon

**Miser Farebrother:
A Novel (vol. 1 of 3)**

«Public Domain»

Farjeon B.

Miser Farebrother: A Novel (vol. 1 of 3) / B. Farjeon — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	19
CHAPTER V	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

Farjeon B. L. Benjamin Leopold

Miser Farebrother: A Novel (vol. 1 of 3)

CHAPTER I

THE LAST OF THE CARE-TAKERS

In Dropmore Beeches, near Beddington, county of Surrey, stands a red brick mansion, in the Gothic style, known as Parkside. It is situated on the outskirts of an estate of forty acres, comprised of a few acres of cover, and, for the rest, of shrubberies, meadow-land, and a wilderness wood, upon the arrangement of which great care had been bestowed and a vast amount of money expended. This was in the old days, when the house had been occupied by a family of good standing, the heirs of which had resided in it for many generations. Pride was taken in it then, and it was deservedly renowned for its beauty. The country people round about quoted Parkside as a possession which reflected honour upon themselves, and the vicarious distinction was accounted of high value. They had good reasons for being proud of it, and of its masters and mistresses, who were to the fore not only in the county but in the metropolis. The gentlemen fought for King and country, and administered the laws; the ladies dispensed charities and set the fashions; they attended Court, hunted, travelled, and held their heads high, as was their due. But other times, other men. The family that had owned Parkside for centuries slipped out of the ranks – for which they had none but themselves to blame. A strain of foreign blood was introduced by marriage, and the heir born of that union inherited the vices of his mother's family. He ran his course merrily; and after him a spendthrift heir, and after him another, reaped what had been bred and zealously cultivated in the bone. They played the part of absentees, and plunged into the fashionable dissipations of the city – raked, and made matches on the race-courses, rattled the dice-box from night till morning, were always ready for any mad prank, drank deeply, and borrowed at exorbitant interest – until they had thoroughly succeeded in squandering their fortune. It was too late, then, for repentance: Parkside was lost to them and theirs for ever. There had been long and complicated law proceedings in connection with the estate, and at the period of the opening of this story it was supposed to be in Chancery – which troubled itself not at all in the matter – and to have no rightful or legal owner. Nevertheless, it was occupied by a man who had earned the name of Miser Farebrother, who paid rent to no one, and was not called upon to do so. It was really doubtful whether any person had authority to demand it; and if a claimant had come forward, his right would have been stubbornly contested by Miser Farebrother, who had papers in his fire proof safe proving, in some entangled way, that he had advanced money upon the estate which entitled him to possession. The lawyers, for a great number of years, had gathered rich harvests out of Parkside, and, after picking its bones clean and involving it in legal complications which the entire learned profession could not have unravelled, had turned their backs upon it and flown to more profitable game. Its fate, long before it fell into the hands of Miser Farebrother, may be described in one word – decay. The wilderness wood, the wild charms of which had been preserved with much care and skill, was so encumbered with stunted wood growth and overrun with giant weeds that it resembled a miniature Forest of Despair; the shrubberies were wrecks; the meadow-land was thick with tufts of rank grass; and the only part of the estate which had thriven was the cover, in which the rabbits literally swarmed, spreading destruction all around. Not a shilling did Miser Farebrother expend upon the grounds – a proof that he did not regard his rights as absolutely incontestable. He had a keen eye for the main chance, and money could have been laid out on the land with profit, both in the present and the future; but he was not the man to waste the smallest coin upon a doubtful venture. "Safe and sure" had been his motto all through his life, and from a worldly point of view he had made it pay.

He took possession of Parkside in the dead of night. For at least a dozen years it had been without a tenant, and for many years before that time its only inmates had been the care-takers appointed by the Courts and the lawyers. The last of these care-takers were a very old man and a very old woman of the name of Barley, who were supposed to have died of starvation in the house. It was said that there were long arrears of wages due to them, which were never paid, because the last shilling of the available funds had been swept away by wig and gown. No one cared to assume responsibility in the matter, and so this old couple were left in possession to do as they pleased. They had come from a distance to enter upon their duties, and nobody in the neighbourhood knew anything about them or their antecedents; nor was it known how they came to be appointed. That they were the poorest of the poor was clear – all that they brought with them to Parkside were a stick and a bundle. The old man carried the stick, and the old woman the bundle.

How they subsisted was a mystery. In the autumn they were in the habit of picking up bits of broken branches and carrying them into the house, presumably to serve in lieu of coals when winter came on. Both of them were bent nearly double with old age and rheumatism. Occasionally they would be seen sitting on a log, very close to each other, with a little pile of stones before them, which they shied with weak and trembling hands at a rabbit or a bird, or at shadows which they mistook for living creatures. They never by any chance hit anything they aimed at, and they did not even succeed in frightening the birds or the rabbits, which darted hither and thither and hopped about quite near to them in the most unconcerned fashion. During the latter years of their tenancy one or other of the old people would sometimes be seen, when the weather was fine, creeping out of Parkside and out of Beddington, starting early in the morning and returning late at night. On these occasions it was observed that they carried a parcel, which without further evidence it was decided was something abstracted from the mansion, which they were travelling to a distance to sell, in order to obtain food; and it was also decided that they did not dispose of these articles in the immediate neighbourhood of Beddington, lest they should be accused of theft. If this were really the case, the old couple might have dismissed their fears; the difficulty of finding a prosecutor would have been insurmountable; and as to portable property of a sufficiently small size to be tied up in a pocket-handkerchief, there was little enough of that in the mansion. All that was valuable and of easy carriage had long since been seized and sold, lawfully or unlawfully. The ruin of Parkside was not a grand crash, in the thunder of which lightning-flashes of old glories made themselves visible; it was a long and mean decline, made up of piecemeal borrowings and bit-by-bit sales; of filchings and small robberies, a few feathers by this sharp rogue, a few feathers by that, from the plumage of the birds that were once the pride of the country. There was certainly plenty of old furniture in the house, which had been allowed to remain, probably because it was heavy and cumbersome and falling to pieces – bedsteads, tables, chairs, benches and sideboards, quaintly and curiously carved; rich tapestries too, mostly worn to shreds, and rotted by age and neglect, in which old stories had been woven by fair hands. They and the gallant deeds they recorded were now on an equality; the reflected radiance of stately seasons of honourable life and dignified labour was utterly and for ever dead, leaving no soul behind; the story was told, and flesh and silk were little better than dust. There were not any pictures in frames in the rooms; but there were paintings on the wall panels, so faded now and colourless that the learning of an antiquary were needed to describe them.

