

It was with a very haggard anxious face that he came into the pretty drawing-room in Harley Street, where Violet sprang up from her low chair by the fire, to meet him. How pretty she was! how sweet! how elegant and graceful every movement and look, every detail of her dress! His eyes took in every beauty lovingly, as one who looks his last on something dearer than life, and then lost all his consciousness of any other beauty, in the surpassing beauty of the love for him in her eyes. She stretched out both her soft hands to him, with the ring he had given her, the only ornament on them, and said, "Tell me about it."

"I have come for that," he said, and he would not trust himself to take those hands in his, or look any longer into her face, but he went to the fire and looked into the glowing coals. "I have come to tell you about my mother. I have deceived you shamefully."

Do not you know some voices that have a caress in every word and comfort in every tone? Violet Meredith's was such a voice.

And then he told her of his mother, describing her as plainly and carefully as he could, trying to set aside everything fanciful or picturesque, and yet do justice to the kind, simple old heart, trying to make Violet see the great difference between the old countrywoman and herself. And then he told her of her having come to him, to end her days under her son's roof. "I could not ask you to live with her," he ended sadly.

She clasped her hands round his arm shyly, for it was only a few days since she had had to bid away her love, like a stolen treasure, out of sight.

"It is too late to think of that," she said with a little coaxing laugh. "too late, for you asked me to be your wife a week ago. Yes, John," the name came still with a little hesitation, "a whole week ago, and I will not let you off. And then, I have no mother of my own; she died before I can remember, and it will be so nice to have one, for she will like me for your sake, won't she? And what does it matter what she is like, you silly, old John? she is your mother, and that is quite enough for me. And don't you think I love you more ridiculously than ever because you are so good and noble and true to your old mother, and are not ashamed of her because she is not just exactly like other people?" And she laid her soft cheek against his sleeve, by her clasped hands, as she spoke.

But he drew away with almost a shudder. "Love me less, then, Violet; hate me, for I am ashamed of her; I was base and cowardly and untrue, and I wanted to get her out of the way so that no one should know, not even you; and I hurt and wounded her—her who would have done anything for her 'Laddie,' as she calls me—and she went away disappointed and sad and sorry, and I cannot find her."

He had sunk down into Violet's low chair, and covered up his face with his hands, and though the fingers forced their way hot burning tears, while he told of his ineffectual efforts to find her, and his shame and regret.

She stood listening, too pitiful and sorry for words, longing to comfort him; and at last she knelt down and pulled his hands gently away from his face, and whispered very softly, as if he might not like to hear her use his mother's name for him, "We will find her, never fear; your mother and mine, Laddie." And so she comforted him.

What an awful place London is! I do not mean awful in the sense in which the word is used by fashionable young ladies, or schoolboys by whom it is applied indiscriminately to a "lark" or a "bore," into which two classes most events in life may, according to them, be divided, and considered equally descriptive of sudden death or a new bonnet. I use it in its real meaning, full of awe, inspiring fear and reverence, as Jacob said, "How dreadful is this place," this great London, with its millions of souls, with its strange contrasts of richness and poverty, business and pleasure, learning and ignorance, and the sin everywhere. Awful indeed! and the thought would be overwhelming in its awfulness if we could not say also as Jacob did, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not," if we did not know that there is the ladder set up reaching to Heaven, and the angels of God ever ascending and descending, if we did not believe that the Lord stands above it. It seemed a very terrible place to the old countrywoman as she wandered about its streets and squares, its parks and alleys, that November day, too dazed and stupefied to form any plan for herself, only longing to get out of sight, that she might not shame her boy. She felt no bitterness against him, for was it not natural, when he was a gentleman and she a poor, homely old body?

