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DICKENS'S NEW STORY.

A HOUSE TO LET.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

[We commence the publication of "A House to Let," which occupies the Christmas number of Dickens's *Household Words*. More than two years have elapsed since the completion of "Little Dorrit." Since then Charles Dickens has done little worthy of notice. "Hard Times," was a sort of lay-sermon, in the thin guise of fiction. There is a strong chance that "A House to Let" is really from the pen of the great and genial writer. Last year's Christmas story was so little in his manner that nobody was surprised at learning, after it had been republished here and in Germany as Dickens's own, that it really had been written by the Rev. Charles Kingsley. "The Poor Travellers' Tales," in a preceding year, were very much in the Pickwickian vein; but they subsequently were collected, and, as part of a book called "After Dark," were claimed by Wilkie Collins, whose "Dead Secret" is one of the most impressive stories of modern times. We fancy, however, that "the fine Italian hand" of Charles Dickens is visible in this new tale. There is some family likeness between the manner in which the Manchester clerk makes an offer of marriage and Tom Linkinwater's "Let's be a comfortable couple," so insinuatingly addressed to little Miss La Creevy. We trace a resemblance, too, between the story of the Dwarf, in this new story, and certain passages in which showmen's experiences are related, in "The Old Curiosity Shop." On the whole, we strongly incline to believe that "A House to Let" is of the "Boz" family, and not only of the "Boz" school, and deliver it as such to our readers.]

OVER THE WAY.

I had been living at Tunbridge Wells and nowhere else, going on for ten years, when my medical man—very clever in his profession, and the prettiest player I ever saw in my life of a hand at Long Whist, which was a noble and princely game before Short was heard of—said to me, one day, as he sat feeling my pulse on the actual sofa which my poor dear sister Jane worked before her spine came on, and laid her on a board for fifteen months at a stretch—the most upright woman that ever lived—said to me, "What we want, ma'am, is a fillip."

"Good gracious, goodness gracious, Doctor Towers!" says I, quite startled at the man, for he was so christened himself: "don't talk as if you were alluding to people's names; but say what you mean."

"I mean, my dear ma'am, that we want a little change of air and scene."

"Bless the man!" said I, "does he mean we or me?"

"I mean you, ma'am."

"Then Lard forgive you, Doctor Towers," I said, "why don't you get into a habit of expressing yourself in a straightforward manner, like a loyal subject of our gracious Queen Victoria, and a member of the Church of England?"

Towers laughed, as he generally does when he has fidgetted me into any of my impatient ways—one of my states, as I call them—and then he began—

"Tone, ma'am, Tone, is all you require!" He appealed to Trottle, who just then came in with the coal-scuttle, looking, in his nice black suit, like an amiable man putting on coals from motives of benevolence.

Trottle (whom I always call my right hand) has been in my service two and thirty years. He entered my service, far away from England. He is the best of creatures, and the most respectable of men, but opinionated.

"What you want, ma'am," says Trottle, making up the fire in his quiet and skilful way, "is Tone."

"Lard forgive you both!" says I, bursting out a-laughing; "I see you are in a conspiracy against me, so I suppose you must do what you like with me, and take me to London for a change."

For some weeks Towers had hinted at London, and consequently I was prepared for him. When we had got to this point we got on so expeditiously that Trottle was packed off to London next day but one, to find some sort of place for me to lay my troublesome old head in.

Trottle came back to me at the Wells after two days' absence, with accounts of a charming place that could be taken for six months certain, with liberty to renew on the same terms for another six, and which really did afford every accommodation that I wanted.

"Could you really find no fault at all in the rooms, Trottle?" I asked him.

"Not a single one, ma'am. They are exactly suitable to you. There is not a fault in them. There is but one fault outside of them."

"And what's that?"

"They are opposite a House to Let."

"O!" I said, considering of it. "But is that such a very great objection?"

"I think it my duty to mention it, ma'am. It is a dull object to look at. Otherwise, I was so greatly pleased with the lodging that I should have closed with the terms at once, as I had your authority to do."

Trottle thinking so highly of the place, in my interest, I wished not to disappoint him. Consequently I said:

"The empty House may let, perhaps."

"O, dear, no, ma'am," said Trottle, shaking his head with decision; "it won't let. It never does let, ma'am."

"Mercy me! Why not?"

"Nobody knows, ma'am. All I have to mention is, ma'am, that the House won't let!"

"How long has this unfortunate House been to let, in the name of fortune?" said I.

"Ever so long," said Trottle. "Years."

"Is it in ruins?"

"It's a good deal out of repair, ma'am, but it's not in ruins."

The long and the short of this business was, that next day I had a pair of post-horses put to my chariot—for, I never travel by railway: not that I have anything to say against railways, except that they came in when I was too old to take to them; and that they made ducks and drakes of a few turnpike bonds I had—and so I went up myself, with Trottle, in the rumble, to look at the inside of this same lodging, and at the outside of this same House.

As I say, I went and saw for myself. The lodging was perfect. That I was sure it would be; because Trottle is the best judge of comfort I know. The empty house was an eyesore; and that I was sure it would be, too, for the same reason. However, setting the one thing against the other, the good against the bad, the lodging very soon got the victory over the House. My lawyer, Mr. Squares, of Crown Office Row, Temple, drew up an agreement, which his young man jabbered over so dreadfully when he read it to me that I didn't understand one word of it except my own name, and hardly that, and I signed it, and the other party signed it, and in three weeks time I moved my old bones, bag and baggage, up to London.

For the first month or so, I arranged to leave Trottle at the Wells. I made this arrangement, not only because there was a good deal to take care of in the way of my school children and pensioners, and also of a new stove in the hall to air the house in my absence, which appeared to me calculated to blow up and burst; but, likewise because I suspect Trottle (though the steadiest of men, and a widower between sixty and seventy,) to be what I call rather a Philanderer. I mean, that when any friend comes down to see me, and brings a maid, Trottle is always remarkably ready to show that maid the Wells of an evening; and that I have more than once noticed the shadow of his arm outside the room door nearly opposite my chair encircling that maid's waist on the landing, like a table cloth brush.

Therefore, I thought it just as well, before any London Philandering took place, that I should have a little time to look round me, and to see what girls were in and about the place. So nobody stayed with me in my new lodging at first after Trottle had established me there safe and sound, but Peggy Flobbins, my maid; a most affectionate and attached woman, who never was an object of Philandering since I have known her, and is not likely to begin to become so after nine-and-twenty years next March.

It was the fifth of November when I first breakfasted in my new rooms. The Guys were going about in the brown fog, like magnified monsters of insects in table-beer, and there was a Guy resting on the doorsteps of the House to Let. I put on my glasses, partly to see how the boys were pleased with what I sent them out by Peggy, and partly to make sure that she didn't approach too near the ridiculous object which, of course, was full of sky-rockets, and might go off into bangs at any moment. In this way it happened that the first time I ever looked at the House to Let, after I became its opposite neighbor, I had my glasses on. And this might not have happened once in fifty times, for my sight is uncommonly good for my time of life; and I wear glasses as little as I can, for fear of spoiling it.

I knew already that it was a ten-roomed house, very dirty, and much dilapidated; that the area-rails were rusty and pealing away, and that two or three of them were wanting, or half wanting; that there were broken panes of glass in the windows, and blotches of mud on other panes, which the boys had thrown at them; that there was quite a collection of stones in the area, also, proceeding from those Young Mischiefs; that there were games chalked on the pavement before the House, and likenesses of ghosts chalked on the street door; that the windows were all darkened by rotting old blinds, or shutters, or both; that the bills "To Let," had curled up, as if the damp air of the place had given them cramps; or had dropped down into corners, as if they were no more. I had seen all this on my first visit, and I had remarked to Trottle, that the lower part of the black board about terms was split away; that the rest had become illegible, and that the very stone of the door-steps was broken across. Notwithstanding, I sat at my breakfast table on that Please to Remember the fifth of November morning, staring at the House through my glasses, as if I had never looked at it before.

All at once—in the first-floor window on my right—down in a low corner, at a hole in a blind or a shutter—I found that I was looking at a secret Eye. The reflection of my fire may have touched it and made it shine; but, I saw it shine and vanish.

The eye might have seen me, or it might not have seen me, sitting there in the glow of my fire—you can take which probability you prefer, without offence—but something struck through my frame, as if the sparkle of this eye had been electric, and had flashed straight at me. It had such an effect upon me, that I could not remain by myself, and I rang for Flobbins, and invented some little jobs for her, to keep her in the room. After my breakfast was cleared away, I sat in the same place, with my glasses on, moving my head, now so, and now so, trying whether, with the shining of my fire and the flaws in the window-glass, I could reproduce any sparkle seeming to be up there, that was like the sparkle of an eye; but no, I could make nothing like it. I could make ripples and crooked lines in the front of the House to Let, and I could even twist one window up and loop it into another; but I could make no eye, nor anything like an eye. So, I convinced myself that I really had seen an eye.

