

superior position to that occupied by Nelly, who was only a labourer's daughter, and a nursemaid to boot. Mary served in the bar, and helped in the housework at the inn; but still she was in some sort a person of importance, and had men and maids beneath her. She might even have hired Nelly herself as scullery maid, if she had been so minded. But if she chose to make a friend of the girl, and to walk about with her on Sunday nights, there was no one to say her nay. Although popularly called a barmaid, Mary was particularly quiet and gentle in manner, not at all like the usual "young lady at the bar." And Nelly, being delicate, and pretty, and refined, had a natural affinity for her; and the two had been friends for some time, although Nelly was only seventeen and Mary three-and-twenty.

Of course, Mary heard plenty of gossip concerning Nelly and William Harrison, and perhaps she could have added something thereto if she had wished; but she chose to keep silent on the subject. Men and women of her class are not usually reticent on such points; and Mary must have listened to much that she would rather not have heard, but she never opened her lips, or betrayed by a look or word that the story of Nelly's "misfortune" was painful to her. One day I met her in the village, and rather incautiously asked her if she knew how Nelly Barton was getting on. I shall never forget the frozen look that came over her still, pale face, as she replied:

"I know nothing about Nelly Barton now, ma'am." And then she walked on with her lips so set, her head so high, that really I felt inclined to run after her and apologize for having mentioned Nelly's name to her. But after a little hesitation I went on my way, moralizing to myself on the virtues and vices of village Pharisees, who are quite as afraid of being brought into contact with sinners as they were in Judaea.

Nelly got hard measure in her own home, where the standard of morality was rather higher than in some of the cottages. The elder brother, Nathan, and the unmarried sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, never failed to lecture her on sins when they were at home. Her mother grumbled incessantly. Her father not only talked, but beat her periodically with the leathern strap which he had been in the habit of keeping for his boys. He had never been a consistently sober man; but after Nelly's troubles began he took to going regularly to the public-house, as if he wished to justify her mother's prediction that she "would drive her father to the drink by her wicked ways." Then the baby, which, in spite of ill-feeding and neglect, lived on, as babies that are not wanted always do, was cross and fretful and sickly, giving poor Nelly no rest either by night or day. I met her sometimes in the village, and was shocked to see how ill she looked. Her pretty, fair face was white and drawn, her blue eyes were sunken, her lips purple and dry. She looked as if she were falling rapidly into a decline, and our hearts waxed hot with wrath against the man who had brought the girl to misery and shame. Some people urged her to go out to service again. Mrs. Charteris promised to find her an outfit and a place; but, as a matter of fact, the girl's mother found her too useful at home to let her depart. She scolded, indeed, and grumbled, and said that Nelly and her brat were nothing but an expense to her; but all the world knew differently. For, while Mrs. Barton stood at her cottage door and gossiped, Nelly toiled silently at the wash-tub, cleaned the house, and knitted socks for sale, beside making her own and her baby's clothes. Her industry and her patience softened the hearts of many of her old friends, and they began to accost her in the streets again in a sociable way; but there was one point in which she continued to be in disgrace with the Rectory, and as the Rectory people were influential in the place she was felt to be still under a cloud. This point, of course, concerned the parentage of the child. She still refused to give her lover's name.

This state of things went on till Nelly's little girl was nearly two years old. And then the increasing discomfort and ill-fortune of the Barton household came to a climax. Dr. Elliott was sent for late one night to look at Nelly, who was said to have fallen downstairs. He went to the cottage at once, and found her lying flat on a little truckle-bed in the back kitchen, where she slept. She was insensible, and seemed seriously hurt. Her father was crouching over the remnants of a fire in the front room, dazed and only half sober. Mrs. Barton stood crying, with the child in her arms.

"How did this happen?" said the doctor, after a prolonged examination of his patient.

"She was coming downstairs with a candle to let father in, an' her foot slipped on the steps."