Amidst these ancient surroundings the last of the care-takers, old Mr. and Mrs. Barley, moved and starved. One can imagine them creeping up the wide staircases, and tottering about the rooms, living ghosts, clinging to each other for support (they were both past seventy, and chronically weak from want of proper nourishment), wondering whether they had not reached the dead world upon the brink of which they stood. There came a hard winter, and a fall of snow which lasted intermittently, but pretty steadily, nevertheless, for a full fortnight. It was during this winter that an incident occurred in the career of the last of the care-takers.

Said a gossip to a kindred heart, trudging through the snow at least a hundred yards for the purpose, "My man, coming home from work last night, passed the gates of Parksides."

"He does always, doesn't he?" was the response, evincing in the querist an ungracious spirit, for Gossip Number Two was aware that her neighbour had not walked ankle-deep in the coldest of carpets to impart this information.

"Yes, he does always, when he doesn't go another way."

"What other way?"

"The way of the Hog in the Pound." (For comprehension to uninformed minds, a public-house.)

"That's the way he likes best," observed Gossip Number Two, still with the ungracious spirit upon her.

"*You* needn't boast," said Gossip Number One; "your man leaves half his wages there."

"Yes; worse luck! But what about Parksides?"

"He saw a woman going in."

"Old Mrs. Barley?"

"No; a youngish woman, looking like a beggar, with a boy holding on to her."

"A tramp! The Barleys can't help her – can't help themselves."

"She asked my man whether that was Parksides, and whether a married couple of the name of Barley lived there. 'Lives there!' says my man to her. 'Starves there, would be nearer the truth.' The woman gave a sigh, and passed into the grounds."

"Is that all?" asked Gossip Number Two, disappointed in a story so bare of incident.

"That's all," replied Gossip Number One. "Leastways it's all my man told me."

"It ain't much."

"No, it ain't. But," added Gossip Number One, cheerfully illogical, her temperament being livelier than that of her neighbour, "what can we expect in such weather? Just look how the snow's coming down again!"

This shifting of responsibility from a colourless story to a remarkable storm – which, despite its inconveniences, was interesting because it afforded a sound theme for conversation – somewhat mollified Gossip Number Two, who, accompanied by her visitor, stepped to the window to gaze upon the whirling flakes. They were thick and heavy, and a strong, uncertain wind was lashing them furiously about, this way and that, with a bewildering lack of method which furnished an exception to the indisputable truth that order is nature's first law. The window through which the gossips were looking was in the front room of the cottage, and faced the narrow lane which led to the main road. Along this lane a woman was walking, with a little boy scarcely three years of age tugging at her gown. Presently they reached the cottage, where the woman paused to wipe the snow from her face and eyes. She was very poorly dressed, and belonged evidently to the lower orders.

"Is that her?" asked Gossip Number Two.

"It might be. She's got a little boy with her, and she looks like a beggar. Let's have her in."

Candour compels the admission that it was not an instinct of hospitality or humanity that prompted the suggestion. It was simply curiosity to discover what connection existed between the poor woman and her child and old Mr. and Mrs. Barley.

There was not much to learn. The last of the care-takers were her parents. Having lost her husband, and being at her wits' end how to live, she had tramped a matter of sixty miles to Parksides in the hope that her parents might be able to assist her. Her hope was shattered the moment she saw them. So desperate were their circumstances that she would stop with them only one night, and she was now on her way back to her native town, in which, at all events, she had a claim upon the poor-house. She did not complain. She had been so used to poverty and hardships that she harboured them without a murmur, but she said it was bitter weather, and she did not know how ever she would get home again. While she was telling her tale, sitting by the fireside – for the warmth of which she expressed herself humbly thankful – the little fellow in her lap fell asleep.

"What is his name?"

"Tom – after his poor father," said the woman.

Gossip Number One looked at Gossip Number Two, who nodded, and going to the cupboard took therefrom a teapot, a tea-caddy, and a loaf of bread. A full kettle was steaming on the hob. As the woman raised her head, her hostess saw tears glistening in her eyes.

"There, there, my dear," she said, "we none of us know what we may come to. A cup of tea'll warm your inside. And, I declare! it's left off snowing again!"

Half an hour afterward the woman, having thanked her entertainers, resumed her journey, and the gossips stood on the doorstep and gazed at her vanishing form until a turn in the narrow lane hid her from their sight. Comforting food and human sympathy had strengthened her, and she was carrying her child, who, as his mother declared, was almost "dead with sleep." Strange and subtle are the invisible links which connect life with life and already one was spiritually forged between the slumbering lad and men and women who will play their parts in this story of human love and passion and suffering and desire.

In the ancient decayed house yonder old Mr. and Mrs. Barley were talking in quavering tones of their Jane, who had paid them her last earthly visit.

"She'll marry agin, mother, will our Jane," piped the old man; "she was always a taking lass. It's only yesterday she was in pinafores."

For three years longer the Barleys remained tenants of Parkside, and then departed for another bourne. It was bruited about the neighbourhood that they had been found dead in the kitchen, clasped in each other's arms. So little had been seen of them during the last years of their tenancy that but small interest had been taken in them. They troubled nobody, and nobody troubled them. But being dead, the case was different; popular fancy placed them on a pinnacle, and they became distinguished.

"So the Barleys have gone," was said. "Who'll be the next?"

No records are to hand throwing light upon what was done with their bodies; among the uninformed the general belief was that they were not buried, but that they "disappeared." Of course their spirits remained, to the comfort of superstitious souls still in the flesh. There was a talk of "ghosts," and the ball, being set rolling, grew apace. The natural consequence was that Parkside acquired the reputation of being a haunted house. The ghosts of the old people were seen by many persons of all ages – who were ready to testify to the same in the witness-box – standing at the windows, or moving familiarly about the grounds, or seated on the roof top; always very lovingly arm in arm. Not in the memory of the oldest inhabitant had such an enjoyable excitement been furnished, and the superstition caused Parkside to be avoided at night-time. Those who were fearsomely courageous enough to make a special excursion to "see the ghosts" always went in company, and always came back with white faces and trembling limbs. Children would huddle together in a shrinking heap, standing so for a few minutes, and then, startled into active movement by a sudden cry from one among them, would scream: "There they are! Oh! oh! They're coming after us!" and would scamper off as fast as their legs would carry them; until, at a safe distance, they would pause, breathless, to compare notes.

Here was a chance for the imagination, and it ran riot. No speculation was too extravagant.

"Did *you* see them? *I* did! What did they look like? Like what they are, you dunce – ghosts! Old Barley had a night-cap on. So had she. They were all in white. He was smoking a pipe. Did you see the fire coming out of his mouth? He blew it at us. Yes, and when they saw we didn't go away they got up, and grew and grew till they were higher than the trees! Johnny, come home with me to mother. She wouldn't believe *me* when I told her. Oh, didn't they look awful!"