Well, to be sure I could not get rid of the impression of this eye, and it troubled me and troubled me, until it was almost a torment. I don't think I was previously inclined to concern my head much about the opposite house; but, after this eye, my head was full of the House; and I thought of little else than the House, and I watched the house, and I talked about the house, and I dreamed of the house. In all this, I fully believe now, there was a good Providence. But you will judge for yourself about that, by-and-by.

My landlord was a butler, who had married a cook, and set up housekeeping. They had not kept House longer than a couple of years, and they knew no more about the House to Let than I did. Neither could I find out anything concerning it among the trades-people or otherwise; further than what Trottle had told me at first. It had been empty, some said six years, some said eight, some said ten. It never did let, they all agreed, and it never would let.

I soon felt convinced that I should work myself into one of my states about the house; and I soon did. For a whole month I was in a flurry, that was always getting worse. Towers's prescriptions, which I had brought to London with me, were of no more use than nothing. In the cold winter sunlight, in the thick winter fog, in the black winter rain, in the white winter snow, the House was equally on my mind. I have heard, as everybody else has, of a spirit haunting a house; but I have had my own personal experience of a house's haunting a spirit; for that House haunted mine.

In all that month's time, I never saw any one go into the House, nor come out of the House. I supposed that such a thing must take place sometimes, in the dead of the night, or the glimmer of the morning; but, I never saw it done. I got no relief from having my curtains drawn when it came on dark, and shutting out the house. The Eye then began to shine in my fire.

I am a single old woman. I should say at once, without being at all afraid of the name, I am an old maid; only that I am older than the phrase would express. The time was when I had my love trouble, but it is long and long ago. He was killed at sea (dear Heaven rest his blessed head!) when I was twenty-five. I have all my life, since ever I can remember, been deeply fond of children. I have always felt such a love for them, that I have had my sorrowful and sinful times, when I have fancied something must have gone wrong in my life—something must have been turned aside from its original intention I mean—or I should have been the proud and happy mother of many children, and a fond old grandmother this day. I have soon known better in the cheerfulness and contentment that God has blessed me with and given me abundant reason for; and yet I have had, to dry my eyes even then, when I have thought of my dear, brave, hopeful, handsome, bright-eyed Charley, and the trust he meant to cheer me with. Charley was my youngest brother, and he went to India. He married there, and sent his gentle little wife home to me to be confined, and she was to go back to him, and the baby was to be left with me, and I was to bring it up. It never belonged to this life. It took its silent place among the other incidents in my story that might have been, but never were. I had hardly time to whisper to her "Dead my own!" or she to answer, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust! O lay it on my breast and comfort Charley!" when she had gone to seek her baby at Our Saviour's feet. I went to Charley, and I told him there was nothing left but me, poor me; and I lived with Charley out there, several years. He was a man of fifty, when he fell asleep in my arms. His face had changed to be almost old and a little stern; but, it softened, and softened when I laid it down that I might cry and pray beside it; and, when I looked at it for the last time, it was my dear, untroubled, handsome, youthful Charley of long ago.

—I was going on to tell that the loneliness of the House to Let brought back all these recollections, and that they had quite pierced my heart one evening, when Flobbins, opening the door and looking very much as if she wanted to laugh but thought better of it, said:

"Mr. Jabez Jarber, ma'am!"

Upon which Mr. Jarber ambled in, in his usual absurd way, saying:

"Sophonisba!"

Which I am obliged to confess is my name. A pretty one and proper one enough when it was given to me: but, a good many years out of date now, and always sounding particularly highflown and comical from his lips. So I said, sharply:

"Though it is Sophonisba, Jarber, you are not obliged to mention it, that I see."

In reply to this observation, the ridiculous man put the tips of my five right hand fingers to his lips, and said again, with an aggravating accent on the third syllable:

"Sophonisba!"

I don't burn lamps, because I can't abide the smell of oil, and wax candles belonged to my day. I hope the convenient situation of one of my tall old candlesticks on the table at my elbow will be my excuse for saying, that if he did that again, I would chop his toes with it. (I am sorry to add that when I told him so, I knew his toes to be tender.) But, really, at my time of life and at Jarber's, it is too much of a good thing. There is an orchestra still standing in the open air at the Wells, before which, in the presence of a throng of fine company, I have walked a minuet with Jarber. But, there is a house still standing, in which I have worn a pinafore, and had a tooth drawn by fastening a thread to the tooth and the door-handle, and toddling away from the door. And how should I look now, at my years, in a pinafore, or having a door for my dentist?

Besides, Jarber always was more or less an absurd man. He was sweetly dressed, and beautifully perfumed, and many girls of my day would have given their ears for him; though I am bound to add that he never cared a fig for them, or their advances either, and that he was very constant to me. For, he not only proposed to me before my love-happiness ended in sorrow, but afterwards too: not once, nor yet twice; nor will we say how many times. However many they were, or however few they were, the last time he paid me that compliment was immediately after he had presented me with a digestive dinner-pill stuck on the point of a pin. And I said on that occasion, laughing heartily, "Now, Jarber, if you don't know that two people whose united ages would make about a hundred and fifty, have got to be old, I do; and I beg to swallow this nonsense in the form of this pill," (which I took on the spot), "and I request to hear no more of it."

After that, he conducted himself pretty well. He was always a little squeezed man, was Jarber, in little sprigged waistcoats; and he had always little legs and a little smile, and a little voice, and little roundabout ways. As long as I can remember him he was always going little errands for people, and carrying little gossip. At this present time when he called me "Sophonisba!" he had a little old-fashioned lodging in that new neighborhood of mine. I had not seen him for two or three years, but I had heard that he still went out with a little perspective-glass and stood on doorsteps in Saint James's street, to see the nobility go to Court; and went in his little cloak and goloshes outside Willis's rooms to see them go to Almack's; and caught the frightfullest colds, and got himself trodden upon by coachmen and linkmen, until he went home to his landlady a mass of bruises, and had to be nursed for a month.

Jarber took off his little fur-collared cloak, and sat down opposite me, with his little cane and hat in his hand.

"Let us have no more Sophonisbaing, if *you* please, Jarber," I said. "Call me Sarah. How do you do? I hope you are pretty well."

"Thank you. And you?" said Jarber.

"I am as well as an old woman can expect to be."

Jarber was beginning:

"Say not old, Sophon——" but I looked at the candlestick, and he left off; pretending not to have said anything.

"I am infirm, of course," I said, "and so are you. Let us both be thankful it's no worse."

"Is it possible that you look worried?" said Jarber.

"It is very possible. I have no doubt it is the fact."

"And what has worried my Soph——, soft-hearted friend," said Jarber.

"Something not easy, I suppose, to comprehend. I am worried to death by a House to Let, over the way."

Jarber went with his little tip-toe step to the window-curtains, peeped out, and looked round at me.

"Yes," said I, in answer: "that house."

After peeping out again, Jarber came back to his chair with a tender air, and asked: "How does it worry you, S—arah?"

"It is a mystery to me," said I. "Of course every house is a mystery, more or less; but something that I don't care to mention," (for truly the Eye was so slight a thing to mention that I was more than half ashamed of it,) "has made that House so mysterious to me, and has so fixed it in my mind, that I have had no peace for a month. I foresee that I shall have no peace, either, until Trottle comes to me, next Monday."

I might have mentioned before that there is a long-standing jealousy between Trottle and Jarber; and that there is never any love lost between those two.

"*Trottle*," petulantly repeated Jarber, with a little flourish of his cane, "how is *Trottle* to restore the lost peace of Sarah?"

"He will exert himself to find out something about the House I have fallen into: that state about it, that I really must discover by some means or other, good or bad, fair or foul, how and why it is that that House remains To Let."

"And why, Trottle? Why not," putting his little hat to his heart; "why not, Jarber?"

"To tell you the truth, I have never thought of Jarber in the matter. And now I do think of Jarber, through your having the kindness to suggest him—for which I am really and truly obliged to you—I don't think he could do it."

"Sarah!"

"I think it would be too much for you, Jarber."

"Sarah!"

"There would be coming and going, and fetching and carrying, Jarber, and you might catch cold."

"Sarah! What can be done by Trottle, can be done by me. I am on terms of acquaintance with every person of responsibility in this parish. I am intimate at the Circulating Library. I converse daily with the Assessed Taxes. I lodge with the Water Rate. I know the Medical Man. I lounge habitually at the House Agent's. I dine with the Churchwardens. I move to the Guardians. Trottle! A person in the sphere of a domestic, and totally unknown to society!"

"Don't be warm, Jarber. In mentioning Trottle, I have naturally relied on my Right Hand, who would take any trouble to gratify even a whim of his old mistress's. But, if you can find out anything to help to unravel the mystery of this House to Let, I shall be fully as much obliged to you as if there were never a Trottle in the land."

Jarber rose and put on his little cloak. A couple of fierce brass lions held it tight round his little throat; but a couple of the mildest hares might have done that, I am sure. "Sarah," he said, "I go. Expect me on Monday evening, the sixth, when perhaps you will give me a cup of tea—may I ask for no green? Adieu!"

