

AUNT JESSIE.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

The young girl kept her own counsel, and said not a word of how she had guessed the secret for herself, and how her heart had often bled, to watch the precious sight growing dimmer day by day. She had seen through the loving devices of the other to endeavour to spare her as long as possible, and had breathed not a word of her suspicions; but it had been hard at times not to break through the barriers of silence, and pour out the sympathy with which her heart had overflowed whenever she had seen the deepening look of care and sadness resting on the beloved face of her who had been almost more than a mother to her.

For they both knew what blindness meant in this case: not simply deprivation of sight—one of God's choicest blessings—but the means of earning a livelihood, scanty though that might have been, taken away, and nothing save deepest poverty, almost starvation, staring the elder one in the face, or, that greatest dread and fear of the poor, the workhouse. For Esther—willing as she was, and ready, in the depths of her grateful loving heart to work and toil as far as human strength and ability could carry her—knew to her sorrow, that she could do little more than she did already.

She had only lately obtained this, her first situation, in Mr. Webb's shop; and for the next two or three years she was to receive nothing, but to give her services in return for learning the business. She had her dinner and tea there, and indeed, could have lived altogether in the house; but it was her own wish and choice to come home every night, even though doing so involved a long walk through some of the worst parts of the city. But her aunt would have been lonely without her; and that aunt had toiled and striven for her ever since she had been left, a helpless infant, to her care. Esther longed so ardently to be able to repay some of that love and devotion; but circumstances had always seemed against her.

When Esther had been old enough to leave school, Mrs. Lang, thinking it would be a good thing for her niece, and might enable them hereafter to keep a little home together, had embraced an opportunity which offered itself of apprenticing her to a dressmaker who at that time was living in the same house, and, according to appearances, had a tolerably good business. To do this she had been forced to "live hard," as the expression goes—had stinted herself in every way, and had sat up a great part of the night, week after week, and month after month, working as fast as her fingers could go, at the shirtmaking, which was her only means of earning money.

The shop for which she worked had employed her for years, and she had received a constant supply, sufficient to keep her always occupied. But it was miserable pay—only enough, with all her industry, to provide them with the bare necessities of life, without which they must have perished, and making no compensation for the perpetual weary aching of back, and head, and eyes, which such close unremitting application entailed.

At length, when Esther's term of apprenticeship was beginning to draw to a close, and she was indulging hopes of being able in time to earn something, and thus be no longer a burden to her aunt, Miss Cooper's affairs suddenly appeared to be in inextricable confusion, she hastily threw up her business, quitted the place, and Esther was cast upon her own resources.

Nothing had offered, save this situation at Mr. Webb's—a linendraper's shop, in one of the busiest and most crowded of the

narrow streets of the old city. Esther had engaged herself, as they were honest respectable people, and, in time, there was the promise of a salary, though for the present her hopes of helping her aunt were disappointed.

She had hard work at her new post—had to be there early in the morning and late at night, with scarcely a minute's breathing-space through the day, and the additional fatigue of her long walk to and fro. And she was naturally delicate, and ill fitted to stand such a life. But she had a brave spirit, and tried to make light of all disagreeables, and be, as she had ever been, the joy and comfort of her aunt's declining years. But Mrs. Lang knew, and her niece knew, that with the former's sight would go her power of maintaining herself; and Esther not having yet attained to the summit of her wishes—namely, to be able to support them both—what could be done?

No wonder that the utterance of that short sentence—"I am getting blind!"—had struck with a chill sense of sorrow upon the young heart, confirming the fears which she had been struggling to put from her; whilst even to the other the sound of her own words seemed to place the fact beyond all doubt and question.

Esther took the rejected shirts—for there was no longer cause for concealment; she need no longer pretend not to see that the sight of the other was failing; and, trying to force back the tears which filled her eyes, she bent over her work for some time without speaking.

"It's all quite right, Esther," said the quiet voice of her aunt, at length—we are sure of that, aren't we?"

No reply, save a sort of stifled sob.

"And if we should have to part for a time, and I seek a shelter somewhere else, it would still all be right and kind—we should be certain of that, shouldn't we?"

"Oh, Aunt Jessie! it seems so hard!"