In the early morning, when the streets were empty, except for policemen or late revellers hurrying home, or market-carts coming in from the country, with frosty moisture on the heaps of cabbages, she got on pretty well. She had a cup of coffee at an early coffee-stall, and no one took any notice of her; some of those that passed were country people too, and at that early hour people are used to see odd, out-of-the-way figures, that would be stared at in the height of noon. But as the day went on, and the streets filled with hurrying people, and the shops opened, and the omnibuses and cabs began to run, and she got into more bustling, noisy thoroughfares, and was hustled and pushed about and looked at, the terrors of the situation came heavily upon her. She tried to encourage her-

self with the thought that before long she should get out of London and reach the country little knowing, poor old soul, how many miles of streets, and houses, and pavements, lay between her and the merest pretence to real country. And then, too, in that maze of streets where one seemed exactly like another, her course was of a most devious character, often describing a circle and bringing her back through the same streets without the old woman knowing that she was retracing her steps; sometime a difficult crossing, with an apparently endless succession of omnibuses and carts, turned her from her way—sometime a quieter-looking street with the trees of a square showing at the end enticed her aside. Once she actually up North Crediton Street unconsciously and unnoticed. She reached one of the parks at last, and sat down very thankfully on a seat, though it was clammy and damp, and the fog was lurking under the gaunt, black trees, and hanging over the thin coarse grass, which was being nibbled by dirty, desolate sheep, who looked to the old woman's eyes like some new kind of London animal, not to be recognised as belonging to the same species as the soft, fleecy white flocks on the hill-sides and meadows of Sunnybrook. She sat here a long time resting, dozing and trying to think. "I don't want to trouble no one, or shame no one. I only want just to get out of the way." She was faint and tired, and she thought perhaps she might be going to die. "It's a bit unkind to die all alone, and I'd liefer die in my bed comfortable like; but there! it don't much matter, it'll soon be all over and an end to it all." But no! that would not do either; and the old woman roused herself and shook off the faintness. "Whatever would folks say if Laddie's mother were found dead like any tramp on the road? He'd die of shame, pretty near, to hear it in everyone's mouth." Poor old soul! she little knew how people can starve, and break their hearts, and die for want of food or love in London, and no one be the wiser or the sadder. It was just then that her pocket had been picked, or rather that her purse was gone; for she did not wonder where or how it went, and, indeed, she did not feel the loss very acutely, though, at home in the old days, she had turned the house upside down and hunted high and low and spared no pains to find a missing halfpenny. It did not contain all her money, for with good, old-fashioned caution, she had had some notes sealed up in her stays; but still it was a serious loss, and one she would have made great moan over in old times. She did not know the sight of her worn old netted purse, with the rusty steel rings, had touched a soft spot in a heart that for years had seemed too dry and hard for any feeling. It had lain in the hand of an expert London pickpocket, it was mere child's play taking it, it did not require any skill. There was a bit of lavender stuck into the rings, and he snelt and looked at it, and then the old woman turned and looked at him with her country eyes; and then all at once, almost in spite of himself, he held out the purse to her. "Don't you see as you've dropped your purse?" he said, in a surly, angry tone, and finished with an oath that made the old woman tremble and turn pale; and he flung away, setting his teeth and calling himself a fool. That man was not all bad, who is? and his poor act of restitution is surely put to his credit in the ledger of his life, and will stand there when the books shall be opened. The old woman got little good from it, however, for the purse was soon taken by a less scrupulous thief.

How cold it was! The old woman drew her damp shawl round her, and longed, oh! how bitterly, for the old fireside, and the settle, worn and polished by generations of shoulders, for the arm-chair with its patchwork cushion—longed, ah! how wearily, for the grave by the churchyard wall, where the master rests free of all his troubles, and where "there's plenty of room for I,"—and longed too, quite as simply and pathetically, for a cup of tea out of the cracked brown teapot. But why should I dwell on the feelings of a foolish, insignificant old woman? There are hundreds and thousands about us, whose lives are more interesting, whose thoughts are more worth recording. "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing?" and yet, "Doth not God take thought for sparrows?" then, surely so may we. Does He indeed despise not the desires of such as he sorrowful? even though the sorrowful one be only an old country woman, and her desire a cup of tea? Then why should we call that common and uninteresting which he pitifully beholds? And we shall find no life that is not full of interest, tender feeling, noble poetry, deep tragedy, just as there is nobody without the elaborate system of nerves and muscles, and veins, with which we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

The early November dusk was coming on before she set out on her pilgrimage again, the darkness coming all the earlier for the fog and London smoke; and then hardly caring which way she went, she turned her face eastward, not knowing that she was making for the very heart of London. The streets were even more crowded and confusing than they had been in the morning, and the gas and the lighted shops, and the noise and her own weariness, combined to increase her bewilderment.