This was on a Thursday, the second of December. When I reflected that Trottle would come back on Monday, too, I had my misgivings as to the difficulty of keeping the two powers from open warfare, and indeed I was more uneasy than I quite like to confess. However, the empty House swallowed up that thought next morning, as it swallowed up most other thoughts now, and the House quite preyed upon me all that day, and all the Saturday.

It was a very wet Sunday; raining and blowing from morning to night. When the bells rang for afternoon church, they seemed to ring in the commotion of the puddles as well as in the wind, and they sounded very loud and dismal indeed, and the streets looked very dismal indeed, and the House looked dismallest of all.

I was reading my prayers near the light, and my fire was glowing in the darkening window-glass, when, looking up, as I prayed for the fatherless children and widows and all who were desolate and oppressed, I saw the Eye again. It passed in a moment, as it had done before; but, this time, I was inwardly more convinced that I had seen it.

Well; to be sure, I *had* a night that night! Whenever I closed my own eyes, it was to see eyes. Next morning, at an unreasonably, and I should have said (but for that railroad) an impossibly early hour, came Trottle. As soon as he had told me all about the Wells, I told him all about the House. He listened with as great interest and attention as I could possibly wish, until I came to Jabez Jarber, when he cooled in an instant, and became opinionated.

"Now, Trottle," I said, pretending not to notice, "when Mr. Jarber comes back this evening, we must all lay our heads together."

"I should hardly think that would be wanted, ma'am; Mr. Jarber's head is surely equal to anything."

Being determined not to notice, I said again that we must all lay our heads together.

"Whatever you order, ma'am, shall be obeyed. Still, it cannot be doubted, I should think, that Mr Jarber's head is equal, if not superior, to any pressure that can be brought to bear upon it."

This was provoking; and his way, when he came in and out all through the day, of pretending not to see the House to Let, was more provoking still. However, being quite resolved not to notice, I gave no sign whatever that I did notice. But, when evening came, and he showed in Jarber, and, when Jarber wouldn't be helped off with his cloak, and poked his cane into cane chair-backs, and china ornaments, and his own eye, in trying to unclasp his brazen lions of himself, (which he couldn't do, after all,) I could have shaken them both.

As it was, I only shook the tea pot, and made the tea. Jarber had brought from under his cloak a roll of paper, with which he had triumphantly pointed over the way, like the ghost of Hamlet's father appearing to the late Mr. Kemble, and which he had laid on the table.

"A discovery?" said I, pointing to it, when he was seated, and had got his tea cup—"Don't go, Trottle."

"The first of a series of discoveries," answered Jarber. "Account of a former tenant, compiled from the Water-Rate, and Medical Man."

"Don't go, Trottle," I repeated; for, I saw him making imperceptibly to the door.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, I might be in Mr Jarber's way?"

Jarber looked that he decidedly thought he might be. I relieved myself with a good angry croak; and said—always determined not to notice:

"Have the goodness to sit down, if you please, Trottle. I wish you to hear this."

Trottle bowed in the stiffest manner, and took the remotest chair he could find. Even that, he moved close to the draught from the keyhole of the door.

"Firstly," Jarber began, after sipping his tea, "would my Sophon—"

"Begin again, Jarber," said I.

"Would you be much surprised, if this House to Let should turn out to be the property of a relation of your own?"

"I should indeed be very much surprised."

"Then it belongs to your first cousin (I learn, by the way, that he is ill at this time) George Forley."

"Then, that is a bad beginning. I cannot deny that George Forley stands in the relation of first cousin to me; but I hold no communication with him. George Forley has been a hard, bitter, stony father to a child now dead. George Forley was most implacable and unrelenting to one of his two daughters who made a poor marriage. George Forley brought all the weight of his hand to bear as heavily against that crushed thing as he brought it to bear lightly, favoringly, and advantageously upon her sister, who made a rich marriage. I hope that, with the measure George Forley meted, it may not be measured out to him again. I will give George Forley no worse wish."

I was strong upon the subject, and I could not keep the tears out of my eyes; for that young girl's was a cruel story, and I had dropped many a tear over it before.

"The house being George Forley's," said I, "is almost enough to account for there being a Fate upon it, if Fate there is. Is there anything about George Forley in those sheets of paper?"

"Not a word."

"I am glad to hear it. Please to read on. Trottle, why don't you come nearer? Why do you sit mortifying yourself in those Arctic regions? Come nearer."

"Thank you, ma'am; I am quite near enough to Mr. Jarber."

Jarber rounded his chair, to get his back full to my opinionated friend and servant, and, beginning to read tossed the words at him over his (Jabez Jarber's) own ear and shoulder.

He read what follows:

THE MANCHESTER MARRIAGE.

Mr. and Mrs. Openshaw came from Manchester to London, and took the House To Let. He had been, what is called in Lancashire, a Salesman for a large manufacturing firm, who were extending their business, and opening a warehouse in London; where Mr. Openshaw was now to superintend the business. He rather enjoyed the change of residence; having a kind of curiosity about London, which he had never yet been able to gratify in his brief visits to the metropolis. At the same time he had an odd, shrewd, contempt for the inhabitants; whom he had always pictured to himself as fine, lazy people; caring nothing but for fashion and aristocracy, and lounging away their days in Bond Street, and such places; ruining good English, and ready in their turn to despise him as a provincial. The hours that the men of business kept in the city scandalized him too; accustomed as he was to the early dinners of Manchester folk, and the consequently far longer evenings. Still, he was pleased to go to London; though he would not for the world have confessed it, even to himself, and always spoke of the step to his friends as one demanded of him by the interests of his employers, and sweetened to him by a considerable increase of salary. His salary indeed was so liberal that he might have been justified in taking a much larger House than this one, had he not thought himself bound to set an example to Londoners of how little a Manchester man of business cares for show. Inside, however, he furnished the House with an unusual degree of comfort, and, in the winter time, he insisted on keeping up as large fires as the grates would allow, in every room where the temperature was the least chilly. Moreover, his northern sense of hospitality was such, that, if he were at home, he could hardly suffer a visitor to leave the house without forcing meat and drink upon him. Every servant in the house was well warmed, well fed, and kindly treated; for their master scorned all petty saving in aught that conduced to comfort; while he amused himself by following out all his accustomed habits and individual ways in defiance of what any of his neighbors might think.

His wife was a pretty, gentle woman, of suitable age and character. He was forty-two, she thirty-five. He was loud and decided; she soft and yielding. They had two children; or rather, I should say, she had two; for the elder, a girl of eleven, was Mrs. Openshaw's child by Frank Wilson, her first husband. The younger was a little boy, Edwin, who could just prattle, and to whom his father delighted to speak in the broadest and most unintelligible Lancashire dialect, in order to keep up what he called the true Saxon accent.

Mrs Openshaw's Christian-name was Alice, and her first husband had been her own cousin. She was the orphan niece of a sea-captain in Liverpool; a quiet, grave little creature, of great personal attraction when she was fifteen or sixteen, with regular features and a blooming complexion. But she was very shy, and believed herself to be very stupid and awkward; and was frequently scolded by her aunt, her own uncle's second wife. So, when her cousin, Frank Wilson, came home from a long absence at sea, and first was kind and protective to her; secondly, attentive; and thirdly, desperately in love with her, she hardly knew how to be grateful enough to him. It is true, she would have preferred his remaining in the first or second stages of behavior; for his violent love puzzled and frightened her. Her uncle neither helped nor hindered the love affair; though it was going on under his own eyes. Frank's step-mother had such a variable temper, that there was no knowing whether what she liked one day she would like the next, or not. At length she went to such extremes of crossness, that Alice was only too glad to shut her eyes and rush blindly at the chance of escape from domestic tyranny offered her by a marriage with her cousin; and, liking him better than any one in the world except her uncle (who was at this time at sea) she went off one morning and was married to him; her only bridesmaid being the housemaid at her aunt's. The consequence was, that Frank and his wife went into lodgings, and Mrs. Wilson refused to see them, and turned away Norah, the warm-hearted housemaid, whom they accordingly took into their service. When Captain Wilson returned from his voyage, he was very cordial with the young couple, and spent many an evening at their lodgings smoking his pipe and sipping his grog; but he told them that, for quietness' sake, he could not ask them to his own house; for his wife was bitter against them. They were not very unhappy about this.

The seed of future unhappiness lay rather in Frank's vehement, passionate disposition, which led him to resent his wife's shyness and want of demonstration as failures in conjugal duty. He was already tormenting himself, and her, too, in a slighter degree, by apprehensions and imaginations of what might befal her during his approaching absence at sea. At last he went to his father and urged him to insist upon Alice's being once more received under his roof; the more especially, as there was now a prospect of her confinement while her husband was away on his voyage. Captain Wilson was, as he himself expressed it, "breaking up," and unwilling to undergo the excitement of a scene; yet he felt that what his son said was true. So he went to his wife. And before Frank went to sea he had the comfort of seeing his wife installed in her old little garret in his father's house. To have placed her in the one best spare room was a step beyond Mrs. Wilson's powers of submission or generosity.

