

She would not go to bed, but sat up, as if reading, hour after hour in silence, wonder, and grief, as to the meaning of this most extraordinary behaviour, to which she could not perceive even the remotest clue of explanation.

And during those same hours she heard his heavy step pacing to and fro.

Should she go to him?

She did not like to do so, because, with all her love for and devotion to him, he had never resigned the right to command, or she, even in heart, forgotten the duty to obey. He evidently did not wish to talk more with her just then.

"Oh," thought she, "it must be some secret trouble affecting his business, or property, or perhaps even his life."

His life! Then it must be through Lord Langton!

Ha, yes! she saw it now. He was in danger, perhaps, both of the scaffold and the loss of all his wealth, and he was perhaps thinking how she would, in poverty and bitterness of soul, reflect on him for his imprudent behaviour, which had led to her sacrifice.

Oh, did he but know how much she honoured him for that behaviour—how willingly she would have shared the same danger in the same cause!

Yes, she must go and tell him that.

She found his bedroom door locked. He answered her kindly, but would not open to her.

Then she went, and gave up in her bed to all the sickness and sorrowfulness of soul this incident naturally brought on her.

What was the mercer doing all this while?

Let us look in upon him. He sits at a little writing-table, where he always keeps materials ready for business memoranda, which he is fond of making while dressing at leisure. Before him is a little wagon-headed trunk of some foreign wood, deep crimson in colour, and highly scented.

He has drawn from this a letter, and he is reading it for the fifth or sixth time this night.

This is the letter:—

HONOURED SIR,—This comes, hoping you are well, from John Forbes, who, maybe, you will remember is a servant to an old acquaintance of yours, not now to be named.

It's a sad business I'm writing about, but I do hope, honoured sir, you will make the best of things by taking to this helpless child as I send, with my wife's best care to keep it safe and warm.

This child, honoured sir, is the daughter of one which I do believe you would go down on your knees any day to serve—as God knows I would—and as I'm now sorry to show you—I mean about myself. You must know who I mean.

This child was just going off to that receptacle for all the wickedest women's brats alive—not that I say none of them are good, and unfortunate, and to be pitied; but what's one out of a dozen? Not enough, in the words of Scripture, to leaven the whole lump. I'm talking about the Foundling.

What do I want to do to save that child? Why, by the help of my wife—God in heaven bless her for giving way to me!—we have sent our own child instead to the hospital, and now send this one to you.

God forgive you if you refuse or desert the babe of your benefactor, now you are called on by sufferers like me to "Go and do likewise!"

I won't tell you a lie. I don't now that my wife would have been able to do such a thing but for our own danger at this time, which is great, and which, maybe, might have caused our child to be left an orphan to the parish in our flight.

That helps us to make up our mind, I being mixed up in the same bad business; and so, to enable us to get more safely through, as well as to save both the dear children, we have done what I tell to you.

From, honoured sir, yours to command,  
JOHN FORBES.

He put the letter by after this perusal, locked the chest, and began to undress.

It was useless going to bed; he knew he should not sleep.

He went to look out at the window. The air, as he opened it, blew freshly, crisply, almost frost-like. The stars were out in wondrous splendour, and seemed in their softness to be gazing on him, and his sudden and great trouble, in tender sympathy.

He wanted not to be looked at—he wanted solitude, there to get the strength to do the right thing, over which his spirit groaned in unendurable anguish. He shut down the window, went to the bedside, knelt, and prayed, abandoning himself before he had done to an intensity of grief that would have unsettled poor Christina's reason only to have heard it, and been told it was all about herself.

#### CHAPTER L.—LIFE'S SEE-SAW.

Up and down—how strangely goes that connecting plank of fact, which often bears two men at its extremities, linked together in one destiny, but under the operation of the law that when the one rises the other must fall!

So was it to be now with the mercer and another of the characters of our history.

The morning succeeding this night of anguish at Blackheath, the mercer received the following note:—

DEAR SIR RICHARD,—I have found my sister, but am bound to tell you, while desiring you and your daughter to receive her with me for one night only, that she is at present utterly unworthy—how unworthy I hardly know how to describe to you, without inflicting so much pain on us both that, at all events, I forbear till I see you to go into the details; but as my sister, she must not be abandoned without an effort. When you see her, you will perhaps think me almost brutal for speaking thus of one to whom God has given such a frame. Ah, my friend, I would willingly exchange all her beauty for a few gleams only of honesty, and sweet, pure, womanly instinct. It is a frightful blow to me, but must be borne. She has given me absolute proofs. We shall be with you in the evening.

DANIEL STERNE.

It would be difficult to describe the astonishment—the relief—the extravagant outpouring of joy with which the mercer first read these lines.