Uninteresting as old Mr. and Mrs. Barley had been during their lifetime, it cannot be denied that their ghosts supplied an entertainment better than any theatre.

CHAPTER II

MISER FAREBROTHER RECONNOITRES THE GROUND AND RECEIVES A SHOCK

This condition of affairs favoured Miser Farebrother, when, in pursuance of a cunningly-formed plan, he took possession of the estate. Already he claimed to have a hold upon it, and who had a better right than he to live there rent free? There was a fascination in the prospect. To live rent free! To have a house and land all one's own! There would be a claim for Queen's taxes, perhaps, and rates. Well he would pay a little – as little as possible. The government receipts would go a long way to strengthen his hold upon the property. The rent of his house in London was ruinous. In so many years he would be so much money in pocket – a fortune. Then, he had heard and read that if a man lived in a house for a certain time without paying rent, it became legally and lawfully his own, to sell or do what he liked with. It was a bold step, but the prize was so valuable that he would risk it.

He made two preliminary investigations of the property, and as everything depended upon secrecy, these visits were paid in the night when nobody was about. He knew nothing of the popular belief that the place was haunted.

On the first of these visits he was undisturbed. He crept into the grounds within a few minutes of midnight, and made his way to a back door. It yielded to his touch. He lit a candle which he had brought with him, and entered. All was still and lonely; not a sound reached his ears; there was not a crumb in the mansion upon which even a rat or a mouse could live. Stealthily and warily he made a tour of the rooms, shading the light with his hand when he was near a window. There was small need for such a precaution, but he took it, nevertheless.

"Safe and sure!" he muttered – "safe and sure!"

He was gratified and amazed to discover so many pieces of old furniture in the house; and he made out a list upon paper of what it would be necessary to bring with him when he actually took possession: his desk, containing his private papers and account-books, in which were entered his precious transactions; a few pots and pans, and some sheets and blankets; the personal clothing his wife would attend to. These things could be put into a cart, and a single horse would be sufficient to convey them from London. He had ascertained the distance – between fifteen and sixteen miles. He and his wife and child could ride in the cart. So much saved!

Determining to come again before the final step was taken, he left the house at two in the morning as secretly and quietly as he had entered it.

His second visit was paid in the course of the following week, at about the same hour of the night. He entered the house, again without being disturbed, and lighting his candle, made another tour of the rooms. He stood in one which had been a principal bedroom, and he resolved to turn it to the same use. On this occasion he made a more careful examination of the furniture, which, in consequence of the craze for the antique, he knew to be worth a great deal of money; and he was rubbing his hands with glee, having placed the candle on a table, and was thinking, "All mine! all mine!" when a sound from the bedstead almost drove the blood from his heart. It was a sound of soft breathing.

He stood for a few moments transfixed; his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth; his feet seemed fastened to the floor. The sound of soft, regular breathing continued, and presently, as nothing more alarming occurred, he began to recover himself. His feet became loosened, his limbs regained their power of action. Noiselessly he took from his pockets two articles – one a revolver, which he always carried about him; the other a bottle of water. He moistened his throat, and returned the bottle to his pocket; and then, holding the pistol, without any distinct idea of the use he might put it to, he

tremblingly approached the bed. There, fully dressed, lay a lad of some thirteen or fourteen years of age.

A common-looking lad, sleeping very peacefully and calmly.

Miser Farebrother, seeing before him an enemy whom he could easily overcome, shook the lad roughly, and cried, "Now, then, what are you doing here?"

The lad jumped up, and slid from the bed to the floor.

"Do you hear me?" cried Miser Farebrother. "What are you doing here, you vagabond?"

That the lad was terribly frightened was clear by his movements; he shrank back and cowered at the sight of the pistol, but he managed to blurt out:

"I ain't doing no harm, your honour! I'm only having a sleep."

"How dare you sleep here?" demanded Miser Farebrother, in a tone of authority. "You have come to commit a robbery – to rob *me*! I'll put you in jail for it."

"Don't your honour – don't!" pleaded the lad, still cowering and shrinking. "I ain't done a morsel of harm – upon my soul I ain't! I didn't come here to steal nothink – upon my soul I didn't!"

Miser Farebrother put the pistol into his pocket, and the lad began to whimper.

"Do you know I could take your life, could lawfully take it," said Miser Farebrother, "for breaking into *my* house as you have done, and sleeping upon *my* bed?"

"Yes, your honour; but please don't! I didn't break into the house. The door was open."

"Stop that crying."

"Yes, your honour."

And the lad, in default of a handkerchief, dug his knuckles into his eyes. A lad of resource and some decision of character, he cried no more. This fact was not lost upon Miser Farebrother.

"You did not break into the house, you say?"

"No, your honour; upon my soul I didn't!"

"And you found the door open?"

"Yes, your honour."

"Which door?"

"The kitchen door, your honour."

"How long have you been here?"

"Three days, your honour."

This piece of information rather confounded Miser Farebrother, who, himself an interloper, was feeling his way; but he was politic enough not to betray himself.

"Three days, eh – and not yet caught?"

"Nobody wants to ketch me, your honour."

"Not your father and mother?"

"Ain't got none, your honour."

"Somebody else, then, in their place?"

"There ain't nobody in their place. There ain't a soul that's got a call to lay a hand upon me."

"Except me."

"Yes, your honour," said the lad, humbly: "but I didn't know."

His complete subservience and humbleness had an effect upon Miser Farebrother. He judged others by himself – a common enough standard among mortals – and he was not the man to trust to mere words; but there was a semblance of truth in the manner of the lad which staggered him. In all England it would have been difficult to find a man less given to sentiment, and less likely to be led by it, but the lad's conspicuous helplessness, and his ingenuous blue eyes – which, now that the pistol was put away, looked frankly at the miser – no less than his own scheme of taking possession of Parksides by stealth and in secrecy, were elements in favour of this lad, so strangely found in so strange a situation. A claim upon Parksides Miser Farebrother undoubtedly possessed; he held papers, in the shape of liens upon complicated mortgages, which he had purchased for a song; but

he had something more than a latent suspicion that the law's final verdict was necessary to establish the validity and exact value of his claim. This he had not sought to obtain, knowing that it would have led him into ruinous expense and probable failure. These circumstances were the breeders of an uneasy consciousness that he and the lad, in their right to occupy Parkside, were somewhat upon an equality. Hence it was necessary to be cautious, and to feel his way, as it were.

"Where are your people?" he asked.

The lad stared at him.

"My people!"

"Your people," repeated Miser Farebrother. "Where you live, you know."

"Ain't got no people," said the lad. "Don't live nowhere."

"Listen to me, you young scoundrel," said Miser Farebrother, shaking a menacing forefinger at him; "if you're trying to impose upon me by a parcel of lies, you'll find yourself in the wrong box. As sure as I'm the master of this house, I'll have you locked up and fed upon stones and water for the rest of your life."