The worst part about it, however, was that the faithful Norah had to be dismissed. Her place as housemaid had been filled up; and, even had it not, she had forfeited Mrs. Wilson's good opinion forever. She comforted her young master and mistress by pleasant prophecies of the time when they would have a household of their own; of which, in whatever service she might be in the meantime, she should be sure to form part. Almost the last action Frank Wilson did, before setting sail, was going with Alice to see Norah once more at her mother's house. And then he went away.

Alice's father-in-law grew more and more feeble as winter advanced. She was of great use to her step-mother in nursing and amusing him; and, although there was anxiety enough in the household, there was perhaps more of peace than there had been for years; for Mrs. Wilson had not a bad heart, and was softened by the visible approach of death to one whom she loved, and touched by the lonely condition of the young creature, expecting her first confinement in her husband's absence. To this relenting mood Norah owed the permission to come and nurse Alice when her baby was born, and to remain to attend on Captain Wilson.

Before one letter had been received from Frank (who had sailed for the East Indies and China), his father died. Alice was always glad to remember that he had held her baby in his arms, and kissed and blessed it before his death. After that, and the consequent examination into the state of his affairs, it was found that he had left far less property than people had been led by his style of living to imagine; and, what money there was, was all settled upon his wife, and at her disposal after her death. This did not signify much to Alice, as Frank was now first mate of his ship, and, in another voyage or two, would be captain. Meanwhile he had left her some hundreds (all his savings) in the bank.

It became time for Alice to hear from her husband. One letter from the Cape she had already received. The next was to announce his arrival in India. As week after week passed over, and no intelligence of the ship's arrival reached the office of the owners, and the captain's wife was in the same state of ignorant suspense as Alice herself, her fears grew most oppressive. At length the day came when, in reply to her inquiry at the Shipping Office, they told her that the owners had given up hope of ever hearing more of the Betsy-Jane, and had sent in their claim upon the underwriters. Now that he was gone forever, she first felt a yearning, longing love for the kind cousin, the dear friend, the sympathising protector, whom she should never see again—first felt a passionate desire to show him his child, whom she had hitherto rather craved to have all to herself—her own sole possession. Her grief was, however, noiseless and quiet—rather to the scandal of Mrs. Wilson, who bewailed her step-son as if he and she had always lived together in perfect harmony, and who evidently thought it her duty to burst into fresh tears at every strange face she saw; dwelling on the poor young widow's desolate state, and the helplessness of the fatherless child, with an unction, as if she liked the excitement of the sorrowful story.

So passed away the first days of Alice's widowhood. By-and-by things subsided into their natural and tranquil course. But, as if this young creature was always to be in some heavy trouble, her ewe-lamb began to be ailing, pining, and sickly. The child's mysterious illness turned out to be some affection of the spine likely to affect health, but not to shorten life—at least, so the doctors said. But the long dreary suffering of one whom a mother loves as Alice loved her only child, is hard to look forward to. Only Norah guessed what Alice suffered; no one but God knew.

And so it fell out that when Mrs Wilson, the elder, came to her one day in violent distress, occasioned by a very material diminution in the value of the property that her husband had left her—a diminution which made her income barely enough to support herself, much less Alice—the latter could hardly understand how anything which did not touch health or life could cause such grief; and she received the intelligence with irritating composure. But when, that afternoon, the little sick child was brought in, and the grandmother—who after all loved it well—began a fresh moan over her losses to its unconscious ears—saying how she had planned to consult this or that doctor, and to give it this or that comfort or luxury in after years, but that now all chance of this had passed away—Alice's heart was touched, and she drew near to Mrs. Wilson with unwonted caresses, and, in a spirit not unlike to that of Ruth, entreated, that come what would, they might remain together. After much discussion in succeeding days, it was arranged that Mrs. Wilson should take a house in Manchester, furnishing it partly with what furniture she had, and providing the rest with Alice's remaining two hundred pounds. Mrs Wilson was herself a Manchester woman, and naturally longed to return to her native town. Some connexions of her own at that time required lodgings, for which they were willing to pay pretty handsomely. Alice undertook the active superintendence and superior work of the household. Norah, willing, faithful Norah, offered to cook, scour, do anything in short, so that she might but remain with them.

The plan succeeded. For some years their first lodgers remained with them, and all went smoothly—with the one sad exception of the little girl's increasing deformity. How that mother loved that child is not for words to tell!

Then came a break of misfortune. Their lodgers left, and no one succeeded to them. After some months they had to remove to a smaller house; and Alice's tender conscience was torn by the idea that she ought not to be a burden to her mother-in-law, but ought to go out and seek her own maintenance. And leave her child! The thought came like the sweeping boom of a funeral bell over her heart.

By-and-by Mr Openshaw came to lodge with them. He had started in life as the errand boy and sweeper-out of a warehouse; had struggled up through all the grades of employment in the place, fighting his way through the hard striving Manchester life with strong pushing energy of character. Every spare moment of time had been sternly given up to self-teaching. He was a capital accountant, a good French and German scholar, a keen, far-seeing tradesman, understanding markets, and the bearing of events, both near and distant, on trade; and yet, with such vivid attention to present details, that I do not think he ever saw a group of flowers in the fields without thinking whether their colors would, or would not, form harmonious contrasts in the coming spring muslins and prints. He went to debating societies, and threw himself with all his heart and soul into politics, esteeming, it must be owned, every man a fool or a knave who differed from him, and overthrowing his opponents rather by the loud strength of his language than the calm strength of his logic. There was something of the Yankee in all this. Indeed, his theory ran parallel to the famous Yankee motto, "England flogs creation, and Manchester flogs England." Such a man, as may be fancied, had had no time for falling in love, or any such nonsense. At the age when most young men go through their courting and matrimony, he had not the means of keeping a wife, and was far too practical to think of having one. And now that he was in easy circumstances, a rising man, he considered women almost as incumbrances to the world, with whom a man had better have as little to do as possible. His first impression of Alice was indistinct, and he did not care enough about her to make it distinct. "A pretty yea-nay kind of woman," would have been his description of her, if he had been pushed into a corner. He was rather afraid, in the beginning, that her quiet ways arose from a listlessness and laziness of character, which would have been exceedingly discordant to his active, energetic nature. But, when he found out the punctuality with which his wishes were attended to, and her work was done; when he was called in the morning at the very stroke of the clock, his shaving-water scalding hot, his fire bright, his coffee made exactly as his peculiar fancy dictated, (for he was a man who had his theory about everything, based upon what he knew of science, and often perfectly original)—then he began to think: not that Alice had any peculiar merit; but that he had got into remarkably good lodgings; his restlessness wore away, and he began to consider himself as almost settled for life in them.

Mr. Openshaw had been too busy, all his life, to be introspective. He did not know that he had any tenderness in his nature; and if he had become conscious of its abstract existence, he would have considered it as a manifestation of disease in some part of his nature. But he was decoyed into pity unawares; and pity led on to tenderness. That little, helpless child—always carried about by one of the three busy women of the house, or else patiently threading colored beads in the chair from which, by no effort of its own, could it ever move; the great, grave blue eyes, full of serious, not uncheerful expression, giving to the small, delicate face a look beyond its years; the soft, plaintive voice, dropping out but few words, so unlike the continual prattle of a child—caught Mr. Openshaw's attention in spite of himself. One day—he half scorned himself for doing so—he cut short his dinner-hour to go in search of some toy which should take the place of those eternal beads. I forgot what he bought; but, when he gave the present (which he took care to do in a short, abrupt manner, and when no one was by to see him) he was almost thrilled by the flash of delight which came over that child's face, and could not help all through that afternoon going over and over again the picture left on his memory, by the bright effect of unexpected joy on the little girl's face. When he returned home, he found his slippers placed by his sitting-room fire; and even more careful attention paid to his fancies than was habitual in those model lodgings. When Alice had taken the last of his tea-things away—she had been silent as usual till then—she stood for an instant with the door in her hand. Mr. Openshaw looked as if he were deep in his book, though in fact he did not see a line; but was heartily wishing the woman would be gone, and not make any palaver of gratitude. But she only said:

"I am very much obliged to you, Sir. Thank you very much," and was gone, even before he could send her away with a "There, my good woman, that's enough!"

