

UP AND DOWN THE LADDER.

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CHAPTER I.—Continued.

The offer of the month's rent in advance seemed to obliterate all doubt of the widow's respectability from the mind of the landlady.

"On these conditions," said she, "I have no objection to take you in, although it is greatly against my rule to have anybody here without knowing who they are, as we wish to keep our house respectable. I live here with my husband, and the only other lodgers in the house are an elderly man and his wife, who have the first floor."

"I will tell you candidly how I am situated," said the widow, "for I think you are quite right to be cautious. My name is Evans. Three months ago I lost my husband, who was manager of a manufactory in Norwich. Some months before his death he unfortunately became security for a friend, who afterwards went through the bankruptcy court, and we were entirely ruined. All I could save from the general wreck was a few pounds. I have now come up to London with my son to find out an old relative, who is in good circumstances, to see if she can assist me. I have now told you candidly who I am, and, that your rent may be safe, I will at once pay you a month in advance. I am sure you will find us good and quiet lodgers."

So saying, she put her hand in her pocket, and taking out a somewhat scantily filled purse, she paid the landlady the twenty-eight shillings for the first four weeks' rent.

The receipt of the money seemed to produce a great effect on the mind of Mrs. Murphy, for that was the good woman's name. The sharp, shrewd, lodging-house keeper tone and manner immediately vanished, and that of the good, motherly, kind-hearted woman supplied its place. Running her fingers through the long black locks of the boy, and eyeing him attentively and evidently with pleasure, she said to the mother—

"You must have found it bitter cold outside the coach, ma'am, raining and blowing as it did last night."

"It was wet and cold, indeed, ma'am," was the reply; "the wind seemed to cut through you. I feel as if I should never get warm again, and poor Robert's teeth quite chattered, till it made my heart ache to hear him."

"Well, now, I'll tell you what we'd better do," said Mrs. Murphy, in a decided, off-hand manner; "I suppose the boy will have the back room. I'll get his bed ready for him directly, and the sooner he's in it the better—that is to say, after he has had his breakfast."

"Oh, we breakfasted as we came along," said Mrs. Evans; "he won't want any now."

"Then I'll get his bed at once," said Mrs. Murphy. "Afterwards, I will go downstairs and get some shavings and coal and make you a fire, so you'll be able to get his clothes thoroughly dry for him before he awakes." So saying, she quitted the room, leaving the mother and son to unfasten their packages.

In about five minutes Mrs. Murphy returned, bringing with her a shovel full of coals in her hand, and her apron full of carpenter's shavings. With a quick and skilful hand she placed these in the grate, and after a few moments the widow had a blazing fire in her room.

"Now, my dear," said Mrs. Murphy, who seemed to take upon herself (possibly noticing the exhausted condition of the widow) the superintendence of Mrs. Evans's domestic arrangements, "the sooner the boy is in bed the better, and then you can dry his clothes for him. Is there any thing more I can do for you, as you ought not to leave the house, ill as you are, if you can help it?"

Mrs. Evans thankfully accepted the landlady's offer, and she forthwith gave her a list of such few necessities as she should require, including tea, bread and butter, &c., all of which Mrs. Murphy promised to obtain for her, saying she would make the money she expended go as far as if it had been her own.

The first thing Mrs. Evans done when left to herself, was to see her son comfortably in bed, his jaded and pallid appearance proving to her, but to well, how much he was in need of repose, and how severely he had felt the cold and fatigue of the previous night. As soon as he was comfortably asleep, she took his clothes, which were still sodden with rain, to dry them by the fire in her own room; then, feeling no inclination to sleep herself, she merely made some changes in her dress, and these completed she seated herself on a chair before the fire, and then she endeavored to turn over calmly in her mind the steps she ought to take to better her prospects for the future.

CHAPTER II.

FAMILY AFFAIRS.