"I ain't trying to impose upon you," persisted the lad, speaking very earnestly; "I ain't telling you a parcel of lies. Look here, your honour, have you got a book?"

"What book?"

"I don't care what book – any book! Give it me, and I'll kiss it, and swear on it that I've told you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"You'll have to tell something more of yourself before I've done with you. Where did you live before you lived nowhere?"

"Hailsham, your honour."

"Where's that?"

"Don't know, your honour."

"How far from here?"

"Six days, your honour."

"None of your nonsense. How far?"

"Couldn't tell to a yard, if you was to skin me alive. It took me six days to git here."

"You walked?"

"Yes, your honour; every step of the way."

"Who did you live with at Hailsham?"

"Mother."

"You said you had none."

"More I have. She's dead."

"Father too?"

"Yes; ever so long ago."

"What brought you here?"

"My legs."

Miser Farebrother restrained his anger – for which there was no sound reason, the lad's manner being perfectly respectful.

"What did you come here for?"

"To see grandfather. I heerd mother talk of him and grandmother ever so many times, and that they lived down here; so when she was buried I thought I might do worse than come and see 'em."

"Have you seen them?"

"No, your honour; they're dead too." The lad added, mournfully, "Everybody's dead, I think."

"They lived down here, you say?"

"Yes; 'most all their lives; in this fine house. They was taking care of it for the master."

Some understanding of the situation dawned upon Miser Farebrother, and a dim idea that it might be turned to his use and profit.

"What was their name?"

"Barley, your honour. That's my name, Tom Barley; and if you'd give me a job I'd be everlastingly thankful."

Miser Farebrother, with his eyes fixed upon the lad's face, into which, in the remote prospect of a job, a wistful expression had stolen, considered for a few moments. Here was a lad who knew nobody in the neighbourhood and whom nobody knew, and who recognized in him the master of Parkside. In a few days he intended to enter into occupation, and he had decided not to bring a servant with him. Tom Barley would be useful, and was, indeed, just the kind of person he would have chosen to serve him in a rough way – a stranger, whose only knowledge of him was that he was the owner of Parkside; and no fear of blabbing, having nothing to blab about. He made up his mind. He took a little book from his pocket, the printed text of which was the calculation of interest upon ten pounds and upward for a day, for a week, for a month, for a year, at from five to fifty per cent. per annum.

"Take this book in your hand and swear upon it that you have told me the truth."

Tom Barley kissed the interest book solemnly, and duly registered the oath.

"If I take you into my service," said Miser Farebrother, "will you serve me faithfully?"

A sudden light of joy shone in Tom Barley's eyes. "Give me the book again, your honour, and I'll take my oath on it."

"No," said Miser Farebrother. As a matter of fact, he had been glad to get the book back in his possession, not knowing yet whether Tom Barley could read, and being fearful that he might open it and discover its nature; "I'll be satisfied with your promise. But you can't sleep in the house, you know."

"There's places outside, your honour; there's one where the horses was. That'll be good enough for me."

"Quite good enough. How much money have you got?"

"I had a penny when I reached here, your honour, but it's gone. I spent it in bread."

"Is that all you've had to eat?"

"No, your honour; I killed a rabbit."

"Very well. I take you into my service, Tom Barley. Twopence a week, and you sleep outside. When you're a man I'll make your fortune if you do as you're told. What's to-day?"

"Monday, your honour," said Tom Barley, now completely happy. "The church bells was ringing yesterday."

"On Thursday night," said Miser Farebrother, "at between twelve and one o'clock, I shall be here with a cart. There will be a lady in it besides me, and – and – a child. You understand?"

"Yes, your honour, I'm awake."

"Be awake then, wide awake, or you will get in trouble. I shall want you to help get some things out of the cart. There will be a moon, and you will be able to see me drive up. Look out for me. Here's a penny on account of your first week's wages. You can buy some more bread with it, and if you like you can kill another rabbit. Was it good?"

"Prime, your honour."

"It ought to be. It was *my* rabbit, you know, Tom Barley, and you'll kill no more than one between now and Thursday. The skins are worth money, and many a man's been hanged for stealing them. You will not forget? – Thursday night between twelve and one."

"No fear of my forgetting, your honour," said Tom Barley, ducking his head in obeisance; "I shall be here, wide awake, waiting for you."

Miser Farebrother saw Tom Barley out of the house, and walked away through the shadows, rubbing his hands in satisfaction at having done a good night's work.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW TENANTS ARRIVE, AND ONE DEPARTS

At the appointed hour a cart drew up at the gates of Parkside, in which, in addition to the driver, were Miser Farebrother and his wife and child. Tom Barley was waiting for them, and he darted forward to assist. Miser Farebrother alighted first, and receiving the child from his wife, looked rather helplessly about him, Mrs. Farebrother not being strong enough to alight without help.

"Can you hold a child?" asked Miser Farebrother of Tom Barley.

"Yes, your honour," replied Tom, eagerly; and he took the child, a little girl scarcely two years old, and cuddled it close to him.

The mother looked anxiously at the lad, and the moment her feet touched the ground she relieved him of the charge. The moonlight shone upon the group, and Tom Barley gazed in wonder at the lady's beautiful face and the pretty babe. Desiring Tom to assist the driver in the removal of the necessary household articles he had brought with him in the cart, Miser Farebrother led the way into the house, which they entered through the door at the back. As he was lighting a candle, Mrs. Farebrother sighed and shivered.

"It is very lonely," she murmured.

"It is very comfortable," he retorted; "a palace compared to the place we have left. You will get well and strong here."

She shook her head, and said, in a tone so low that the words did not reach her husband's ears, "I shall never get well."

"What is that you say?" he cried, sharply. She did not reply. "Instead of grumbling and trying not to make the best of things," he continued, "it would be more sensible of you to light the fire and make me a cup of tea. Here's plenty of wood, and here's a fireplace large enough to burn a ton of coals a day. I must see to that. Now bustle about a bit; it will do you good. I am always telling you that you ought to be more energetic and active."

"Is there no servant in the house?" she asked, wearily. She had taken off her mantle, and having wrapped her child in it and laid her down, was endeavouring to obey her husband's orders. "You said you had one."

"So I have, a man-servant. I engaged him expressly for you."

"The boy at the gate?"

"Yes; and here he is, loaded. That's right, Tom; be sharp and willing, and you'll die a rich man."

Tom Barley was sharp enough to perceive that Mrs. Farebrother was too weak for the work she was endeavouring to perform, and willing enough to step to her assistance.

"May I light the fire?" he asked, timidly.