For some time longer he took no apparent notice of the child. He even hardened his heart into disregarding her sudden flush of color and little timid smile of recognition, when he saw her by chance. But, after all, this could not last forever; and, having a second time given way to tenderness, there was no relapse. The insidious enemy having thus entered his heart, in the guise of compassion to the child, soon assumed the more dangerous form of interest in the mother. He was aware of this change of feeling, despised himself for it, struggled with it; nay internally yielded to it and cherished it, long before he suffered the slightest expression of it, by word, action, or look, to escape him. He watched Alice's docile, obedient ways to her stepmother; the love which she had inspired in the rough Nora, (roughened by the wear and tear of sorrow and years;) but above all, he saw the wild, deep, passionate affection existing between her and her child. They spoke little to any one else, or when any one else was by; but, when alone together they talked and murmured, and cooed, and chattered so continually that Mr. Openshaw first wondered what they could find to say to each other, and next became irritated because they were always so grave and silent with him. All this time, he was perpetually devising small new pleasures for the child. His thoughts ran, in a pertinacious way, upon the desolate life before her; and often he came back from his day's work loaded with the very thing Alice had been longing for, but had not been able to procure. One time it was little chair for drawing the little sufferer along the streets, and many an evening that ensuing summer Mr. Openshaw drew her along himself, regardless of the remarks of his acquaintances. One day in autumn he put down his newspaper, as Alice came in with the breakfast, and said, in as indifferent a voice as he could assume:

"Mrs. Frank, is there any reason why we two should not put our horses together?"

Alice stood still in perplexed wonder. What did he mean? He had resumed the reading of his newspaper, as if he did not expect any answer; so, she found silence her safest course, and went on quietly arranging his breakfast without another word passing between them. Just as he was leaving the house, to go to the warehouse as usual, he turned back and put his head into the bright, neat, tidy kitchen, where all the women breakfasted in the morning:

"You'll think of what I said, Mrs. Frank" (this was her name with the lodgers,) "and let me have your opinion upon it to-night."

Alice was thankful that her mother and Norah were too busy talking together to attend much to this speech. She determined not to think about it at all through the day; and, of course, the effort not to think, made her think all the more. At night she sent up Norah with his tea. But Mr. Openshaw almost knocked Norah down as she was going out at the door, by pushing past her and calling out "Mrs. Frank!" in an impatient voice, at the top of the stairs.

Alice went up, rather than seem to have affixed too much meaning to his words.

"Well, Mrs. Frank," he said, "what answer? Don't make it too long; for I have lots of office work to get through to-night."

"I hardly know what you meant, Sir," said truthful Alice.

"Well! I should have thought you might have guessed. You're not new at this sort of work, and I am. However, I'll make it plain this time. Will you have me to be thy wedded husband, and serve me, and love me, and honor me, and all that sort of thing? Because, if you will, I will do as much by you, and be a father to your child—and that's more than is put in the prayer-book. Now, I'm a man of my word; and what I say, I feel; and what I promise, I'll do. Now, for your answer!"

Alice was silent. He began to make the tea, as if her reply was a matter of perfect indifference to him; but, as soon as that was done, he became impatient.

"Well?" said he.

"How long, sir, may I have to think over it?"

"Three minutes!" (looking at his watch). "You've had two already—that makes five. Be a sensible woman, say Yes, and sit down to tea with me, and we'll talk it over together; for, after tea, I shall be busy; say No" (he hesitated a moment to try and keep his voice in the same tone,) "and I shan't say another word about it, but pay up a year's rent for my rooms to-morrow, and be off. Time's up! Yes or no?"

"If you please, sir, you have been so good to little Ailsie—"

"There, sit down comfortably by me on the sofa, and let us have our tea together. I am glad to find you are as good and sensible as I took you for."

And this was Alice Wilson's second wooing.

Mr Openshaw's will was too strong, and his circumstances too good, for him not to carry all before him. He settled Mrs. Wilson in a comfortable house of her own, and made her quite independent of lodgers. The little that Alice said with regard to future plans was in Norah's behalf.

"No," said Mr Openshaw. "Norah shall take care of the old lady as long as she lives; and, after that, she shall either come and live with us, or, if she likes it better, she shall have a provision for life—for your sake, missus. No one who has been good to you or the child shall go unrewarded. But even the little one will be better for some fresh stuff about her. Get her a bright, sensible girl as a nurse: one who won't go rubbing her with calf's-foot jelly as Norah does; wasting good stuff outside that ought to go in, but will follow doctors' directions; which, as you must see pretty clearly by this time, Norah won't; because they give the poor little wench pain. Now, I'm not above being nesh for other folks myself. I can stand a good blow, and never change color; but, set me in the operating-room in the infirmary, and I turn as sick as a girl. Yet, if need were, I would hold the little wench on my knees while she screeched with pain, if it were to do her poor back good. Nay, nay, wench! keep your white looks for the time when it comes—I don't say it ever will. But this I know, Norah will spare the child and cheat the doctor if she can. Now, I say, give the bairn a year or two's chance, and then, when the pack of doctors have done their best—and, maybe, the old lady has gone—we'll have Norah back, or do better for her."

The pack of doctors could do no good to little Ailsie. She was beyond their power. But her father (for so he insisted on being called, and also on Alice's no longer retaining the appellation of mama, but becoming henceforward mother) by his healthy cheerfulness of manner, his clear decision of purpose, his odd turns and quirks of humor, added to his real strong love for the helpless little girl infused a new element of brightness and confidence into her life; and, although her back remained the same, her general health was strengthened, and Alice—never going beyond a smile herself—had the pleasure of seeing her child taught to laugh.

As for Alice's own life, it was happier than it had ever been. Mr. Openshaw required no demonstration, no expressions of affection from her. Indeed, these would rather have disgusted him. Alice could love deeply, but could not talk about it. The perpetual requirement of loving words, looks, and caresses, and misconstruing their absence into absence of love, had been the great trial of her former married life. Now, all went on clear and straight, under the guidance of her husband's strong sense, warm heart and powerful will. Year by year their worldly prosperity increased. At Mrs Wilson's death, Norah came back to them, as nurse to the newly-born little Edwin; into which post she was not installed without a pretty strong oration on the part of the proud and happy father; who declared that if he found out that Norah ever tried to screen the boy by a falsehood, or to make him nesh either in body or mind, she should go that very day. Norah and Mr. Openshaw were not on the most thoroughly cordial terms; neither of them fully recognising or appreciating the other's best qualities.

This was the previous history of the Lancashire family who had now removed to London, and had come to occupy the House.

They had been there about a year, when Mr Openshaw suddenly informed his wife that he had determined to heal long-standing feuds, and had asked his uncle and aunt Chadwick to come and pay them a visit and see London. Mrs Openshaw had never seen this uncle and aunt of her husband's. Years before she had married him, there had been a quarrel. All she knew was, that Mr Chadwick was a small manufacturer in a country town in South Lancashire. She was extremely pleased that the breach was to be healed, and began making preparations to render their visit pleasant.

They arrived at last. Going to see London was such an event to them, that Mrs. Chadwick had made all new linen fresh for the occasion—from night-caps downwards; and, as for gowns, ribbons, and collars, she might have been going into the wilds of Canada, where never a shop is, so large was her stock. A fortnight before the day of her departure for London she had formally called to take leave of all her acquaintances; saying she should need all the intermediate time for packing up. It was like a second wedding in her imagination, and, to complete the resemblance which an entirely new wardrobe made between the two events, her husband brought her back from Manchester, on the last market day before they set off, a gorgeous pearl and amethyst brooch, saying, "Lunnen should see that Lancashire folks knew a handsome thing when they saw it."

For some time after Mr and Mrs. Chadwick arrived at the Openshaws', there was no opportunity for wearing this brooch; but at length they obtained an order to see Buckingham Palace, and the spirit of loyalty demanded that Mrs. Chadwick should wear her best clothes in visiting the abode of her sovereign. On her return, she hastily changed her dress; for Mr Openshaw had planned that they should go to Richmond, drink tea, and return by moonlight. Accordingly, about five o'clock, Mr. and Mrs. Openshaw and Mr. and Mrs. Chadwick set off.

The housemaid and cook sate below, Norah hardly knew where. She was always engrossed in the nursery, in tending her two children, and in sitting by the restless, excitable, Ailsie till she fell asleep. By-and-bye, the housemaid Betsy tapped gently at the door. Norah went to her, and they spoke in whispers.

"Nurse! there's some one down stairs wants you."

"Wants me! Who is it?"

"A gentleman—"

"A gentleman? Nonsense!"

"Well! a man, then, and he asks for you, and he rung at the front door-bell, and has walked into the dining-room."

"You should never have let him," exclaimed Norah, "master and missus out—"

"I did not want him to come in; but, when he heard you lived here, he walked past me, and sat down on the first chair, and said, 'Tell her to come and speak to me.' There is no gas lighted in the room, and supper is all set out."

"He'll be off with the spoons!" exclaimed Norah, putting the housemaid's fear into words, and preparing to leave the room, first, however, giving a look to Ailsie, sleeping soundly and calmly.

Down-stairs she went, uneasy fears stirring in her bosom. Before she entered the dining-room she provided herself with a candle, and, with it in her hand, she went in, looking round her in the darkness for her visitor.

He was standing up, holding by the table. Norah and he looked at each other; gradual recognition coming into their eyes.

"Norah?" at length he asked.