"Was her father sober?"

"Well, sir, he might have had a drop——"

"Can you swear that he didn't strike her?"

"I wasn't there, sir," said the woman, but her frightened face told the doctor that he was very near the truth.

"Take care what you say," he cautioned her, sternly. "I'm not sure that you won't be had up for manslaughter, the pair of you. Your daughter is seriously injured; I don't suppose she will ever rise from that bed again."

Mrs. Barton burst into a noisy wail, and her husband, who had staggered to the door of the room, also began to shed maudlin tears and to vow that he had not meant to hurt his girl. The man's drunken remorse was quite sufficient to condemn him in the eyes of the doctor, who thenceforward espoused the cause of Nelly and her wrongs with quite amusing vehemence. He went out and brought the parish nurse to the girl's bedside, promising to be responsible for the expense; and left Mr. and Mrs. Barton in a wholesomely frightened and conciliatory mood.

Nelly did not die, as at first the doctor really thought she would; but it was found that her spine was seriously hurt, and that there was no hope of her ever being able to walk again. She might live, he said, for many years, and only occasionally would she suffer pain; but her life would be a dreary one, and it behoved her friends and relations to do all that they could to brighten it. I should have liked to have seen the doctor as he laid down the law on this point to the astounded Nathan, Maria and Elizabeth. As to Barton the elder, Dr. Elliott nearly drove him into a fit by the severity of his denunciations.

What would have been a misfortune for any other girl, seemed like a blessing and a deliverance to Nelly. To lie quietly on the bed, without much pain unless she tried to move, to see kindly faces round her, to have flowers and fruit sent her from the Rectory and the Hall,—it was, at first, like a little heaven to her. She was overwhelmed by the kindness and the pity of her friends. Even Nathan was softened, and kissed the pale cheek that he had once struck so heavily. Nelly was too grateful to complain of the fate which had restored her friends to her, even if it had hopelessly crippled her for life.

The difficulty came later on, when her invalidism had become a commonplace thing, and she was felt to be a burden on the household. Her own weariness and weakness were hard to bear. The father fell deeper and deeper into the slough of drunkenness; the mother became a confirmed slattern and grumbler. Lady Airedale, who was then living, came forward with her usual liberality and gave the poor girl a pension of five shillings a week; but this was not sufficient to drive the wolf from the door, for half-a-crown was due every week for rent, and this was usually paid out of poor Nelly's five shillings. In spite of this fact, her mother soon began to upbraid her for her fault, and to tell her that all the misery they were now enduring lay at her door. I think that pretty rose-covered cottage of Thomas Barton's contained about as much real wretchedness as it would hold.

Some one came to Nelly's help. It was Mary Parker, of all people in the world. She walked in one evening, and listened at the foot of the stairs to Mrs. Barton's voice loudly accusing Nelly of every vice under the sun. Mary could hear Nelly's feeble sobs and feebler vindication of herself, and her cheeks grew hot as she heard. She walked straight upstairs, and presented herself at the door of Nelly's room.

"I've come to see Nelly, Mrs. Barton," she said with that quiet air of superiority which Nelly's mother always resented. "I'll sit with her a little while, if you will let me."

Mrs. Barton retired, muttering to herself. Nelly shrank a little and covered his face with her hands. Mary went up to her, and took the hands gently away from the poor worn face, and kissed the quivering lips.

"Oh, Mary," Nelly cried, with a passionate burst of tears, "how can you ever bear to speak to me again?"

Now this speech of Nelly's was uttered from a standpoint differing exceedingly from the listener's. Nelly was speaking in a general sense—from a feeling of self-abasement and self-condemnation. Mary took the speech as a confession of guilt, with especial reference to herself; for she had been in love with William Harrison for the last three years, and she believed that Nelly knew it and had taken her lover away from her. But she accepted the confession as she thought it was meant; kissed the girl again, and bade her say nothing more about it.