She nodded, and sinking into a chair, lifted her child from the floor and nursed her. Seeing her thus engaged, and Tom busy on his knees, Miser Farebrother ran out, and he and the driver between them carried in the rest of the things, the most important being the miser's desk, which he had conveyed at once to the bedroom above. His mind was easier when he saw that precious depository in a place of safety.

Meanwhile Tom Barley was proving himself a most cheerful and capable servant.

"When his honour told me," he whispered, "that he was coming here late at night with you and the baby – a little girl, ain't it? – I thought it would be chilly without a fire, so I cleaned out the fireplace and the chimbley, and got a lot of wood together. There's plenty of it – enough to last a lifetime. Don't you move, now; I can make tea. Used to make mother's. Where's the things? In the basket? Yes; here they are. Here's the kittle, and here's the tea, in a bloo' paper; and here's the teapot;

and here's two cups; and here's a bottle of milk and some sugar. It's a blazing fire – ain't it? That's the best of dry wood. The kittle'll bile in a minute – it's biling already!"

From time to time the delicate woman gave him a grateful look, which more than repaid him, and caused him to double his exertions to make her comfortable. By the time the tea was made, Miser Farebrother had completed the removal of the goods, and had settled with the driver, after a good deal of grumbling at the extortionate demand.

"You can go, Tom," he said to the lad. "Be up early in the morning and make the fire."

"Good-night, your honour."

"Did you hear me tell you to go?" exclaimed Miser Farebrother.

Tom Barley received a kind look from Mrs. Farebrother as he left the room, and he went away perfectly happy.

In another hour the house was quiet and the light extinguished. Miser Farebrother was in secure possession of Parkside, and he fell asleep in the midst of a calculation of how much money he would save in rent in the course of the next twenty years. Other calculations also ran through his head in the midst of his fitful slumbers – calculations of figures and money, and interest, and sharp bargains with needy men, clients he was bleeding to his own profit. No thought in which figures and money did not find a place did he bestow upon the more human aspect of his life, in which there was to be almost immediately an important change.

Within a fortnight of her entrance into the desolate house Mrs. Farebrother lay upon her death-bed. She had been weak and ailing for months past, and the night's journey from London, no less than the deep unhappiness which, since her marriage, had drawn the roses from her cheeks and made her heart heavy and sad, now hastened her end. As she lay upon the ancient stately bed from which she was never to rise, a terrible loneliness fell upon her. Her darling child was by her side, mercifully asleep; her husband was moving about the apartment; the sunbeams falling through the window brought no comfort to the weary heart – all was so desolate, so desolate! In a trembling voice she called her husband to her.

"Well?" he asked.

"I must see my sister," she said.

"I will not have her," he cried. "You are well enough without her. I will not have her here!"

"I am well enough – to die!" she murmured. "I must see my sister before I go."

"You are frightening yourself unnecessarily," said Miser Farebrother, fretfully. "You are always full of fancies, and putting me to expense. You never had the slightest consideration for me – not the slightest. You think of nobody but yourself."

"I am frightened of this place," she found strength to say. "I cannot, I will not, die here alone! I must see my sister, I must see my sister!"

Still he made no movement to comply with her request.

"If you do not send for her at once," said his wife, "I will get up and go from the house and die in the roadway. God will give me strength to do it. I must see my sister, I must see my sister!"

Awed, if not convinced, and fearful, too, lest any disturbance which it was in his power to avoid might bring him into unfavourable notice, and interfere with his cherished plans, he said, reluctantly, "I will send for her."

"You are not deceiving me? You are not promising what you do not intend to perform?"

"I will send for her, I tell you."

"If you do not," she said – and there was a firmness in her weak tones which was not without its effect upon him – "misfortune will attend you all the days of your life. Nothing you do will prosper."

He was superstitious, and believed in omens; and this sounded like a prophecy, the warning of which he dared not neglect. His wife's eyes followed him as he stepped to his desk and sat down and wrote. Presently he left the room, and went in search of Tom Barley, to whom he gave a letter, bidding him to post it in the village. Grumbling at what he had done, he returned to his wife.

"Is my sister coming?" she asked.

"I have written to her," he replied. "Go to sleep and rest. You will be better in the morning."

"Yes," she sighed, as she pressed her child close to her bosom, "I shall be better in the morning. Oh, my sweet flower! my heart's treasure! Guard her, gracious Lord! Make her life bright and happy – as mine once promised to be! I could have given love for love; but it was denied to me. Not mine the fault – not mine, not mine!"

The day waned, the evening shadows fell, and night came on. Upon a table at some distance from the bed was one thin tallow candle, the feeble flame of which flickered dimly. During the long weary hours Mrs. Farebrother did not sleep; she dozed occasionally; but the slightest sound aroused her. In her light slumbers she dreamt of incidents in her happy girlhood before she was married – incidents apparently trivial, but not really so because of the sweet evidences of affection which made them memorable: a song, a dance, a visit to the sea-side, a ramble in fragrant woods; innocent enjoyments from which sprang fond imaginings never to be realized. Betweenwhiles, when she was awake, the gloom of the room and the monstrous shadows thrown by the dim light upon portions of the walls and ceilings distressed her terribly, and she needed all her strength of mind to battle against them. In these transitions of sensation were expressed all the harmonies and discordances of mortal life. Bitter to her had been their fruit!

An hour before midnight she heard the sound of carriage wheels without, and she sat straight up in her bed from excitement, and then fell back exhausted.

"It is my sister," she said, faintly, to her husband. "Let her come up at once. Thank God, she is here in time!"

Her sister bent fondly and in great grief over her. Between these two existed a firm and faithful affection, but the circumstances of Mrs. Farebrother's marriage had caused them to see very little of each other of late years.

"Attend to my darling Phœbe," whispered Mrs. Farebrother; "there is no female servant in the house. Oh, I am so glad you have come before it was too late!"

"Do not say too late, my dearest," said her sister; but her heart was faint within her as she gazed upon the pallid face and the thin wasted hands; "there are happy years before you."

"Not one, not one!" murmured Mrs. Farebrother.

"Why did you not send for me before?"

The dying woman made no reply, and her sister undressed little Phœbe, and placed her in a cot by the mother's bedside. Then she smoothed the sheets and pillows, and sat quietly, with her sister's hand in hers.

"It is like old times," murmured Mrs. Farebrother, wistfully. "You were always good to me. Tell me, my dear – put your head close to mine – oh, how sweet, how sweet! Were it not for my darling child I should think that Heaven was shining upon me!"

"What is it you want to know, dear? You were about to ask me something."

"Yes, yes. Tell me – are you happy at home?"

"Very happy."

"Truly and indeed?"

"Truly and indeed. We are not rich, but that does not matter."

"Your husband is good to you?"

