

A flush rose to Agnes' cheek. "Do not blame my father," she said. "He could do nothing but what was right. He gave up all he possessed in the world, rather than defraud any one of sixpence; and we ought to be thankful that he never ventured, as many do, too far."

"What do you mean, Agnes?"

"That he was upright enough never to owe more than he could pay. He was unfortunate; but, at least, his ruin entailed none upon others."

"I don't see that it makes much difference to us. We could not be more than penniless, had he owed a hundred thousand pounds."

Agnes saw that she was not understood, and was silent.

"I had some letters this morning," said Mrs. Vining, taking one up. "It's wonderful how cold-hearted people are! There is not one person who answers my letters with more than common civility, sometimes hardly even that."

"It is the way of the world I believe," said Agnes, with a sigh. "We cannot expect much civility now."

"There is not one who even asks me to go and stay for a time, though, of course, all my friends know I am left without a home. I don't think I could go anywhere with such coarse common mourning as I have, but at least they might ask me."

Agnes could scarcely restrain a smile at these weak and frivolous complaints, though she knew her stepmother far too well to be surprised. Louisa Morris had been governess-pupil at the school where Agnes had been placed, at fourteen, to be "finished," as the phrase is. Her wonderful beauty attracted the admiration of the wealthy merchant, Mr. Vining, on one of his visits to his daughter; and after a few weeks he made her an offer of his hand, which she was only too ready to accept. She had no prospect in life but that of a governess. She had no parents, and the expense of her education had been defrayed, and she had been supplied with a small sum for pocket-money, by a cousin of her fathers, her only relative. This had ceased when she was eighteen; from that time she was to be dependent on her own exertions for her

bread; and she esteemed herself very happy when at nineteen she married Mr. Vining, and became the mistress of a large fortune and a splendid establishment. She had never, while considering herself the darling of fortune, contemplated the possibility that, by a sudden caprice of the same fickle goddess, she might again be reduced to the same dependent position from which she had been raised. People wondered a little at Mr. Vining's choice. He, a grave man of middle age, with a son grown up, and a daughter nearly so; but in the latter fact he found his excuse. He must have a mistress for his house, and a chaperon for Agnes when she came home, and where could he have found one better fitted for both offices? And those who knew Mrs. Vining, admitted the plea.

The first result of the marriage was a desperate quarrel between Mrs. Vining and his son, a youth of Louisa's own age. He never liked her, and the bickerings that soon began ended at last in serious disagreements. Mr. Vining interfered and made matters worse, for he took his wife's side, and Philip thought himself unjustly treated. Words ran high, and at last father and son parted in anger—Philip declaring that as his father preferred a stranger to his own children, he would no longer remain beneath his roof. He had been brought up in idleness, and was unfit for any profession. He possessed one thousand pounds of his own, a legacy from an uncle of his mother's, the only relative he had ever known; and the greater part of another thousand, a gift from his father on his last birthday; and with this sum, and refusing the assistance which Mr. Vining would have rendered him, he left home and went to Canada.

Time softened the feelings of both father and son, and at last letters came to be interchanged between them, expressed with mutual good will. Philip succeeded; he was steady and industrious beyond his years, husbanded his slender means, and took pride in supporting himself without help, as he had said he would do. Mr. Vining grew proud of his son, and determined in a few years to bring him back to England, and make him still the heir to