He did not stop to weigh them or doubt them—they were too delicious for such mental operations. No; he accepted them in heartfelt, boundless gratitude, forgetting even the grief and shame of Daniel Sterne, while he revelled in the reprieve to himself.

But then, slowly he began to recall the fact that another child had been sent to the Foundling instead of Christina, and that most probably it was this child, who was now a woman, whom Lord Langton had found. And then all his doubts and anxieties came back.

Christina had at breakfast the full benefit of these changes. She was delighted, then alarmed; but the mercer, after a while, caught on her face a strangely thoughtful and perplexed look, as if she were asking herself what these moods, following the last night's trouble, had been about.

He evidently was determined not to let her dwell on such themes.

"They would go off to Bath," he said, gaily, "and drink the waters. Yes, they wanted change—wanted relief. They would go and enjoy a fashionable life for a few weeks, and laugh at the absurdities of Beau Nash."

In the absence of his mind, the mercer actually forgot to show Daniel Sterne's letter, till Christina, who knew he had received one, and guessed his change of feeling must be due to that letter, asked him about it.

Then, with a sort of shame and sorrow at his own selfish forgetfulness, he produced it; and as Christina read it, the mercer became conscious through her of the extreme gravity of the communication. His face grew serious, his manner composed and sympathetic, and then they talked together for some time on this sad incident for the earl, and wondered what plan he had in view for his sister that they might promote.

But the mercer was conscious during this talk of Christina's eye being often directed to him

with an inquiring, wistful, almost pained expression of face, which at times seemed even to pass into a feeling of awe and dread.

"What is she speculating about now?" asked the mercer of himself in terror. "How senseless it was of me to forget myself so much last night! When will she forget it, I wonder? She must forget it! Ay, God knows I must make her forget it somehow!"

The evening has come, and with it Lord Langton and Mistress Maria Clementina.

She has pleaded hard for liberty to put on her fashionable clothes, but the earl has sternly forbidden her to change the black in which she had met him at the Foundling. Accordingly, nothing can be more lady-like, attractive, or lovely than this youthful, blooming creature, whom the earl introduces with the words—

"My sister!"

Christina came to her, took her by the hand, spoke sweet and kind words; and Mistress Preston, after a long and earnest look at her, as if for Paul Arkdale's sake, shed some tears, as if in acknowledgment of the kindness.

The earl then said aloud—

"My friends, I have brought this lady here first, that you, Sir Richard may, as my friend, go yourself into her story, and satisfy yourself, for me, that I have drawn the right conclusion from it.

"Her name—the name by which she is at present known—is Maria Clementina Preston. She was left as a babe at the hospital in the way described by Humphrey Arkdale. The man's name who left her is still preserved in the archives of the institution, and it is the same as the one mentioned by Arkdale."

"What name was that?" demanded the mercer, whose brow had again clouded, and whose demeanour was that of a man in extreme embarrassment.

"John Forbes!"

"The story is not true! it cannot be true! You are imposed on!" exclaimed the angry mercer, whose agitation was even greater than his anger.

"Sir Richard!" remonstrated the earl.

"Christina, come with me for a few moments. Mr. Sterne, will you and this lady spare us a few moments, and I shall return, and endeavour to throw fresh light on this mystery?"

Full of amazement, Christina was led away into another room up-stairs, quite out of reach of the hearing of those below.

The mercer locked the door the moment they were inside, then cried out, in tones of piercing grief—

"Oh, Teena, darling, the blow has fallen that I thought an hour ago was averted! Do you not guess what it is I have to tell you?"

"No, no, dear papa! But let it be what it will, God, who sees into my heart, knows it can and shall make no change in me."

"Not if you find I have no natural right over you—that no blood of mine flows in your veins—that other and nobler relatives wait to claim you the instant they know the truth?"

"Oh, papa, darling papa, you do not surely mean that I—I am——"

"I do mean it, Teena. You are the sister of Lord Langton, and not this woman, who is, I fancy, a kind of beautiful devil—I know, at least, she has bewitched Paul Arkdale.

"But come, the bolt is sped, and cannot by any art of man be returned to the cross-bow. What I have said will prove to be true; and when we come back to this room, Teena, you and I will be, perhaps, divided in destiny for evermore!"

"No, papa; there, at least, you are wrong. Were he twenty brothers in one, he would certainly not make me change my filial devotion to you. Oh, never! never!"

"Come, then, let us go back to them."

They went back, and found the earl and his supposed sister sitting very far apart, having scarcely spoken a single word to each other during this extraordinary absence of Sir Richard and his daughter.

The knight's first act was to go to Lord Langton, put John Forbes' letter into his hand, and ask him to read it aloud.