

should have known then—I should have been prepared for what I had to face. Now I have started wrong, and gone on wrong, and must begin again.'

'She did it for the best,' I said; but I felt the truth of the girl's words. 'She wanted to spare you.'

'And bore a double share herself—poor mother! If I had only known, she might have been alive—no, I could not wish her alive; the womenfolk of such men can know no happiness in this world, but—I could have made her happier. She should not have borne what she had to bear.'

She spoke with all the impetuous intolerance of youth, but there was reason in what she said.

'He is my father, I know; but she should never have sacrificed herself to him. It did no good; it encouraged him. He never knew how she suffered, nor cared. Oh, ma'am!' she cried, tears starting to her eyes, 'I don't know if I am wrong or wicked to say it, but it seems to me so wrong and wicked to encourage such selfishness.'

'Why should a man, because he is selfish and heartless enough, have everything done for him? Why, if he spends his wages in drink, and gives none to his wife for food, or clothes, or rent—why should she strive, and wear her life out in striving, to provide him with food and clothes, and keep a roof over his head? No, the man must never know to what straits they are driven. And what return do ninety-nine women out of a hundred get for their pains? Only abuse and neglect and ill-usage!'

I looked at the girl in amaze. This was so different to the abject spirit displayed by most women of her class.

'We must forgive till seventy times seven,' I murmured softly, for there was so much truth and right in the girl's words I could not argue against her.

'I would forgive,' she said eagerly, 'and would work my fingers to the bones if needs be. But it seems to me that it lowers a man to take it for granted that he cannot be sober and respectable, or support his family; it makes him an object of scorn, and ruins his character altogether to treat him so, and make him think nothing good is expected of him. Why should they not know the want and hunger and care they bring on their womenfolk.'

'If they spend all on drink and their own pleasures, why should they eat when their wives and children go hungry? Why should they have more ease and comfort than those they are supposed to help and care for?'

'We women would think it perfect happiness to go and do our day's work, no matter how hard, if we knew that at the end of the time we should come home to a tidy house and comfortable meals, with no more to do until the next day's regular work begins again, instead of our work, which is never done—'

'Oh, it is no use my talking like this!' she cried, breaking off abruptly; 'only it makes me wild to see the way the men treat their womenfolk, and the way the women endure it. They are ruining the men—and the happiness of all women.'

Truth is often apt to be depressing, and I went away from Mercy Pendray's house perplexed and unhappy. The truth of her words was undeniable; the misery in store for one holding such opinions seemed to me immense.

A week after I was there the food supply and Mercy's little stock of money ran short. When she told her father, he looked at her as though a little surprised at being troubled about such trifles, and roughly bade her get what she wanted at the shop and pay for it when she could.

'I cannot do that, father,' she said. 'We

shall never be better off than we are now. If you will give me part of your wages each week I will be as careful as I can, and do my best with it; but I will not go in debt when there is no need.'

He swore under his breath, and tossed her a shilling. Mercy took it without a word, and her father, glancing at her uneasily, slunk away.

As long as the shilling lasted there was food for him when he came home; and for a day or two he thought he had got over his difficulties, and Mercy would be as little trouble as her mother had been.

He changed his mind, though, when he came home and found no fire and no supper—only the dry remains of a loaf and a little weak tea. It did not strike him that it was harder on Mercy than on himself, and he swore at her again.

Mercy put down her work, and came to him quite calm and dignified, though as white as the tablecloth.

'Father,' she said. 'I am quite ready to stay here and work for you, but I will not be cursed and sworn at! If you don't want me I can go out in service again.'

For a moment he looked as though he would strike her. He was not accustomed to be hungry, or to be defied. But something in her manner deterred him.

After that he gave her five shillings a week regularly when he received his wages. It was little enough—too little to pay the rent, and buy coal and food and clothes; but Mercy did not complain. She meant to do her best, and she did it.

I got her some needlework to do. And with a few hens, and turning her garden to good account, she just managed to keep things going; and for two or three months things went on quietly. Zekiel was morose and ungenial always, but he seemed to respect his daughter; and he certainly did not treat her as he had treated his wife. She, for her part, was cheerful, to all appearances, and industrious. But I could not help noticing the droop of her lips, and the wistfulness in her eyes, both of which were becoming habitual to her.

