

A THORNY PATH.

(By Hesba Stretton, author of "Jessica's First Prayer," Etc.)

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued.)

"I'll go and see what can be done," he said to himself.

It was three hours since Hagar and her baby had been admitted into the accident ward of the hospital. But the baby had been carried at once to the dead room, and Abbott was told that it was very doubtful if the woman would recover. There was no clue to her name or dwelling-place, and he could give no information about her. But when they asked him what must be done with the dead body of the child, and he looked down at the puny, wasted frame and the small white face, the tears that had been smarting under his eyelids filled his eyes as if he had been gazing on his mother's dear features.

"I've a funeral from my house," he said, "and the coffin shall be made a little larger for the little creature. Perhaps the mother would fret over it being buried by the parish, if she comes to herself and asks after it. Send the baby to my house."

So when Abbott's mother was laid in a coffin, her snow-white hair braided softly against her withered face, the little unknown child was placed beside her with its tiny head resting on her arm. The neighbors, who came in to see, said it was like Abbott and his mother, ever ready to give help and shelter to the friendless and homeless. The dead woman was sharing even her coffin and her grave with one who had no claim upon her, except that of being a child of the same heavenly Father.

CHAP. V.—FORSAKEN.

There had been no break in Abbott's mode of life, excepting for the one day of the funeral; he went on travelling down to Birkenhead one day, and coming back the next, but everything seemed changed and saddened to him. There were many faces of travellers recognized from seeing them time after time; he exchanged friendly greetings, and gave kindly service to many whose names he did not know; but there was no longer a home for him. To go back to his rooms his mother had left empty was dreary and joyless. It grew yet more solitary when all his mother's little possessions were given away, in accordance with her own wishes, among several poor acquaintances. For what would be the use, she had asked him cheerfully, of keeping her gowns and shawls and underclothing till they were all rotten and moth-eaten, while there were so many poor folks needing them, with the winter coming on, when they would be more valuable? Yet it gave Abbott a pang to see his mother's

shawl and bonnet worn on a Sunday before his own eyes by a woman who was no more like his mother, he said to himself, than a wayside weed is like a garden flower. He had never thought how sorely he should miss her.

Every other day, when he returned to Paddington, he did not fail to enquire at the hospital close by, after the unknown, miserable woman who was lying there in a long hand-to-hand conflict with death. There had been a concussion of the brain, and she had been unconscious for some days; even when she had somewhat recovered, the physician would not suffer her to be excited by being questioned, or told of her baby's death. There was no clue as yet to her name and history.

"Tell her that Abbott's been asking after her," he said, as soon as they told him she was conscious; "not that she knows me, but it will be a pleasant thing to her to think that anybody cares how she's going on. There's nobody else but me to ask after her, and she isn't quite strange to me since her child was buried in my mother's coffin."

It was several days before Hagar could understand the message, which was uttered very slowly and distinctly to her by the nurse: "Abbott has been asking for you." She lay quite still, answering nothing and gazing with dim eyes into the nurse's face. "Abbott has been asking for you." They were the first words with meaning in them which reached her bewildered brain. By-and-by, as she grew stronger, and her memory returned, she slowly pieced together the fragments of things remembered so as to begin to understand that an accident had happened to her, and that she was in an hospital. But who Abbott was she did not know; yet there was a feeling of comfort conveyed to her every time she received his friendly message. She was a very silent patient, lying motionless and speechless for hours, with her dark eyes almost closed, and scarcely a look of life about her. Her mind was busily at work, however, groping about the darkened chambers of her brain and recalling all her past career, from which she had been suddenly separated by a long interval of unconsciousness.

"I had a little baby," she muttered, half-aloud, and the nurse, who was near to her, happened to overhear her.

"Yes, my poor dear," she said, kindly; "when you were knocked down and injured so by a cab, you had a little baby in your arms."

"Where is she?" asked Hagar.

"It's where it will never know want any more," answered the nurse, laying her hand gently on Hagar's throbbing head; "never be cold any more, or hungry again.

It's with Jesus, who said, 'Suffer little children to come unto Me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' Your baby is in heaven, my dear."