"That's because we can't see aright, Esther. But whatever we do, don't let us doubt the loving-kindness of our Father. I have been faithless, I know; I've sat wondering and thinking what would become of us, and prayed the Lord to spare me my sight until you were able to be earning something; because I know your loving heart, Esther, and that you'd be glad to give me a share of anything you had."

"Oh, how glad!" ejaculated Esther.

"But He hasn't granted me that," pursued the other, "and so I know He has something better for me instead. If that had been the best thing, He would have given it."

Esther glanced up with a sort of veneration at the sweet face before her, marvelling at its patience and calmness; and as she looked, she inwardly acknowledged that she had still much to learn before she could yield up her will in such submission.

CHAPTER III.

Esther had been struggling with a severe cold ever since that tempestuous night when she had come in so wet, and had been so anxious to hide from her aunt's eyes the state of her boots, knowing that there was nothing forthcoming towards the purchase of a new pair, and that it would only vex and grieve her to find how much they were needed. At length she was obliged to yield to illness, and was confined to bed with a sharp attack on the lungs. Mrs. Lang was her only nurse; and night and day she watched beside her, doing the best she could, and sometimes making her sense of feeling take the place of seeing.

Mr. and Mrs. Webb were kind, and sent what help they could. But it was a hard struggle to pull through that time; and many a little possession which she had kept

and clinging to all these years was Mrs. Lang forced to part with to meet the daily needs. Her overtaxed strength, and sleepless watchful nights, moreover, told upon the feeble remnant of sight that was yet left; and by the time Esther began to recover her aunt saw clearly what was the only course left to her. But to gratify her niece, who wished it so earnestly, she would once more pay a visit to the oculist, and hear his opinion.

It was a bright spring day, warm and pleasant, and the doctor's house being at no great distance, and the way so familiar, she decided to go alone, though Esther tried to persuade her to find some companion to guide her. But she said she could see sufficiently in the bright sunlight not to mistake her way; and so she departed, leaving Esther sitting up, for the first time, that afternoon.

The oculist's verdict was—"No hope, no cure; it must end in total blindness." And the patient heart bowed to receive it meekly. With a simple "Thank you, sir," she turned to grope her way home again.

She had to pass over the bridge across the river; and feeling tired—for this was the first time she had been out of doors, save to the little general shop, since Esther's illness began—she stood a while leaning against the stone parapet, and looking down upon the flowing waters, which she could only dimly make out. But she knew well what their appearance was; she had so often stood there looking down when her sight was still good.

Though it was a bustling part of the city, and busy life seemed ever streaming and thronging across that bridge, she soon grew too much engrossed in her meditations to notice what went on around her. Even in that crowded part a fresh breeze fanned her cheeks, brought by the river, as it seemed to her fancy, from the sweet fields and meadows and open country through which its course lay before it flowed past the great city on its way to the sea.

One peaceful spot upon its banks she knew well; and as she stood looking down with almost sightless eyes, a vivid picture rose up before her mental vision. It was a picture of a substantial farm-house, long and low, with drooping creepers and sunny lawn in front, and meadows stretching down to the river's bank, whilst fruitful orchards lay on either side, and well-built hay-ricks and corn-stacks nestled behind—all combining to give an air of plenty and comfort. She saw a group of children playing about—girls mostly, with only one boy amongst them, and he the youngest of the party. They romped and were merry; but the games were always chosen by him, and it was his kings, not theirs, which always seemed to be consulted. And watching them at their sports, looking on calmly and smilingly, were the figures of a white-haired couple, who glanced continually with fond pride towards the bright comely lad.

But after a time those aged figures disappeared from view, and the laughing group of merry children was exchanged for one of sober women, whose faces often wore a look of care, which they seemed to share together, and which deepened as the days passed by, being always deepest when the brother's name was mentioned.

Then the scene changed again: that band of sisters was broken up and dispersed, having sacrificed their all—and each had had a moderate portion left her by the father—to save the brother from exposure and disgrace. They had gone to seek their fortunes, impoverished by the one on whom they had lavished their affection, whom they had made their idol, and the old home knew them no more. It had passed into other hands, after having been in their