

"My pity is not weak or womanish, nor do I call it pity at all. It is simply love of justice. Either Grace is married or not married. All I want is, for her sake and the child's, to find out the exact law of the case."

"Which is just what I told her last night. No doubt she was married, as she says; only the marriage being illegal, is null and void."

"But she says such marriages are not uncommon."

"I believe they are not, in the lower classes." Nevertheless, those who risk them must take the consequences. The wife is only the mistress, and the children are base-born. I beg your pardon for putting plain facts into plain language, but you compel me. Why will you meddle in this unpleasant matter? It can be nothing to you." And he looked at her keenly as he spoke, but Hannah did not perceive it just then. Her interest was too strongly excited for the cruel position of poor Grace. She recalled involuntarily an old argument of Lady Dunsmore on this very subject—whether any wrong could be exactly "nothing" to any honest-minded man or woman, even though he or she were not personally affected thereby.

"Pardon me," she answered gently, "it is something to me to see any human being in great misery, if by any possibility that misery could be removed. Are you quite sure you are right as to the law? It cannot always have been what you say, because Grace tells me of a certain Mr. Melville who visits at the Moat-House"—and Hannah repeated the story. "Can it be possible," added she, "that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor?"

"No. But in 1835 the law was altered, or at least modified: all such marriages then existing were confirmed, and all future ones declared illegal. Melville escaped by a hair breadth only, his parents having been married in 1834."

"Then what was right one year was wrong the next? That is, to my weak womanly notions, a very extraordinary form of justice."

Her brother-in-law regarded her inquiringly. Evidently he was surprised; did not at first take in the intense single-mindedness of the woman who could thus throw herself out of herself, and indignantly argue the cause of another, even though it trenched upon ground so delicate that most feminine instincts would have let it alone. He looked at her; and then his just nature divining the utter innocence and indifference out of which she spoke, he said nothing—only sighed.

"You are a very good woman, Hannah—I know that, and Grace ought to be exceedingly obliged to you. But you cannot help her—not in the least."

"And cannot you? Could you not, at least, prevent the man's marrying another woman—as he means to do in your very church next Sunday?"

"Does he? The brute!" cried Mr. Rivers passionately. Then, relapsing into his former coldness—"I fear nothing can be done. The former marriage being invalid, he can contract another at any time—legally, I mean; the moral question is a different thing."

"So it seems," said Hannah bitterly; for she was vexed at his manner—it seemed so hard, so unlike his usual warm, generous way