

A THORNY PATH.

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

CHAPTER XII.—(Continued.)

The child had been brought to her without any wish of her own; and she had put herself out of all her customary ways to care for her and the old man. She had nursed him through his illness and death, and tended her neighbor at much cost and sacrifice to herself. And now that she had come home refreshed and rested in body, and with her mind roused with the pleasant thought of restoring Dot to her mother, it was a hard blow to find the child lost.

"God is taking care of her," said Abbott, briefly. His face wore an expression of great disappointment also. He scarcely knew himself how deep an interest he felt in Hagar's troubles; but he had never known a warmer glow of pleasure than he had done a few minutes ago, in the positive assurance that he was about to carry Dot home to her mother, and be able to break to her the news of her father's death, whilst she was upheld by the delight of having the little girl once again in her arms. Still the child could not be lost altogether; there were too many children among the poor for any one to wish to kidnap another except for its good clothes; and Dot's clothing would not be very good. It was a great gain to know where she had been so lately as last evening; and surely it would not now be difficult to trace her. It was something, too, to know that Hagar's father had died peacefully in his bed, tended kindly by a good old woman like Mrs. Clack. Poor Hagar! She would not lie awake again long hours of the night, wondering where his old gray head was sheltering. He had been cared for as long as he lived; and he had escaped the doom he dreaded, that of dying in the work-house.

"God bless you!" he said, "for all you've done for them. I'm going now to strike whilst the iron's hot. The little lass can't be far away. I'll come in again on Monday; to-morrow I run down to Birkenhead, stay there Sunday, and come back on Monday. But I'll send Hagar to you; and there's my address, if you hear aught of the child. Good-by, Mrs. Clack."

The place looked still more forlorn and desolate when Abbott was gone. She could scarcely believe it had ever seemed so solitary in the old times, when she had lived quite alone. Now the poor old blind fiddler was dead, Dot lost, and Don away; oh, how dreary and lonesome it was! What pleasure would the fresh eggs and yellow butter be to her if there was nobody to share them? But surely Don would be coming home soon, very

soon. She had not heard of him for a fortnight, when Peggy had gone to the Fever Hospital to enquire after him; but he was nearly well then; and he must soon be dismissed. At any rate she would go and see after him to-morrow.

Somewhat comforted by this resolution, Mrs. Clack roused herself, and set about restoring her room to its accustomed appearance. She unwrapped and shook out two or three of the smartest gowns to decorate the bed-posts, and put the best bonnets she had in stock upon the top of them, and she clothed the bare walls with the gayest mantles and shawls. Home was looking like home again, and by-and-by her

"Oh, yes! I've gone to the hospital again, out of my own head," she answered; "me and Dot, only he'd gone away from there to another hospital with a very hard name, down by the sea, and they said he'd come back as strong as a horse."

"That's good news," said Mrs. Clack, taking the tea-pot out of Peggy's hand, and going back to her room with a feeling of relief. The damp chips and coal which had been sputtering and smouldering in the grate were beginning to burn up brightly, and by the time her little tea-table was set ready beside the fire, she felt very much cheered and in better spirits.

"Well, God is taking care of

near home, he met with a policeman who was carrying on his arm a little creature that had fallen fast asleep with its head upon his shoulder. Abbott stopped him to look at the sleeping face, and drowsy little head.

"I've never seen the child I'm seeking after," he said, "and I'm fairly puzzled; I can't tell for certain if this is the one. Age three, dark eyes—I cannot see the eyes—light, curly hair and fair skin, red cloak, brown hat and blue frock, button shoes—but this child has lost its shoes—name Hagar, but answers to the name of Dot. Dot!" he called, patting the little cheek, "Dot!" but the child only answered by a sleepy cry, and nestled its head down again on the policeman's shoulder.

"I'm just going off my beat," he said, "and if you'll step with me as far as the station, I'll come round with you to Hawthorne Road, and take the child with me. It's no more than a step out of my way."

It was past midnight when Abbott and the policeman turned into Hawthorn Road, and all the houses were dark and silent, except his own. He was five hours behind his time, and he knew very well that the two women standing on the door-steps, looking out anxiously, could be no other than his cousin and Hagar. Was he really bringing home her child to her? He did not know what she would do if this was not Dot.

The steady tread of their footsteps sounded loudly in the silent street, and reached the ears of the anxious women before they could see who was coming. Hagar was the first to catch sight of Abbott, and of the policeman carrying a little child in his arms; she could see the curly head resting on his shoulder, as he passed under the lamps. Her heart seemed to stand still, and her limbs felt heavy and rigid, as if they would not move at her will. But with a great effort she recovered herself, and darting down the road, she met them before they could reach the house. She snatched the child, her child, from the policeman, and sank down on the pavement, clasping it to her bosom.

"Hagar! Hagar!" exclaimed Abbott. "I'm not sure it's Dot. I never saw your little lost girl. Look at her and see. Only you can tell if it's Dot."

She scarcely dared to lift up the drowsy face, or fix her own eyes upon it. Her arms relaxed their hold, and again her heart seemed to cease its rapid throbbing. Abbott caught the little creature, and held it under her falling eyes, and then Hagar, with a low moan, pushed it away, and fell senseless to the ground.

CHAP. XIII.—DOT AND DON IN THE WORLD.

It was hard work to Abbott to



PEGGY WATSON'S APOLOGY.

nervous depression was over, and she was ready to answer the door when she heard a low, single knock, very like Don's. It was not Don, however, but Peggy Watson, with a cracked tea-pot in her hand.

"Please, Mrs. Clack," she said, in a penitent voice, "I've made you a cup of good tea, and I'm very sorry I was so impudent. Father's come home and flogged me, and I never said a word against it. I'm sure I was good to little Dot—I was, indeed—and I'll go and search all London over for her, till I've not got a sole to my foot."

"Have you heard anything of Don, Peggy?" asked Mrs. Clack.

"Don," she said to herself, "that's quite plain, sending him down to the sea to get strong and well. And me, too, He's sent into the country, and it stands to sense, He'll take care of little Dot; He's not likely to overlook her, when He's so fond of little children. Maybe Mr. Abbott's found her already. Eh! it's a rare thing to be a man."

Abbott had not found Dot, though he was hurrying from one police-station to another, describing her and her clothing, as he had heard them described by Hagar and Mrs. Clack. His description was vague enough, and he could learn nothing about the lost child. At last, as he drew