

'Yes, I knew him,' said Hope, deliberately; 'and he knows me well. I can take entire charge of him. Do not let me keep you.'

'Well, indeed, I have had to neglect the house since morning, when Mr. Furniss brought the poor young man in,' said Mrs. Proctor. 'I ought to be downstairs. There's the handbell, Mrs. Westall; you've only got to ring it if he comes to, and I'll come and help you. There's nothing to be done for him, the doctor says. A fine young man, too!'

Oh, how thankful Hope was when the busy widow left the room! She flung herself down by the bedside the moment the door closed:

'Harold,' she whispered passionately to the stony face; 'Harold, my husband, I am here—Hope—your wife, Oh, do speak to me, just once—just once!'

But there was a dreadful silence, only broken by the irregular breathing of the injured man.

There was no trace of wound or blow on the white face; the brown hair lay unstained on the pillow. No bones were broken Mrs. Proctor told the new nurse—yet the doctor had pronounced the case hopeless, and had gone away, because he could do absolutely nothing.

'Call me if he wakes and seems to suffer,' he left word. 'But he will not suffer; he is paralysed from the waist downwards.'

The nurse had listened without a movement to her repetition of all this, convincing Mrs. Proctor that she was 'just the right sort of person for a sick-room; so self-possessed!'

If she had only now heard the agonised appeal to the dying man! But she had not heard it, she was busy in her kitchen with the cares of the household. Supper for Mr. Furniss, that engrossed her mind first. The dying man was a stranger to her, Mr. Furniss was a well-known and much-respected neighbour.

Hope still knelt, though she no longer tried to arouse the unconscious form before her. Her eyes travelled higher, and she did what so many have done before her—'called to the Lord in her distress.'

'O God, forgive me!' she cried. 'I meant to punish, and Thou hast laid Thine hand upon me. I would fain have judged, and Thou hast judged me. Forgive me, forgive me. And oh, in Thy Mercy, forgive him the sins of his life—of his youth, O Lord! Be not keen to mark what he has done amiss, for I love him.'

Yes, the passionate avowal came from the very depths of Hope's heart. Love is a flower hard to kill. And she did love her husband still. Wounded, wronged, deserted, she felt able yet to take him back to her heart, in his weakness and suffering.

The doctor came at midnight, and was thankful, too, to find 'a regular nurse in possession of the case.' How fortunate that Mrs. Westall happened to be staying at Mr. Furniss's! He gave a few directions. 'You know recovery from such an accident is impossible,' he said calmly, 'but the patient may linger a few days, though I do not think it likely. I will look in in the morning. You are sure you can manage the night without help?'

Yes, Hope was quite sure.

'It is everything, the patient having known you before,' said the doctor as he left the room.

Oh, those night watches by the sick, how face-to-face they bring one with all that is most real in life!

Hope sat with eyes fixed upon her husband's face. Would he die so, with that stony immovable countenance? She prayed: God it might not be so. And the prayer was heard.

Just as daylight stole into the room Harold opened his eyes and fixed them on her. Gradually meaning stole into the gaze, and at last a faint flush dyed his cheek. 'What is it?' said the sick man. 'Where am I? Hope, Hope, tell me quick!'

He was agitated; this must not be. His wife knelt by him and took his hand. 'You have had a fall,' she explained; 'your horse threw you; you were hurt.'

'Hurt! I am dying,' said Harold firmly. Then he grasped Hope's hand in an agony. 'Hope, pray for me,' he cried. 'I have so much to repent of, and so little time.'