"But I may show you my little Polly, mayn't I?" said Nelly, wistfully. You don't mind?—I called her after you. Nobody'll ever know that I did, because Mary's such a com-

mon name about here. But I thought of you—I did."

Mary's eyes filled with tears. She held out her arms to the little toddling child, and took it to her heart at the same time. And from that moment she held aloof no more.

It was a great advantage to Nelly to have Mary's friendship. Mary sent her dainties from the inn, and took the child home sometimes to play with the dogs and cats which wandered familiarly in and out of the bar-parlour; to bask on sunny days in the inn garden, and to become the pet, instead of the outcast, of the village. Little Polly was a remarkably pretty child, but Mary mourned in secret that she resembled her mother only, and had not inherited Will Harrison's fine brown eyes. Nelly got plenty of orders for knitted socks and shawls—Mary took care of that; and the Barton household revived a little and became a trifle more prosperous than heretofore.

It became still more prosperous when Thomas Barton died. The Squire remitted the rent altogether, and Mrs. Barton earned a fair amount by washing and charring. If she had been blessed with a more tranquil disposition, the home would have been happier; but her grumbling tongue was never silent. And although Nelly kept silent about her woes, we, who knew her, often saw that her face was very sad.

And thus the years went by, until the time came when Polly was seven years old.

Mary was sitting one day behind the counter with her needlework—there was so little of the ordinary public-house custom in Mr. Parker's highly respectable inn, that she was often able to sew for an hour or two in the bar without interruption—and Polly was strutting about the clean-flagged entrance hall, with a black kitten clasped to her breast, when a tall bronzed man in a soldier's uniform walked in. Mary rose, in a dutiful, mechanical way, to take his orders.

"Don't you know me, Mary?" said Will Harrison.

She started, and the colour flushed her pale face. The pleasant brown eyes were just the same. The voice was unaltered; but the manner was changed, and the brown resolute face did not look like the Will she had known of old. His regimentals, too, altered his appearance; she noticed that he wore medals on his breast, and some mysterious stripes upon his arm.

"Come, Mary, won't you shake hands? It's a long time since I saw you. I thought I would turn in here and see whether you were in your old place. I didn't expect it, though!"

She gave him her hand across the counter, and then she wished she had refused it. The man pressed it between both his own, and looked into her face with a wistful sort of enquiry.

"You don't seem particularly glad to see me, Mary. I thought that if you were still here you would be glad to hear that I had got on pretty well. I'm a Sergeant, now—Sergeant Harrison doesn't sound bad does it!—and I've had a little money left me. I'm going to leave the army, and settle down in Underwood."

"Are you?" said Mary. Then, resolving to ask one question and get it over, she said sharply, "Are you married?"

He stared at her in evident surprise. "Married!" he exclaimed. "No—not while I belonged to a marching regiment, thank you! No—I always remembered a face I had left behind, Mary, and thought that perhaps, one day—"

There was something in his voice or in his eyes that frightened Mary, although she did not quite know why. She caught hold of the bar counter with both her hands, and called hurriedly to the child.

Polly, come here! Don't run out into the road."

Will Harrison turned round suddenly, and looked at the fair-haired child. At first he must have thought that it was Mary's own little girl, for he turned again and glanced at her left hand, as if to see whether she wore a wedding ring; then he said,

"Whose child is that?"

"A neighbor's child," said Mary; then, with an effort, "Tell the gentleman your name, dear."

"It's Polly Barton," said the little one, looking up into Will's face with her sunny blue eyes.

"I thought she must be a Barton," said Will, eagerly.

"She has eyes like Nelly's——"

"She is Nelly's child," said Mary, curtly

He stood erect, without speaking, and looked at her, while she continued in a dull low voice, as if she were repeating a lesson that had been often conned.

"She was born about six months after you went away. And before the child was two years old, Thomas Barton struck Nelly and pushed her downstairs when he was