"Who are you?" asked Norah, with the sharp tones of alarm and incredulity. "I don't know you:" trying by futile words of disbelief to do away with the terrible fact before her.

"Am I so changed?" he said, pathetically. "I daresay I am. But, Norah, tell me!" he breathed hard, "where is my wife? Is she—is she alive?"

He came nearer to Norah, and would have taken her hand; but she backed away from him; looking at him all the time with staring eyes, as if he were some horrible object. Yet he was a handsome, bronzed, good-looking fellow, with beard and moustache, giving him a foreign-looking aspect; but his eyes! there was no mistaking those eager, beautiful eyes—the very same that Norah had watched not half-an-hour ago, till sleep stole softly over them.

"Tell me, Norah—I can bear it—I have feared it so often. Is she dead?" Norah still kept silence. "She is dead!" He hung on Norah's words and looks, as if for confirmation or contradiction.

"What shall I do?" groaned Norah. "O, sir! why did you come? how did you find me out? where have you been? We thought you dead, we did, indeed!" She poured out words and questions to gain time, as if time would help her.

"Norah! answer me this question straight, by yes or no—Is my wife dead?"

"No, she is not!" said Norah, slowly and heavily.

"O, what a relief! Did she receive my letters? But perhaps you don't know. Why did you leave her? Where is she? O, Norah, tell me all quickly!"

"Mr. Frank!" said Norah, at last, almost driven to bay by her terror lest her mistress should return at any moment, and find him there—unable to consider what was best to be done or said—rushing at something decisive, because she could not endure her present state: "Mr. Frank! we never heard a line from you, and the ship-owners said you had gone down, and you and every one else. We thought you were dead, if ever man was, and poor Miss Alice and her little sick, helpless child! O, sir, you must guess it," cried the poor creature at last, bursting out into a passionate fit of crying, "for indeed I cannot tell it. But it was no one's fault. God help us all this night!"

Norah had sate down. She trembled too much to stand. He took her hands in his. He squeezed them hard, as if, by physical pressure the truth could be wrung out.

"Norah!" This time, his tone was calm, stagnant as despair. "She has married again!"

Norah shook her head sadly. The grasp slowly relaxed. The man had fainted.

There was brandy in the room. Norah forced some drops into Mr. Frank's mouth, chafed his hands, and—when mere animal life returned, before the mind poured in its flood of memories and thoughts—she lifted him up, and rested his head against her knees. Then she put a few crumbs of bread taken from the supper-table, soaked in brandy into his mouth. Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"Where is she? Tell me this instant." He looked so wild, so mad, so desperate, that Norah felt herself to be in bodily danger; but her time of dread had gone by. She had been afraid to tell him the truth, and then she had been a coward. Now, her wits were sharpened by the sense of his desperate state. He must leave the house. She would pity him afterwards; but now she must rather command and upbraid; for he must leave the house before her mistress came home. That one necessity stood clear before her.

"She is not here; that is enough for you to know. Nor can I say exactly where she is" (which was true to the letter if not to the spirit) "Go away, and tell me where to find you to-morrow, and I will tell you all. My master and mistress may come back at any minute, and then what would become of me with a strange man in the house?"

Such an argument was too petty to touch his excited mind.

"I don't care for your master and mistress. If your master is a man, he must feel for me—poor shipwrecked sailor that I am—kept for years a prisoner amongst savages, always, always, always thinking of my wife and my home—dreaming of her by night, talking to her—though she could not hear—by day. I loved her more than all heaven and earth put together. Tell me where she is, this instant, you wretched woman, who salved over her wickedness to her, as you do to me."

The clock struck ten. Desperate positions require desperate remedies.

"If you will leave the house now, I will come to you to-morrow, and tell you all. What is more, you shall see your child now. She lies sleeping up stairs. O, sir, you have a child, you do not know that as yet—a little weakly girl—with just a heart and soul beyond her years. We have reared her up with such care. We watched her, for we thought for many a year she might die any day, and we tended her, and no hard thing has come near her, and no rough word has ever been said to her. And now you come and will take her life into your hand, and will crush it. Strangers to her have been kind to her; but her own father—Mr Frank, I am her nurse, and I love her, and I tend her, and I would do anything for her that I could. Her mother's heart beats as her's beats; and, if she suffers a pain, her mother trembles all over. If she is happy, it is her mother that smiles and is glad. If she is growing stronger, her mother is healthy; if she dwindles, her mother languishes. If she dies—well, I don't know: it is not every one can lie down and die when they wish it. Come up-stairs, Mr Frank, and see your child. Seeing her will do good to your poor heart. Then go away, in God's name, just this one night—to-morrow, if need be, you can do anything—kill us all if you will, or show yourself a great, grand man, whom God will bless for ever and ever. Come, Mr Frank, the look of a sleeping child is sure to give peace."

She led him up-stairs; at first almost helping his steps, till they came near the nursery door. She had almost forgotten the existence of little Edwin. It struck upon her with affright as the shaded light fell upon the other cot; but she skilfully threw that corner of the room into darkness, and let the light fall on the sleeping Ailsie. The child had thrown down the coverings, and her deformity, as she lay with her back to them, was plainly visible through her slight night-gown. Her little face, deprived of the lustre of her eyes looked wan and pinched, and had a pathetic expression in it, even as she slept. The poor father looked and looked with hungry, wistful eyes, into which the big tears came swelling up slowly, and dropped heavily down, as he stood trembling and shaking all over. Norah was angry at herself for growing impatient of the length of time that long-lingering gaze lasted. She thought that she waited for full half an hour before Frank stirred. And then—instead of going away—he sank down on his knees by the bedside, and buried his face in the clothes. Little Ailsie stirred uneasily. Norah pulled him up in terror. She could afford no more time even for prayer in her extremity of fear; for surely the next moment would bring her mistress home. She took him forcibly by the arm; but, as he was going, his eye lighted on the other bed; he stopped. Intelligence came back into his face. His hands clenched.

"His child?" he asked.

"Her child," replied Norah, "God watches over him," said she instinctively; for Frank's looks excited her fears, and she needed to remind herself of the Protector of the helpless.

"God has not watched over me," he said, in despair, his thoughts apparently recoiling on his own desolate, deserted state. But Norah had no time for pity. To-morrow she would be as compassionate as her heart prompted. At length she guided him down stairs, and shut the outer door, and bolted it—as if by bolts to keep out facts.

Then she went back into the dining-room, and effaced all traces of his presence as far as she could. She went up-stairs to the nursery and sate there, her head on her hand, thinking what was to come of all this misery. It seemed to her very long before they did return; yet it was hardly eleven o'clock. She heard the loud, hearty Lancashire voices on the stairs; and for the first time, she understood the contrast of the desolation of the poor man who had so lately gone forth in lonely despair.

It almost put her out of patience to see Mrs Openshaw come in, calmly smiling, handsomely dressed, happy, easy, to inquire after her children.

"Did Ailsie go to sleep comfortably?" she whispered to Norah.

"Yes."

Her mother bent over her, looking at her slumbers with the soft eyes of love. How little she dreamed who had looked on her last! Then she went to Edwin, with perhaps less wistful anxiety in her countenance, but more of pride. She took off her things, to go down to supper. Norah saw her no more that night.

Beside the door into the passage, the sleeping-nursery opened out of Mr. and Mrs Openshaw's room, in order that they might have the children more immediately under their own eyes. Early the next summer morning Mrs Openshaw was awakened by Ailsie's startled call of "Mother! mother!" She sprang up, put on her dressing gown, and went to her child. Ailsie was only half awake, and in a not uncommon state of terror.

"Who was he, mother? Tell me!"

"Who, my darling? No one is here. You have been dreaming, love. Waken up quite. See, it is broad daylight."

"Yes," said Ailsie, looking round her; then clinging to her mother, said, "but a man was here in the night, mother."

"Nonsense, little goose. No man has ever come near you!"

"Yes, he did. He stood there. Just by Norah. A man with hair and a beard. And he knelt down and said his prayers. Norah knows he was here, mother" (half angrily, as Mrs. Openshaw shook her head in smiling incredulity.)

"Well! We will ask Norah when she comes," said Mrs. Openshaw, soothingly. "But we won't talk any more about him now. It is not five o'clock; it is too early for you to get up. Shall I fetch you a book and read to you?"

"Don't leave me, mother," said the child, clinging to her. So Mrs. Openshaw sat on the bedside talking to Ailsie, and telling her of what they had done at Richmond the evening before, until the little girl's eyes slowly closed, and she once more fell asleep.

"What was the matter?" asked Mr. Openshaw, as his wife returned to bed.

"Ailsie, wakened up in a fright, with some story of a man having been in the room to say his prayers—a dream, I suppose." And no more was said at the time.

Mrs. Openshaw had almost forgotten the whole affair when she got up about seven o'clock. But, bye-and-bye, she heard a sharp altercation going on in the nursery—Norah speaking angrily to Ailsie; a most unusual thing. Both Mr. and Mrs Openshaw listened in astonishment.