'When is Dave coming to see you?' I asked. 'You must bring him to see me when he comes.'

'Oh,' she cried, 'I wish I could, ma'am. I am sure you would think well of him. But I can't have him over here, ma'am. How can I?'

'Why not?' I asked, thinking she meant she could not provide a meal or so for him.

'Oh, I can't, ma'am! I hope—I try not to be ashamed of father; and I am not—it isn't that. But Dave—he is very particular—and—and he was always down on them that takes too much and neglects their homes; and I gave him to understand father was so different, and—I couldn't bear to have him despise him. You may call it pride—I don't think it is—only mother was fond of father, and I couldn't bear him to despise what she loved.'

'I understand,' I said, full of wonder and sorrow that any man could slight the love of a daughter such as this.

'That is why I try to make father different. It hurts me to think he might be one of those Dave and I despised so much. So I don't let Dave come; he is always asking to.'

A few weeks later, just as Mercy's hopes of her father were highest, and a visit from Dave might be contemplated, the crash came. There was a row at the Wrecker's Arms one night, and a quarrel—a frightful quarrel—between Job Truman, a fisherman, and Zekiel Pendray, and when it was ended Job Truman's body was carried home to his poor, delicate little wife, and laid on the bed in the one little room the family shared; and

Zekiel Pendray was led away to the lock-up to await the inquest.

I was much with Mercy during those next weeks while the trial went on, and after sentence was passed and Zekiel was taken away to serve his term of penal servitude. Terrible, terrible weeks those were, and my powers of consolation were taxed to the uttermost. I say consolation, but no one could console a heart wrung as Mercy's was then; one could only trust to God's gentle hand, and his great healer, Time.

'I think I was too proud, thinking I was going to succeed where other women had failed,' she said to me one day, 'and God is punishing me. Better I had left it to God to bring about in his own way.'

'No, no!' I cried, 'God works through us, and we must all try to help each other, or we are failing in what God asks of us. God does not punish one cruelly for trying to do what is right, if one tries, praying to him to direct one.'

'One of the laws of existence is that no one can sin and escape all results of their sin; and the cruellest part of all is that the punishment and pain are not confined to the sinner; often it falls more hardly on others—on the innocent. That thought should be one of the greatest checks on us when we contemplate sin. We are preparing woe for others, and the greatest woe for those who love us best.'

'This task was beyond you, and God is taking it on himself. No man can gauge the workings of the Almighty. We can only say to ourselves, "He loves me still, and does it all for the best, if not for me, then for the greatest number. I will trust him, and all will come right at last."'

'At last, at last!' she cried. 'Oh, when will that be?' And then she broke down and wept like a tired child, the first tears I had seen her shed at all.

A few days later she came to me. 'I have written to Dave, and told him all must be at an end between us,' she said; her lips quivered and her face was wrung with pain, but she did not weep.

'And I am going to stay on here,' she went on, after a pause.

I could imagine what the decision cost her, for her one longing had been to go away, far away, where no one would know her or her story.

'I shall be all right,' she went on. 'I am going to have poor Job Truman's widow and children to live with me. She is delicate but I am strong, and between us we will keep the children from the workhouse. You see it is through—my—father that they are left alone to face the world. I shall feel happier if I am doing something—for them.'

'But you have not room; your cottage is too small!'

'Yes,' she said, 'that is what I came to see you about, ma'am. Do you think we could have one of the deserted cottages on Pensal-las Downs? You see, ma'am—seeing my look of astonishment—they are large, the largest we could get anywhere for what we could pay, and we thought we could earn a good bit if we took in washing to do, and out there would be a capital drying-ground.'

I was startled, and rather alarmed at the thought of those two women, with only three small children for company, living in that neglected place. It seemed impossible.

'I would go into service, and send her part of my wages,' Mercy said, in answer to my arguments, 'but it would be so little to divide among so many, and—and she is so delicate and miserable, and can't manage the children very well, and—well, I think I could do more good if I were to stay with her.'

We talked the matter over for some time.