There was a good and ample cause for the great anxiety under which Mrs. Evans labored. All her hopes depended on the reception she would receive from an aged female relative and her husband, who were reputed to be rich, but of whom she had heard nothing for more than ten years, in fact, not since her marriage with Mr. Evans. And here again her prospects were by no means of a flattering description, for the marriage she had contracted having been contrary to the wishes of Mr. and Mrs. Gibbons, the rich relatives alluded to, they had not only refused to receive her and her husband after their marriage, but had positively assured them for the future they should consider all friendship or relationship between them at an end. Nor was there the slightest reason for the objection Mr. and Mrs. Gibbons had taking to Mr. Evans, for he was a young man of great respectability and energy, and in every way a fitting match for the girl. Indeed, had it been otherwise, from the miserable life she had lived while under the control of the old couple (for she had been their ward), the poor girl would have found a good excuse for a somewhat hasty or ill-assorted marriage, as the following sketch of the family history will go far to prove.

Margaret Westmacott, afterwards Mrs. Evans, and her sister Maria had been left orphans before the elder was six years of age. Their father, who died when young, had been a man of little property, in fact, his will had been sworn under seven thousand pounds. This sum he left to be divided in equal portions between his two daughters, his will nominating Mr. Gibbons, who had married his wife's sister, his sole executor and trustee, as well as guardian to the children.

About the time of Mr. Westmacott's death, Mr. Gibbons, who was then an under clerk in an insurance office, lost his father-in-law,

who died possessed of about four thousand pounds, which he left to his daughter. On the receipt of this legacy, which added to the interest of the money left by Mr. Westmacott to his daughters, a considerable portion of which Mr. Gibbons appropriated for their expenses, he resolved to give up his appointment, and live for the future at his ease. He calculated that by withdrawing his money from the funds, as well as that belonging to his wards, he would be able, if he loaned it out by way of annuity, to realize a much larger income than it at present yielded, and he thus, to use his own expression, "needed to be no longer at the beck and call of any one." Moreover, having no family, he and his wife determined to bring up their wards as their own children. For the happiness of the little girls a more unfortunate conclusion could not have been arrived at, for a more unamiable couple than Mr. Gibbons and his wife could hardly have been found. They agreed tolerably well together, at least, for some years after the commencement of their married life, but to all under their control they were harsh and despotic in the extreme.

A more unhappy childhood than that endured by the orphans it would be difficult to imagine. Although it is possible that Mr. and Mrs. Gibbons might have entertained some slight genuine affection for the children, its good effects were completely neutralised by the severity they used towards them. They certainly professed the greatest love for their two little nieces, Margaret and Maria, and attempted to make the children believe it; still nothing could be more miserable than the life these two little creatures led under their management. The tyranny they exercised over them was, apart from the fact that there was no physical brutality in it, of the cruellest description. They were incessantly watched, and the most trifling faults of childhood were unpitifully punished, either by extra lessons, solitary confinement to their rooms, or other penances of the same description, all of which they were told were inflicted with the view to their ultimate welfare. The only happiness they possessed was in confiding their sorrows to each other, and seeking consolation and comfort in the love which existed between them. They had no associates. Mr. and Mrs. Gibbons had taken a house a few miles from London, where, although they were surrounded by many respectable families, they kept no company, nor, without any visible or intelligible cause, was their society sought for by any.

As the girls grew up, the peculiarities of their dispositions began gradually to develop themselves. Maria, the elder, was a timid, amiable creature, unwilling to give offence to any one, even in the slightest manner, and always ready to offer any compensation in her power to those whom she might unwittingly displease. She tried, and most conscientiously tried, to love and respect her guardians, though with but scant success. She feared and obeyed them, but that was all. She endeavored to prove to herself that it was her duty both to love and obey those who were placed in authority over her, a precept incessantly inculcated on her mind, and that of her sister, by Mr. and Mrs. Gibbons, but in spite of all her good will she found it impossible. Margaret, the younger, was, on the contrary, a high-spirited girl, whose temper all the severity practised against her could not subdue. She made but slight efforts to seem fond of her guardians, and those efforts were easily seen