"There is no one in the world like him; he is the best, the noblest, the most unselfish of men!" But here, with a sudden feeling of remorse, she stopped. The contrast between her bright home and the gloomy home of her sister struck her with painful force; to speak of the joys of the one seemed to accentuate the miseries of the other.

"Go on, dear," said Mrs. Farebrother, gently; "it does not hurt me, indeed it does not; I have grown so used, in other homes, to what you see around you here that custom has made it less bitter

than it once was. It makes me happy to hear of your happiness, and it holds out a glad prospect that my dear child, when she grows up, may have a little share in it."

"She shall, she shall; I promise it solemnly."

"Thank you, dear. So you must go on telling me of your good husband. He is still in his bank?"

"Yes, dear; and hopes for a rise before long. He is always full of hope, and that is worth a great deal – it means so much! He thinks of nothing but his home, and those in it. He dotes upon the children."

"The dear children! Are they well and strong?"

"Yes, dear; and they grow prettier and prettier every day."

"You must kiss them fondly for me, and give them my dear love."

"I will be sure to. You must not talk any more just now; you are tired out. Try and sleep."

"I think I shall be able. God bless you, dear!"

"God bless you, dearest!"

In a few moments, the tension of anxious watching and waiting being over, Mrs. Farebrother slept. Her sister gazed at her solicitously and mournfully. At such a time the cherished memories of old are burdened with a sadness which weighs heavily upon the heart.

"She is not so ill as she fancies, is she?"

It was Miser Farebrother who spoke to her. She rose softly, and led him from the bed, so that their conversation should not disturb the sufferer.

"Why did you not send me a telegram instead of a letter?"

"A telegram!" he cried. "Do you think I am made of money?"

"I am not thinking of your money: I am thinking of my sister. What does the doctor say?"

"The doctor!" he exclaimed. "I have none."

Gentle-natured as she was, she looked at him in horror.

"You have none – and my sister dying!"

"It is not true," he whined, thinking of the inconvenience such an event would cause him; "it cannot be true. She was well a few days ago. I cannot afford doctors. You are all in a conspiracy to rob me!"

"I was told as I came along that this great house is yours."

"Yes, it is – my property, my own."

"And a great deal of land around, and everything in the place."

"Yes, it is – all mine, all mine!" And then, with a sudden suspicion, "Do you intend to dispute it?"

"Heaven forbid! What is it to do with me – except that when you speak of ruin to me, and of not being able to afford a doctor, you are speaking what is false. Why did you marry?"

"I don't know," he replied, wringing his hands, "I don't know. I ought never to have done it. I ought to have lived alone, with nobody to keep but myself."

"It would have been better for my poor sister. But she is your wife, and I shall not allow her to suffer as she is suffering without seeking medical assistance. I have never been in this neighbourhood, and know nothing about it. Where is the nearest doctor?"

"I can't tell you; I am almost as much a stranger here as you are."

"There must be one not very far off. Who was the lad who opened the door for me when I came to-night?"

"My servant, Tom Barley. What do you want him for? He is asleep by this time. He has work to do the first thing in the morning."

"Where does he sleep?"

"Outside; in the stable."

"I shall find it. You must write a few words on paper for me."

"I'll do nothing of the sort. You shan't force me to put my name to anything. Do you think I am not up to such tricks?"

"If you don't do as I say I will bring a lawyer here as well as a doctor."

This woman possessed a sweet and gentle nature, and nothing but the evidence of an overwhelming wrong could have so stirred it to sternness. Miser Farebrother was terrified at the threat of bringing a lawyer into the house; and as he had given way to his wife earlier in the day, so now was he compelled by his fears to give way to her sister. He wrote as she directed:

"Mr. Farebrother, of Parksides, urgently requests the doctor to come immediately to his house to see Mrs. Farebrother, who, he fears, is seriously ill."

He fought against two words – "urgently," because it might cause the doctor to make a heavier charge; and "seriously," because a construction that he had been neglectful might be placed on it. But his sister-in-law was firm, and he wrote as she dictated.

"I will send the lad with it," said Miser Farebrother.

"I will send him myself," said his sister-in-law. "There must not be a moment's delay."

There was no need for her to seek Tom Barley in the stable; he was sitting up in the kitchen below.

She gave him the letter, and desired him to run as fast as he could to the village and find a doctor, who was to come back with him. If the doctor demurred, and wanted to put it off till the following day, he was to be told that it was a matter of life and death.

Tom Barley was visibly disturbed when he heard this.

"Who is it, lady?" he asked. "His honour's wife, or the baby?"

"His wife. You're a kind-hearted lad, and won't waste a moment, will you?"

"No, lady; trust me."

He was not above taking the sixpence she offered him, and he ran out of the house like a shot.

Within the hour he was back with the doctor, whose looks were grave as he examined his patient.

"There is hope, doctor?" said Mrs. Farebrother's sister. "Tell me there is hope!"

He shook his head, and gently told her she must prepare for the worst.

"She is past prescribing for," he said. "I can do nothing for her. She has been for some time in a decline."

The sentence being passed, she had no room in her heart for any other feeling than pity for her dying sister. In the sunrise, when the sweet air was infusing strength into fresh young life, the end came. Mrs. Farebrother whispered to her sister that she wished to speak to her husband alone. Thoroughly awed, he sat by her side. She made no reference to the past; she uttered no reproaches. She spoke only of their child, and begged him to be good to her. He promised all that she asked of him.

"You will get some good woman into the house to take care of her?" she said.

"Yes; I promise."

"And my sister must see her whenever she wishes to do so."

"Yes."

"And when our dear one is old enough and strong enough you will let her go to my sister, and stop with her a little now and then? It will do her good to mix with children of her own age."

"Yes; I promise."

"As you deal by her, so will you be dealt by. May Heaven prosper you in all worthy undertakings! Kiss me. Let there be peace and forgiveness between us."

He kissed her, and sat a little apart while she and her sister, their cheeks nestling, exchanged their last words.

"Look after my treasure," whispered the mother.

"I will, dear, as tenderly and carefully as if she were one of my own."

"You must come here and see her sometimes; he has promised that you may; and when she grows up you will let her come to you?"

"She will always be lovingly welcome. My home is hers if she should ever need one."

"God bless you! May your life be prosperous and ever happy!"

Before noon she drew her last breath, and Parkside was without a mistress.