Once as she passed round the corner of a quieter street, some one ran up against her and nearly threw her down; a lady, the old woman would have described her, smartly, even hand-

somely dressed, with a bright spot on her cheeks, and glowing, restless, unhappy eyes, and dry, feverish lips. She spoke a hasty word of apology, and then, all at once, gave a sharp, sudden cry, and put her hands on the old woman's shoulders, and looked eagerly into her face. Then she pushed her away with a painful, little laugh. "I thought you were my mother," she said.

"No, I never had no gals."

"You're in luck then," the girl said; "thank heaven for it."

"Was your mother, maybe, from the country?"

"Yes, she lived in Somersetshire; but I don't even know that she's alive, and I think she must be dead—I hope she is—I hope it."

There was something in the girl's voice that told of more bitter despair than her words, and the old woman put out her hand and laid it on the girl's velvet sleeve.

"My dear," she said, "maybe I could help you."

"Help!" was the answer. "I'm past that. There! good night, don't trouble your kind head about me."

And then the old woman went on again, getting into narrower, darker streets, with fewer shops, and people of a rougher, poorer class. But it would overtax your patience and my powers to describe the old woman's wanderings in the maze of London. Enough to say, that when, an hour or two later, footsore and ready to drop, she stumbled along a little street near Soho Square, a woman, with a baby in her arms, uttered a loud cry of pleased recognition, and darted out to stop her.

"Why, it ain't never you! Whoever would have thought of seeing you so soon! and how-ever did you find me out? This is the house. Why, there!—there! don't cry sure! don't cry now! You're tired out. Come in and have a cup of tea. I've got the kettle boiling all ready, for my Harry'll be in soon."

It was the young woman she travelled with the day before, though it seemed months to look back to; only her face was bright and happy now, in spite of the fog and dirt about her, for had not her Harry a home and a welcome for her, in spite of all her fears and people's evil prophecies, and was not this enough to make sunshine through the rainiest day.

Very improbable, you will say perhaps, that these two waifs, these floating straws, should have drifted together on the great ocean of London life. Yes, very improbable, well-nigh impossible. I agree, if it is mere chance that guides our way; but stranger, more improbable things happen every day; and if we mean anything by Providence, it is no longer difficult to understand, for we can see the Hand leading, guiding, arranging, weaving the tangled confused threads of human life into the grand, clear, noble pattern of Divine purpose.

#### CHAPTER V.

Eighteen months have passed away since my story began, and it is no longer dull, foggy November, but May, beautiful even in London, where the squares and parks are green and fresh, and the lilacs and laburnums in bloom, and the girls sell lilies of the valley and wallflowers in the streets, and trucks with double stocks and narcissus "all a-growing and a-blowing" pass along, leaving a sweet reviving scent behind them. The sky is blue, with great soft masses of cotton-wool cloud, and the air is balmy and pure in spite of smoke and dirt, and sweet Spring is making his power felt, even in the very midst of London. It is blossoming time in the heart as well as in the Kentish apple-orchards, and the heart cannot help feeling gay and singing its happy little song even though its cares, like the poor larks in the Seven Dials' bird-shops rattling their soft breasts and knocking their poor brown heads against their cages in their ecstasy of song.

Dr. Carter had good cause for happiness that day, though, indeed, he was moving among sickness and suffering in a great London hospital. He had some lilies in his coat that Violet fastened there with her own hands, and as she did so he whispered, "Only another week, Violet," for their wedding-day was fixed in the next week,—and was not that a thought that suited well with the lovely May weather, to make him carry a glad heart under the lilies? The wedding had been long delayed from one cause and another, but principally because the search for the old mother had been altogether fruitless, in spite of the confidence of the police.

"We will find her first," Violet would say; "we must find her, Laddie." She adopted the old name naturally. "And then we will talk of the wedding."

But time rolled on, days, weeks, and months, till at last it was more than a year ago that she had gone, and though they never gave up the hope of finding her, or their efforts to do so, still it no longer seemed to stand between them and give a reason for putting off the marriage, but rather to draw them nearer together, and give a reason for marrying at once. But on Dr. Carter's writing-table always stood the pair of pattens, much to the surprise of patients; but he would not have them moved, and in his heart lay the pain and regret, side by side with his love and happiness.