"Hold your tongue, Ailsie! let me hear none of your dreams; never let me hear you tell that story again!" Ailsie began to cry.

Mr. Openshaw opened the door of communication before his wife could say a word.

"Norah, come here!"

The nurse stood at the door, defiant. She perceived she had been heard, but she was desperate.

"Don't let me hear you speak in that manner to Ailsie again," he said, sternly, and shut the door.

Norah was infinitely relieved; for she had dreaded some questioning; and a little blame for sharp speaking was what she could well bear, if cross-examination was let alone.

Down stairs they went, Mr. Openshaw carrying Ailsie; the sturdy Edwin coming step by step, right foot foremost, always holding his mother's hand. Each child was placed in a chair by the breakfast-table, and then Mr. and Mrs. Openshaw stood together at the window, awaiting their visitors' appearance and making plans for the day. There was a pause. Suddenly Mr. Openshaw turned to Ailsie, and said:

"What a little goosy somebody is with her dreams, waking up poor, tired mother in the middle of the night with a story of a man being in the room."

"Father! I'm sure I saw him," said Ailsie, half crying. "I don't want to make Norah angry; but I was not asleep, for all she says I was. I had been asleep—and I awakened up quite wide awake, though I was so frightened. I kept my eyes nearly shut, and I saw the man quite plain. A great brown man with a beard. He said his prayers. And then he looked at Edwin. And then Norah took him by the arm and led him away, after they had whispered a bit together."

"Now, my little woman must be reasonable," said Mr. Openshaw, who was always patient with Ailsie. "There was no man in the house last night at all. No man comes into the house as you know, if you think; much less goes up into the nursery. But sometimes we dream something has happened, and the dream is so like reality, that you are not the first person, little woman, who has stood out that the thing has really happened."

"But, indeed it was not a dream!" said Ailsie, beginning to cry.

Just then, Mr. and Mrs. Chadwick came down, looking grave and discomposed. All during breakfast-time they were silent and uncomfortable. As soon as the breakfast things were taken away, and the children had been carried up-stairs, Mr. Chadwick began in an evidently preconcerted manner to inquire if his nephew was certain that all his servants were honest; for, that Mrs. Chadwick had that morning missed a very valuable brooch, which she had worn the day before. She remembered taking it off when she came home from Buckingham Palace. Mr. Openshaw's face contracted into hard lines; grew like what it was before he had known his wife and her child. He rang the bell even before his uncle had done speaking. It was answered by the housemaid.

"Mary, was any one here last night while we were away?"

"A man, sir, came to speak to Norah."

"To speak to Norah! Who was he? How long did he stay?"

"I'm sure I can't tell, sir. He came—perhaps about nine. I went up to tell Norah in the nursery, and she came down to speak to him. She let him out, sir. She will know who he was, and how long he stayed."

She waited a moment to be asked any more questions, but she was not, so she went away.

A minute afterwards Openshaw made as though he were going out of the room; but his wife laid her hand on his arm:

"Do not speak to her before the children," she said, in her low, quiet voice. "I will go up and question her."

"No! I must speak to her. You must know," said he, turning to his uncle and aunt, "my missus has an old servant, as faithful as ever woman was, I do believe, as far as love goes—but, at the same time, who does not always speak truth, as even the missus must allow. Now, my notion is, that this Norah of ours has been come over by some good-for-nothing chap (for she's at the time o'life when they say women pray for husbands—'any, good Lord, any,') and has let him into our house, and the chap has made off with your brooch, and m'appen many another thing beside. It's only saying that Norah is soft-hearted, and does not stick at a white lie—that's all, missus."

It was curious to notice how his tone, his eyes, his whole face changed as he spoke to his wife; but he was the resolute man through all. She knew better than to oppose him; so she went up stairs, and told Norah her master wanted to speak to her, and that she would take care of the children in the meanwhile.

Norah rose to go without a word. Her thoughts were these:

"If they tear me to pieces they shall never know through me. He may come—and then just Lord have mercy upon us all; for some of us are dead folk to a certainty. But he shall do it; not me."

You may fancy, now, her look of determination as she faced her master alone in the dining-room; Mr and Mrs Chadwick having left the affair in their nephew's hands, seeing that he took it up with such vehemence.

"Norah! Who was that man that came to my house last night?"

"Man, sir!" As if infinitely surprised; but it was only to gain time.

"Yes; the man whom Mary let in; whom she went up-stairs to the nursery to tell you about; whom you came down to speak to; the same chap, I make no doubt, whom you took into the nursery to have your talk out with; whom Ailsie saw, and afterwards dreamed about; thinking, poor wench! she saw him say his prayers, when nothing, I'll be bound, was farther from his thoughts; who took Mrs. Chadwick's brooch, value ten pounds. Now, Norah! Don't go off! I am as sure as that my name's Thomas Openshaw, that you knew nothing of this robbery. But I do think you've been imposed on, and that's the truth. Some good-for-nothing chap has been making up to you, and you've been just like all other women and have turned a soft place in your heart to him; and he came last night a-lovyering, and you had him up in the nursery, and he made use of his opportunities, and made off with a few things on his way down! Come, now, Norah; it's no blame to you, only you must not be such a fool again! Tell us," he continued, "what name he gave you, Norah? I'll be bound it was not the right one; but it will be a clue for the police."

Norah drew herself up. "You may ask that question, and taunt me with my being single, and with my credulity, as you will, Master Openshaw. You'll get no answer from me. As for the brooch, and the story of theft and burglary; if any friend ever came to see me (which I defy you to prove, and deny.) he'd be just as much above doing such a thing as yourself, Mr Openshaw, and more so, too; for I'm not at all sure as everything you have is rightly come by, or would be yours long, if every man had his own." She meant, of course, his wife; but he understood her to refer to his property in goods and chattels.

"Now, my good woman," said he, "I'll just tell you truly, I never trusted you out and out; but my wife liked you, and I thought you had many a good point about you. If you once begin to sauce me, I'll have the police to you, and get out the truth in a court of justice, if you'll not tell it me quietly and civilly here. Now, the best thing you can do is quietly to tell me who the fellow is. Look here! a man comes to my house; asks for you; you take him up-stairs, a valuable brooch is missing next day; we know that you, and Mary, and cook, are honest; but you refuse to tell us who the man is. Indeed, you've told one lie already about him, saying no one was here last night. Now, I just put it to you, what do you think a policeman would say to this, or a magistrate? A magistrate would soon make you tell the truth, my good woman."

"There's never the creature born that should get it out of me," said Norah. "Not unless I choose to tell."

"I've a great mind to see," said Mr. Openshaw, growing angry at the defiance. Then checking himself, he thought before he spoke again:

"Norah, for your missus's sake I don't want to go to extremities. Be a sensible woman, if you can. It's no great disgrace, after all, to have been taken in. I ask you once more—as a friend—who was this man whom you let into my house last night?"

No answer. He repeated the question in an impatient tone. Still no answer. Norah's lips were set in determination not to speak.

"Then there is but one thing to be done. I shall send for a policeman."

"You will not," said Norah, starting forwards. "You shall not, sir! No policeman shall touch me. I know nothing of the brooch, but I know this: ever since I was four and twenty I have thought more of your wife than of myself; ever since I saw her, a poor motherless girl put upon in her uncle's house, I have thought more of serving her than of serving myself! I have cared for her and her child, as nobody ever cared for me. I don't cast any blame on you, sir, but I say it's ill giving up one's life to any one; for, at the end, they will turn round upon you, and forsake you. Why does not my missus come herself to suspect me? Maybe she is gone for the police? But I don't stay here, either for police, or magistrate, or master. You're an unlucky lot. I believe there's a curse on you. I'll leave you this very day. Yes! I'll leave that poor Ailsie, too. I will! No good will ever come to you!"

Mr. Openshaw was utterly astonished at this speech; most of which was completely unintelligible to him, as may easily be supposed. Before he could make up his mind what to say, or what to do, Norah had left the room. I do not think he had ever really intended to send for the police to this old servant of his wife's; for he had never for a moment doubted her perfect honesty. But he had intended to compel her to tell him who the man was, and in this he was baffled. He was, consequently, much irritated. He returned to his uncle and aunt in a state of great annoyance and perplexity, and told them he could get nothing out of the woman; that some man had been in the house the night before; but that she refused to tell who he was. At this moment his wife came in, greatly agitated, and asked what had happened to Norah; for that she had put on her things in passionate haste, and had left the house.

"This looks suspicious," said Mr. Chadwick. "It is not the way in which an honest person would have acted."

Mr Openshaw kept silence. He was sorely perplexed. But Mrs Openshaw turned round on Mr. Chadwick with a sudden fierceness no one ever saw in her before.

"You don't know Norah, uncle! She is gone because she is deeply hurt at being suspected. O, I wish I had seen her—that I had spoken to her myself. She would have told me anything." Alice wrung her hands.