CHAPTER IV

PHOEBE AND THE ANGELS

It did not long remain so. In less than a fortnight after Mrs. Farebrother's death a housekeeper was installed in Parksides. Her name was Mrs. Pamflett, and her age thirty. Being called "Mrs.," the natural inference was that she was either wife or widow; but as no questions were put to her on this point there were none to answer, and it certainly did not appear to be anybody's business but her own. Miser Farebrother, being entirely wrapped up in his money-bags, gave the entire household into the care of Mrs. Pamflett, one of its items being the motherless child Phœbe. A capable housekeeper, thrifty, careful, and willing to work, Miser Farebrother was quite satisfied with her performance of her duties; but she was utterly unfit to rear a child so young as Phœbe, for whom, it must be confessed, she had no particular love, and Phœbe would have fared badly in many ways had it not been for her aunt.

Mrs. Lethbridge lived in London, in the not very aristocratic neighbourhood of Camden Town. She and Phœbe's mother had been married on the same day – one to a man whose miserly habits were unknown, and had, indeed, not at that time grown into a confirmed disease; the other to a bank clerk, who was expected to keep up the appearance of a gentleman, and fitly rear and educate a family, upon a salary of a hundred and eighty pounds a year. Fortunately for him and his wife, their family was not numerous, consisting of one son and one daughter. With Miser Farebrother they had nothing in common; he so clearly and unmistakably discouraged their attempts to cement an affectionate or even a friendly intimacy that they had gradually and surely dropped away from each other. This was a great grief to the sisters, but the edict issued by Miser Farebrother was not to be disputed.

"I will not allow your sister or her husband to come to the house," he had said to his wife when, in the early days of their married life, she remonstrated with him; later on she had not the courage or the spirit to expostulate against his harsh decrees, to which she submitted with a breaking heart. "They are a couple of busybodies, and you can tell them so if you please, with my compliments."

Mrs. Farebrother did not tell her sister what her husband called them, but she wrote and said that for the sake of peace they had better not come to see her. The Lethbridges mournfully acquiesced; indeed, they had no alternative: they could not force themselves into the house of a man who would not receive them.

"But if we can't go to her," said Mrs. Lethbridge, "Laura" – which was Mrs. Farebrother's Christian name – "can come to us."

This, also, after a little while, Miser Farebrother would not allow.

"I will not," he said, "have my affairs talked about by people who are not friendly to me."

"That is your fancy," said Mrs. Farebrother; "they would be very happy if you would allow them to be friendly."

"Of course," he sneered, "so that they could poke their heads into my business. I tell you I will not have it."

She sighed, and submitted; and thereafter, when she and her sister met, it was by appointment in a strange place. Even these rare meetings, upon their being discovered, were prohibited, and thus Miser Farebrother succeeded in parting two sisters who loved each other devotedly.

"Whatever Laura saw in that miserly bear," said Mrs. Lethbridge, indignantly, to her husband, "to marry him is a mystery I shall never be able to discover."

But this mystery is of a nature common enough in the matrimonial market, and may be attributed to thousands of ill-assorted couples.

It was plainly Miser Farebrother's intention to discourage Mrs. Lethbridge's visits to Parksides after the death of his wife; promises were in no sense sacred to him, even death-bed promises, unless

their performance was necessary to his interests, and in this instance he very soon decided that it was not.

"You perceive," he said to Mrs. Lethbridge, "that I have a housekeeper to look after the child. You are giving yourself a deal of unnecessary trouble trudging down here – for what? To ascertain whether she is properly dressed? You see she is. Whether she has enough to eat? She looks well enough, doesn't she? Don't you think you had better devote yourself to your own domestic affairs instead of prying into mine? Your husband must be very rich that you can afford to pay railway fares and cab fares to come to a house where you are not wanted."

This, in effect, was the sum of his efforts to prevent her from visiting Parkside; and his sneers and slighting allusions, made from time to time, were successful in curtailing her visits to his house during the young childhood of little Phœbe. They were not successful, however, in putting a stop to them altogether, until Phœbe was fourteen years of age, from which time her intercourse with her relatives was maintained by the young girl's visits to Camden Town – happy visits, lasting seldom less than two or three days. Until Phœbe was fourteen, her aunt came down to Parkside only once in every three months. Occasionally Mrs. Lethbridge caught a glimpse of Miser Farebrother, whose welcome, if he gave her one at all, was of the surliest; and as between her and Mrs. Pamflett a strong and silent antipathy had been contracted from their first interview, Mrs. Lethbridge's visits could not be said to be of the pleasantest. But for the sake of her dead sister, whom she had so fondly loved, and of the motherless child, whose sweet ways endeared her to the good aunt, she bore with all the slights that were put upon her; and although she spoke of them at home to her husband, she never mentioned them to her children.

From two to fourteen years of age, Phœbe may be said to have grown up almost in loneliness. Her father rarely noticed her, and Mrs. Pamflett, a peculiar, strange, and silent woman, evinced no desire for her society. The child's nature was sweet and susceptible enough to have given an ample return for proffered affection, and, although she was not at the time aware of it (such speculations being too profound for her young mind), she had great cause for gratitude that her life was not entirely deprived of it. It has unhappily often happened that sweet waters have been turned bitter by unsympathetic contact, and this might have been the case with our Phœbe, had it not been for Mrs. Lethbridge and Tom Barley. Mrs. Lethbridge had made herself so loved by her niece that her visits came to be eagerly looked forward to by the girl, and to be all the more enjoyed because they were rare. Her love for the child was manifested as much, if not more, in her absence than in her presence. When Phœbe could read or spell through written hand, Mrs. Lethbridge wrote letters to her, to which the child replied. Phœbe's letters were slipped unstamped in the post-office by Tom Barley, and for a long time she was not aware of the unfair expense to which her aunt was being put, and for which Miser Farebrother alone was responsible. Mrs. Lethbridge never mentioned it to her niece. Then there were the books which Mrs. Lethbridge brought or sent – a source of so much delight and exquisite enjoyment that the remembrance of those youthful days was with Phœbe a sweet remembrance through all her life.

Living in a certain sense alone in a great mansion, it is not to be wondered at that a current of romance was formed in the young girl's nature. Neglected and uncared for as she was by those immediately about her, there was no restriction upon her movements through the old house. Certain rooms were prohibited to her, Mrs. Pamflett's room and her father's bedroom, which served also as an office. To this latter apartment, when she passed fourteen years of age, Phœbe was sometimes called – otherwise she was forbidden to enter it. With these exceptions she was free to wander whither she would, and she would often pass hours together in a room never occupied by the household, and which had an irresistible fascination for her. It was of octagonal shape, and there were faded paintings on the walls and rotting tapestries. Originally it was most likely used as a library, for it contained book-cases and large pieces of furniture, a table, two secretaries, and a huge chair, so heavy that Phœbe could not even move it. The carvings about the room and upon the furniture were strangely

grotesque – fantastic heads and faces, animals such as were never seen in nature, and uncouth forms of men which had no existence save in the feverish imaginations of the designers. These contorted shapes and grotesque faces might have been supposed to be sufficiently repulsive to cause a sensitive child to avoid them, but in truth they were in themselves an attraction to Phœbe, who discovered no terrors in them to affright her. There was, however, in the room an attraction of a more congenial kind, in which grace, harmony, proportion, and a most exquisite beauty were conspicuous. High up in a corner, opposite a window which faced the west, was a carving of angels' heads, hanging over, as it were, and looking down upon the spectator. Devoid of natural colour as they were, so grand and wondrous had been the skill of the carver that it was as though a multitude of joyous, rosy-cheeked children were bending down to obtain a view of a scene as delightful as they themselves presented. The lips smiled, the eyes sparkled, the faces beamed with life. This marvel, cut out of brown wood, was, indeed, something more than the perfection of art and grace – it was an enchantment which made the heart glad to behold. And in the evening, when the effulgent radiances of a glorious sunset shone upon the wonder and played about it, touching the dainty faces with alluring light, it filled even the soul of our young child with a holy joy.

