

"And what did Mary say?" asked the dame; "Have you seen her since the meeting?"

"Mary? oh, she is always kind," replied Sam.

"Now you know, Sam, that is a copy of your countenance, as my old missus would have said; I expect Mary was rather more pleased than any one else."

"Mary never cared for me, dame; why, how could she? She was engaged, and I—I went away, you know, directly after he left."

The dame muttered something a little fiercely to herself, and then said, "Sam, you know I can read you like a book;" and then she whispered something which made poor Sam grow very red. She noticed it, and being in a merciless mood, did not mend matters by adding, "Come, you know I'm right, just make this here bit of toast. Your face can't get much hotter than it is."

Sam set about making the toast; of course he burnt it, and was duly teased. He could not stand this bantering long, and Sam's way out of a difficulty was always to go straight through it; so he looked up at the dame with a half smile, and said, "You know, dame, my caring for Mary won't make Mary care for me."

"Well, I never said it would, but it do seem to me that seeing as how Jem have been married these five years, the hole in Mary's heart may have got mended, and she may be ready to let you—make another."

Sam laughed sadly and said, "I've been a convict, dame."

"Lad, they've convicted you of nought but good as I can see; and the look of the thing ain't what Mary will go for to think of."

The conversation was not quite pleasant to Sam, though it so deeply interested him; so he soon left the dame. He could not, however, forget what she had said. It seemed as though she had awakened feelings and thoughts which he had been hushing to sleep, feeling instinctively that they might disturb Mary's peace; besides he must be quite, quite sure that she loved him ere he could ask her to marry a man

on whose name a shadow had rested, however unjustly.

That night Sam tossed sleeplessly on his bed. Could the dame be right? Could Mary care ever so little for him? Would he not be doing her a grievous wrong by marrying her even if she did? Of course all these were fruitless thoughts. One thing only Sam did not doubt, and that was his own love to Mary; he never had doubted that for ten long years, but he would not tell her so, not yet, he must wait and see. And for a whole year Sam waited. He made a home at Brook Farm with the Powers to be nearer his work; but the Squire wished to make him his gamekeeper, and to have him altogether on the estate, and Sam had promised to accept the offer when Morton, the present gamekeeper, should leave.

Very bright were those days to "little Mercy," for "little Mercy" she was always called in spite of her seventeen years. Perhaps, could she have read the secret of Sam's heart, Mercy might have lost some of her child-like light-heartedness,—for poor little Mercy had a secret of her own, which, with her true woman's nature, she imparted to none, not even to her own mother. Sam loved her truly in his own gentle, brotherly way, and believed that he fully returned all that in love he received from her.

He was sitting one afternoon in the pleasant farm parlour, chatting with Mrs. Power, when Mary came in. She looked pale and ill, and sat down wearily in a low chair near the fire. Mrs. Power's quick eye at once detected that something was amiss with her that afternoon over and above bodily weariness or weakness, but she refrained from remark. She took Mary's bonnet and shawl, having ascertained that she might stay to tea, and began talking about Mrs. Welby's younger children,—a subject which always roused her visitor's interest. For this once it was ill-chosen, for hardly had the little ones been mentioned, than all poor Mary's control gave way, and heedless of Sam's presence, she burst into a helpless fit of weeping. At last Mrs. Power discovered the cause of her grief. The doctor had