The doctors were making their rounds in the hospital with a crowd of medical students about them. There was a very interesting case in the accident ward, over which much time was spent, and much attention paid. I am not doctor enough to describe what the nature of the case

was, and if I were, I daresay you would not care to hear; but it was a very interesting case to the doctors and nurses, and that means that life and death were fighting over that bed, and science bringing every reinforcement in its power in aid of the poor battered fortress that the grim king was attacking so severely. An easy victory on either one side or the other is very uninteresting to lookers-on, though of the deepest moment to the patient. And so the doctors passed on, with hardly a word, by the two next beds, in one of which life was the conqueror, hanging out his flags of triumph in a tinge of colour on the cheeks, brightness in the eyes, and vigour in the limbs; in the other, death was as plainly to be seen in the still form and white, drawn face.

After the doctors and students had passed by and finished their round, Dr. Carter came back alone to No. 20. He had taken deep interest in the case, and had something to say further about it to the nurse. He was a great favourite with the nurses, from his courteous, gentle manners, so they were not disposed to regard his second visit as a troublesome fidgety intrusion, as they might have done with some. He had not been quite pleased with the way in which a dresser had placed a bandage, and he altered it himself with those strong, tender fingers of his, and was just going off better satisfied, when he found the flowers had dropped from his coat. If they had not been Violet's gift it would not have mattered, but he did not like to lose what she had given, and he looked about for them. They had fallen by some quick movement of his on to the next bed, where death was having an easy victory. The old woman's arms were stretched outside the bed clothes, and one of her hands, hardworked hands, with the veins standing up on the backs like cord, had closed, perhaps involuntarily, on the flowers, the lilies and the dainty green leaf.

"Here they are, sir," said the nurse, "they must have dropped as you turned round." And she tried to draw them from the woman's hand, but it only closed the tighter. "She doesn't know a bit what she's about. Leave go of the flowers, there's a good woman," she said close to her ear; "the gentleman wants them."

But the hand still held them.

"Well, never mind!" Dr. Carter said, with just a shade of vexation; "let her keep them. It does not matter, and you will only break them if you try to get them away."

"She's not been conscious since they brought her in," the nurse said, "it's a street accident; knocked down by omnibus. We don't know her name, or nothing, and no one's been to ask about her."

The doctor still stopped, looking at the lilies in the old hand.

"She is badly hurt," he said.

The nurse explained what the house surgeon had said: "Another day will see an end of it. I thought she would have died this morning when I first came on, she was restless then, and talked a little. I fancy she's Scotch, for I heard her say 'Laddie' several times."

The word seemed to catch the otherwise unconscious ear, for the old woman turned her head on the pillow, and feebly said, "Laddie."

And then, all at once, the doctor gave a cry that startled all the patients in the ward, and made many a one lift her head to see the cause of such a cry.

"Mother!" he cried. "mother, is it you?"

Dr. Carter was kneeling by the bed, looking eagerly, wildly, at the wan white face. Was he mad? The nurse thought he must be, and this a sudden frenzy. And then he called again—

"Mother, mother, speak to me!"

A childless mother near said afterwards she thought such a cry would have called her back from the dead, and it almost seemed to do so in this case, for the closed lids trembled and raised themselves a very little, and the drawn mouth moved into the ghost of a smile, and she said—

"Eh, Laddie, here I be."

And then the nurse came near to reason with the madman.

"There is some mistake," she said; "this is quite a poor old woman."

And then he got up and looked at her, she said afterwards, "like my lord duke, as proud as anything."

"Yes," he said, "and she is my mother. I will make arrangements at once for her removal to my house if she can bear it."

Ah! that was the question, and it wanted little examination or experience to tell that the old woman was past moving. The nurse, bewildered and still incredulous, persuaded him not to attempt it, and instead, her bed was moved into a small ward off the large one, where she could be alone.

Love is stronger than death, many waters cannot drown it. Yes, but it cannot turn back those cold waters of death, when the soul has once entered them, and so Dr. Carter found that with all his love and with all his skill, he could only smooth, and that but a very little, the steep, stony road down into Jordan.

He got a nurse to attend especially upon her, but he would not leave her, and the nurse said it was not much good her being there, for he smoothed her pillows, and raised her head, and damped her lips, and tended her with untiring patience and tenderness. Once when he had his arm under her head, raising it, she opened her eyes wide, and looked at him.

"Ah! Laddie," she said, "I'm a bit tired with my journey. It's a longish way from Sunnybrook."