Hagar neither spoke nor wept; her thoughts were too busy for either words or tears. Baby was dead, and in heaven; but where was her old blind father and little Dot? Something kept her back from asking the nurse, who, after lingering beside her for a few seconds, went on to another patient, more clamorous for attention. Hagar's mind had gone back to the moment when she had been knocked down, and felt the horse's hoofs upon her; then it had travelled still further back to the terrible night in Kensington Gardens. Then, suddenly, as if a vivid flash of lightning had shot across the darkness of a midnight sky, she seemed to see her father and Dot standing helplessly and forlornly under the leafless trees, as she had seen them last

"I forsook them," she cried, starting up in bed, and speaking in a loud and bitter tone; "I forsook them, and now I'm forsaken. God has taken away my baby, and I'm left alone!"

When Abbott called the next day, he was told that the unfortunate, unknown woman he enquired after was delirious, and little hope was felt for her life. Was the parish to bury her in the event of her death? He was the only person interested in her fate, and the question was referred to him.

"I've never seen her," he said, poor creature! and it's foolish of me, perhaps; but no! I can't leave her to be buried like a stray dog that nobody owns. I'd have liked to know something about her, though; but she'd have been alive yet, maybe, but for me taking a cab that morning. Leave it to me; I'll see she's buried decently."

But Hagar rallied again, though it seemed harder and more up-hill work to recover a second time. Very slowly and lingeringly she grew better, and most of the beds in the ward changed occupants more than once before she was well enough to receive a visit from Abbott, whose messages, faithfully delivered day by day, had comforted her with the feeling that she still had a friend in the outside world. It was on the first Sunday in the year, and the ward was crowded with the friends of the patients, all quiet and conversing in whispers, when the nurse told Hagar that Abbott was come to see her. She lifted up her eyes, and looked enquiringly at the tall, strong man, whose grave face met her gaze with an expression of friendly concern.

"I'm Abbott," he said—"the man whose cab knocked you down. I'm come to see what I can do for you, what amends I can make. My dear mother lay dying, and I was hurrying to get

to her in time. It was a very foggy morning, and the driver did not see you."

"Did you get in time?" asked Hagar, faintly; "was your mother dead?"

"No, thank God!" he replied; "I was just in time; we said good-bye to one another. You know your little baby also died that same morning?"

Hagar's lips quivered as she nodded her head in silence.

"Yes," he said softly, "that same morning the little blossom died; so I had it buried with her in the same coffin. We could not ask your leave; but you wouldn't have said no to that?"

The tears were stealing down Hagar's cheeks, but there was almost a smile upon her white face.

"Oh, it was good of you," she murmured.

"Now, he said," after a little silence, and he spoke in a more cheerful and quicker tone, "let us know something about you. You've been lying here like a poor, dumb creature that can't give any account of itself. Nobody knows your name, or where you came from; and your friends must think you are dead. There has been no one to ask after you save me. You will be well enough to be discharged in a week or two. Let me find your friends for you, or let me write to them."

"I haven't got a friend in the world," she answered; "I'm quite alone. Even God has forsaken me."

"No, no," he said, earnestly, "that is impossible; nobody is ever forsaken. You must not say that of God. But you had a home once?"

"Yes," she replied, "I had a home once, a happy home, and a husband, and two little children, and an old, blind father, that I'd never left. But they are all lost, all lost and gone."

"No one left?" he said, in a voice of deep compassion, that seemed to open her heart and lips, as she looked up into his pitying face with tearful eyes.

"Not one!" she cried. "I was going to drown myself if I dared. But there's always a judgment after death, and I was afraid of that. God is angry with those that go before He calls them Himself, and I was afraid, though I longed to die. I'm afraid of getting well now, and being turned out into the cold streets. What is to become of me? Where am I to go?"

She was getting excited, and her voice was growing high and shrill. The nurse came to the side of the bed, and shook her head warningly at Abbott.

"There, then!" he said, soothingly, "don't be afraid, think of me as your friend. I'll prepare a place for you when you're well enough to leave the hospital. If my dear mother was living, it