"I must confess," continued Mr. Chadwick to his nephew, in a lower voice, "I can't make you out. You used to be a word and a blow, and oftenest the blow first; and now, when there is every cause for suspicion, you just do nought. Your missus is a very good woman, I grant; but she may have been put upon as well as other folk, I suppose. If you don't send for the police, I shall."

"Very well," replied Mr. Openshaw, surlily. "I can't clear Norah. She won't clear herself, as I believe she might, if she would. Only I wash my hands of it; for I am sure the woman herself is honest, and she's lived a long time with my wife, and I don't like her to come to shame."

"But she will then be forced to clear herself. That, at any rate, will be a good thing."

"Very well, very well! I am heart-sick of the whole business. Come, Alice, come up to the babies; they'll be in a sore way. I tell you uncle!" he said, turning round once more to Mr. Chadwick, suddenly and sharply, after his eye had fallen on Alice's wan, tearful, anxious face; "I'll have none sending for the police after all. I'll buy my aunt twice as handsome a brooch this very day; but I'll not have Norah suspected, and my missus plagued. There's for you."

He and his wife left the room. Mr. Chadwick quietly waited till he was out of hearing, and then said to his wife, "For all Tom's heroics, I'm just quietly going for a detective, wench. Thou need'st know nought about it."

He went to the police-station, and made a statement of the case. He was gratified by the impression which the evidence against Norah seemed to make. The men all agreed in his opinion, and steps were to be immediately taken to find out where she was. Most probably, as they suggested, she had gone at once to the man who, to all appearance, was her lover. When Mr. Chadwick asked how they would find her out, they smiled, shook their heads, and spoke of mysterious but infallible ways and means. He returned to his nephew's house with a very comfortable opinion of his own sagacity. He was met by his wife with a penitent face:

"O master, I've found my brooch! It was just sticking by its pin in the flounce of my brown silk that I wore yesterday. I took it off in a hurry, and it must have caught in it; and I hung up my gown in the closet. Just now, when I was going to fold it up, there was the brooch! I'm very vexed, but I never dreamt but what it was lost!"

Her husband, muttering something very like "Confound thee and thy brooch too! I wish I'd never given it thee," snatched up his hat, and rushed back to the station, hoping to be in time to stop the police from searching for Norah. But a detective was already gone off on the errand.

Where was Norah? Half mad with the strain of the fearful secret, she had hardly slept through the night for thinking what must be done. Upon this terrible state of mind had come Ailsie's questions, showing that she had seen the Man, as the unconscious child called her father. Lastly came the suspicion of her honesty. She was little less than crazy as she ran up stairs and dashed on her bonnet and shawl, leaving all else, even her purse, behind her. In that house she would not stay. That was all she knew or was clear about. She would not even see the children again, for fear it should weaken her. She feared above everything Mr. Frank's return to claim his wife. She could not tell what remedy there was for a sorrow so tremendous, for her to stay to witness. The desire of escaping from the coming event was a stronger motive for her departure than her soreness about the suspicions directed against her; although this last had been the final goad to the course she took. She walked away almost at headlong speed, sobbing as she went, as she had not dared to do during the past night for fear of exciting wonder in those who might hear her. Then she stopped. An idea came into her mind that she would leave London altogether, and betake herself to her native town of Liverpool. She felt in her pocket for her purse as she drew near the Euston-square station with this intention. She had left it at home. Her poor head aching, her eyes swollen with crying, she had to stand still and think, as well as she could, where next she should bend her steps. Suddenly the thought flashed into her mind that she would go and find out poor Mr Frank. She had been hardly kind to him the night before, though her heart had bled for him ever since. She remembered his telling her, as she inquired for his address, almost as she had pushed him out of the door; of some hotel in a street not far distant from Euston Square. Thither she went—with what intention she hardly knew, but to assuage her conscience by telling him how much she pitied him. In her present state she felt herself unfit to counsel, or restrain, or assist, or do aught else but sympathize and weep. The people of the inn said such a person had been there; had arrived only the day before; had gone out soon after his arrival, leaving his luggage in their care; but had never come back. Norah asked for leave to sit down and await the gentleman's return. The landlady, pretty secure in the deposit of luggage against any probable injury, showed her into a room, and quietly locked the door on the outside. Norah was utterly worn out, and fell asleep—a shivering, starting, uneasy slumber, which lasted for hours.

The detective, meanwhile, had come up with her some time before she entered the hotel, into which he followed her. Asking the landlady to detain her for an hour or so, without giving any reason beyond showing his authority, (which made the landlady applaud herself a good deal for having locked her in,) he went back to the police-station to report his proceedings. He could have taken her directly; but his object was, if possible, to trace out the man who was supposed to have committed the robbery. Then he heard of the discovery of the brooch, and consequently did not care to return.

Norah slept till even the summer evening began to close in. Then up. Some one was at the door. It would be Mr Frank; and she dizzily pushed back her ruffled gray hair, which had fallen over her eyes, and stood looking to see him. Instead, there came in Mr. Openshaw and a policeman.

"This is Norah Kennedy," said Mr. Openshaw.

"O, sir," said Norah. "I did not touch the brooch; indeed I did not. O, sir, I cannot live to be thought so badly of;" and, very sick and faint, she suddenly sank down on the ground. To her surprise, Mr Openshaw raised her up very tenderly. Even the policeman helped to lay her on the sofa; and, at Mr. Openshaw's desire, he went for some wine and sandwiches; for the poor, gaunt woman lay there almost as if dead with weariness and exhaustion.

"Norah!" said Mr. Openshaw, in his kindest voice, "the brooch is found. It was hanging to Mrs. Chadwick's gown. I beg your pardon. Most truly I beg your pardon, for having troubled you about it. My wife is almost broken-hearted. Eat, Norah—or, stay, first drink this glass of wine," said he, lifting her head, pouring a little down her throat.

As she drank, she remembered where she was, and who she was waiting for. She suddenly pushed Mr Openshaw away, saying, "O, sir, you must go. You must not stop a minute. If he comes back he will kill you."

"Alas, Norah! I do not know who 'he' is. But some one is gone away who will never come back: some one who knew you, and whom I am afraid you cared for."

"I don't understand you, sir," said Norah, her master's kind and sorrowful manner bewildering her yet more than his words. The policeman had left the room at Mr. Openshaw's desire, and they two were alone.

"You know what I mean, when I say some one is gone who will never come back. I mean that he is dead!"

"Who?" said Norah, trembling all over.

"A poor man has been found in the Thames this morning, drowned."

"Did he drown himself?" asked Norah, solemnly.

"God only knows," replied Mr. Openshaw, in the same tone. "Your name and address at our house, were found in his pocket: that, and his purse, were the only things, that were found upon him. I am sorry to say it, my poor Norah, but you are required to go and identify him."

"To what?" asked Norah.

"To say who it is. It is always done, in order that some reason may be discovered for the suicide—if suicide it was. I make no doubt he was the man who came to see you at our house last night. It is very sad I know." He made pauses between each little clause, in order to try and bring back her senses, which he feared were wandering—so wild and sad was her look.

"Master Openshaw," said she, at last, "I've a dreadful secret to tell you—only you must never breathe it to any one, and you and I must hide it away for ever. I thought to have done it all by myself, but I see I cannot. Yon poor man—yes! the dead, drowned creature is, I fear, Mr. Frank, my mistress' first husband!"

Mr Openshaw sat down as if shot. He did not speak; but, after a while, he signed Norah to go on.

"He came to me the other night—when—God be thanked—you were all away at Richmond. He asked me if his wife was dead or alive. I was a brute, and thought more of your all coming home, than of his sore trial; I spoke out sharp, and said he was married again, and very content and happy: I all but turned him away; and now he lies dead and cold!"

"God forgive me!" said Mr. Openshaw.

"God forgive us all!" said Norah. "Yon poor man needs forgiveness perhaps less than any one among us. He had been among the savages—shipwrecked—I know not what—and he had written letters which had never reached my poor missus."

"He saw his child!"

"He saw her—yes! I took him up, to give his thoughts another start: for I believed he was going mad on my hands. I came to seek him here, as I more than half promised. My mind misgave me, when I heard he had never come in. O, sir! it must be him!"

Mr. Openshaw rang the bell. Norah was almost too much stunned to wonder what he did. He asked for writing materials, wrote a letter, and then said to Norah:

"I am writing to Alice, to say I shall be unavoidably absent for a few days; that I have found you; that you are well, and send her your love, and will come home to-morrow. You must go with me to the Police Court; you must identify the body; I will pay high to keep names and details out of the papers."

"But where are you going, sir?"

He did not answer her directly. Then he said:

"Norah! I must go with you, and look on the face of the man whom I have so injured—unwittingly, it is true; but it seems to me as if I had killed him. I will lay his head in the grave, as if he were my only brother; and how he must have hated me! I cannot go home to my wife till all that I can do for him is done. Then I go with a dreadful secret on my mind. I shall never speak

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Every communication must be accompanied by the name of the writer. In order to insure correctness in the typography, but one side of the sheet should be written upon.

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