This was Phœbe's favourite room; and here she would sit and read, and sometimes stand, with folded hands, looking upward at the enchanting group, with the sunset's colours upon them; and in her eyes would dwell a rapture which made her as lovely as the fairest of the faces she gazed upon. Thus she grew up to a graceful and beautiful womanhood, encompassed by sweet and grand imaginings which purified her soul.

CHAPTER V

MRS. PAMFLETT RECOMMENDS A NEW CLERK TO THE MISER

Long before this, Tom Barley had grown to manhood's estate: the only estate of which he was owner and was ever likely to possess. But, although he had no landed property of his own to look after, he had an object in life. He conceived it to be his particular privilege to protect Phœbe, to run of her errands, and to be in a general way her willing and cheerful slave. Had he been able to intelligently and logically express himself upon the point in the early years of his connection with Miser Farebrother, it would have been ascertained that he founded his position upon the facts that he had held Phœbe in his arms upon her first introduction to Parksides, that he had been smiled upon by her mother, that he had attended the poor lady's funeral as an important and very genuine mourner, and that, besides, he was in the service of Miser Farebrother, who had promised to make his fortune. Later on, these unexpressed motives were merged into an absorbing devotion for the young girl, for whom he grew to entertain a kind of worship which removed her from his estimate of the ordinary mortal. A rough-and-ready knight he, ready to sacrifice himself at any moment for the queen of his idolatry. She, it must be confessed, received his homage very willingly, and as though it were rightly her due, and, unconsciously to herself, she richly repaid him for his services: by allowing him to initiate her into woodland wonders with which he had made himself familiar, by constant smiles and bright looks, by accepting the assistance of his hands when she crossed tumble-down stiles, and in a hundred other general ways of faith and belief in him which were a finer reward to Tom Barley than money could have been. Of this latter commodity he had little enough. The twopence a week which Miser Farebrother paid him was all he ever received from his employer, in addition to scraps of food from the kitchen upon which he managed to subsist. But, living in civilized society, clothing was a prescribed necessity, and was not to be obtained upon eight-and-eightpence a year. Tom dropped a hint or two, but Miser Farebrother was oblivious, and callous to the peeping of flesh through tatters.

"You extravagant dog," he said, "I did not undertake to clothe you. Look at me: *I* can't afford fine new clothes! Go and hang about the village, when you've nothing to do here, and look for an odd job. That's the way to earn honest pennies. Many a millionaire began with less. And, Tom," he added, "when you've saved a few shillings, I dare say I can find an old pair of trousers that I'll sell you cheap."

Tom profited by the suggestion, and in a little while found the way to earn a good many honest pennies. Miser Farebrother fished out of his scanty wardrobe some tattered garments, which he disposed of to Tom, and it was then that the lad exhibited himself in a new character, which drove the miser to desperation. He bargained with his master and beat him down to the last penny; Tom was not devoid of shrewdness, and he was beginning to understand the miser.

"If every man was as generous as I am," grumbled Miser Farebrother, at the conclusion of their first barter, "he'd soon be on the road to ruin."

"They're full of holes," said Tom, turning the clothes over and examining them ruefully. The miser would not allow him to handle them until the bargain was completed and the money safe in his pocket: "look here, and here!"

"Look here, and here, you dog!" retorted Miser Farebrother. "Do I charge you anything for their being too big for you? Can't you cut off the bottoms of the trousers, and patch the knees with the extra bits? You ought to give the pieces back to me; but I make you a present of them."

Tom was quick enough at taking a hint. Being thrown upon his own resources, and imbued with the cheerfulest of spirits, he soon became proficient with the needle, and, by patching here and darning there, managed to maintain a tolerably decent appearance. He might have done better, had he not been afflicted by an insatiable hungering for brandy-balls, which, at three a penny, was a

temptation not to be resisted whenever he had a copper to spare. To see him rolling one in his mouth was a picture of unalloyed bliss.

Mrs. Pamflett and he were not good friends, and an incident which will be presently related did not dispose them more favourably to each other. He was more fortunate with Mrs. Lethbridge. This good-hearted woman had noticed his unselfish devotion to Phœbe, and he won her favour thereby. Many a small silver bit found its way from her pocket to his; and more than once she bore with her to Parksides a little parcel containing a waistcoat, or an undershirt, or a couple of pairs of socks, which had served their time at home, but which were not so utterly worn out as not to be useful to Tom. He was very grateful for these gifts, and showed his appreciation of them by forcing a brandy-ball upon her now and then. She went further. Impressed by Phœbe's constant praise of the young fellow, and recognizing that the girl had near her, when she was absent, a stanch and faithful champion, ever ready to protect and defend her, she took Tom Barley into her confidence.

"Can you read, Tom?" she asked.

"Yes, lady," he replied. "Square letters – not round uns. And I can write 'em."

Thereupon Mrs. Lethbridge wrote her name and address in Camden Town on a piece of paper, in square letters; and Tom spelt them aloud.

"Keep this by you," said Mrs. Lethbridge; "and if ever anything happens to Miss Farebrother, and you don't know what to do, come for me at once. Here's a two-shilling piece. You must not spend it; you must put it carefully away, in case you need it for this special purpose. The railway fare to London and back is eighteenpence; an omnibus will bring you very near to my house for threepence. You understand?"

"I understand, lady. But trust me for taking care of Miss Phœbe."

"I do, Tom; but something we don't think of just now might happen, and Miss Phœbe might want you to come for me. Or you might think, 'I wish Miss Phœbe had somebody with her who feels like a mother to her, and who loves her very tenderly.'"

"So do I, lady," said Tom, in an earnest tone. "I'll do as you tell me. You can trust me."

"I know it, Tom, and so does Miss Phœbe. She says she doesn't know what she should do without you."

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.