

'But,' said Aunt Jane, 'do you think you ought to go amongst the poor alone?'

'Oh, they aren't poor in that sense, auntie; they are just single women, old acquaintances of mine—school-fellows, indeed—who have to work for their living. I want to see them again, and find out how they get on, whether they have found their place in life, and are happy.'

Aunt Jane was not wholly satisfied; but Claudia was not in her teens, nor was she a stranger in London. So the scheme was passed, and all the more readily because Claudia explained that she did not mean to make her calls at random.

Her first voyage was to the flat in which Babette Irving and her friend lived. It was in Bloomsbury, and not in a pile of new buildings. In old-fashioned phraseology, Miss Irving and her friend would have been said to have taken 'unfurnished apartments,' into which they had moved their own possessions. It was a dull house in a dull side-street. Babette said that Lord Macaulay in his younger days was a familiar figure in their region, since Zachary Macaulay had lived in a house near by. That was interesting, but did not compensate for the dinginess of the surroundings.

Babette herself looked older.

'Worry, my dear, worry,' was the only explanation of the fact that she offered. It seemed ample.

Her room was not decked out with all the prettiness Claudia, with the remembrance of other days, had looked for. Babette seemed to make the floor her waste-paper basket; and there was a shocking contempt for appearances in the way in which books and papers littered the chairs and tables. Nor did Babette talk with enthusiasm of her work.

'Enjoy it?' she said, in answer to a question, 'I sometimes wish I might never see pen, ink, and paper again. That is when I am over-done. But I am ashamed to say it; for I magnify my office as a working woman, and am thankful to be independent.'

'But I thought literary people had such a pleasure in their gift,' said Claudia.

'Very likely—those eminent persons who tell their interviewers they never write more than five hundred words a day. But I am only a hewer of wood and drawer of water so to speak.'

'But the thought of being useful!'

'Yes, and the thought— But here is Susie.'

Susie was the friend who taught singing. Claudia thought she had never seen a woman look more exhausted; but Claudia knew so little of life.

'You have had a long day, my dear,' said Babette, as Susie threw herself into a chair; 'it is your journey to the poles, isn't it?'

'To the poles?' said Claudia.

'Yes, this is the day she has to be at Hampstead school from 9.30 till 12.30 and at a Balham school from 2.30 till 4. Its rather a drive to do it, since they are as far as the poles asunder.'

'Still,' said Claudia, 'railway travelling must rest you.'

'Not very much,' said Susie, 'when you travel third-class and the trains are crowded.'

'But it must be so nice to feel that you are filling a really useful position in the world.'

'I don't know that I am,' said Susie, rather wearily. 'A good many of my pupils have no ear, and had far better be employed at something else.'

'But your art.'

'I am afraid few of them think much of that, and what I have to do is to see that

the parents are well enough pleased to keep their girls on at singing. I do my best for them; but one gets tired.'

Claudia did not reply. This seemed a sadly mercenary view of work, and a little shocked her. But then Claudia had not to earn her own living.

Claudia's inquiries of Sarah Griffin were scarcely more cheerful. Sarah was at the shop from 8.30 a.m. until seven, and was unable, therefore, to see her friend during the day. Aunt Jane and Aunt Ruth insisted that Sarah should spend the evening at St. John's Wood, and promised that she should get away in good time in the morning.

She came. Again Claudia marvelled at the change in her friend. Already she seemed ten years older than her age; her clothes, if neat, cried aloud of a narrow purse. She had lost a good deal of the brightness which once marked her, and had gathered instead a patient, worn look which had a pathos of its own.

Sarah did not announce her poverty, but under the sympathetic hands of Aunt Jane she in time poured out the history of her daily life.

She was thankful to be in work, even though it was poorly paid. When first in search of occupation she had spent three weary weeks, in going from one house of business to another. In some she was treated courteously, in a few kindly, in many coarsely, in some insultingly. But that was nothing; Sarah knew of girls far more tenderly reared than she had been, whose experiences had been even sadder.

But Claudia hoped that now Sarah was really at work she was comfortable.

Sarah smiled a little wintry smile. Yes; she was comfortable, and very thankful to be at work.

Aunt Jane with many apologies wanted more detail.

Then it appeared that Sarah was living on twelve shillings and sixpence a week. She lived at a home for young women in business; she fed chiefly on bread and butter. Her clothes depended upon occasional gifts from friends.

Claudia began to condemn the world for its hardness.

'But I'm not clever,' said Sarah; 'I can do nothing in particular, and there are so many of us wanting work.'

'Many?' said Claudia, with some surprise. 'I thought most girls brought up as you and I were rarely thought of work, except, of course, at home.'

'Yes, my dear,' said Sarah; 'but when one goes out into the world, one finds things rather different. If you were to advertise a place in an office which any intelligent young woman could fill, you would have hundreds of applications, even if you offered them no more than a shilling a day.'

'And do all these people really need it?'

'Yes; and we all think it hard when girls come and, for the mere pleasure of doing something, take such work at a lower wage than those can take who must live.'

'But look at me,' said Claudia; 'I don't want the money, but I want occupation; I want to feel that I have some definite duties, and some place of my own in the world.'

Sarah looked a little puzzled. Then she said, 'Perhaps Mrs. Warwick could help you.'

'Who is Mrs. Warwick?'

'Mrs. Warwick is the presiding genius of a ladies' club to which some of my friends go. I dare say one of them will be very glad to take us there in the evening, if you can come.'

So they agreed to go. Claudia felt, it must be owned, a little disappointed at what she had heard from her friends, but was

still inclined to believe that between the old life at home and the drudgery for the bare means of existence there still lay many things which she could do. She revolved the subject in the course of a morning walk on the day they were to visit the club, and returned to the shelter of her aunt's home with something of her old confidence restored.

Despite their goodness—Claudia could not question that—how poor, she thought, looked their simple ways! Aunt Jane sat, as aforetime, at one side of the fireplace, Aunt Ruth at the other. Aunt Jane was knitting in the red wool, as she had always knitted since Claudia had known her. Aunt Ruth, with an equal devotion to habit, was working her way through a piece of embroidery. Molossus, the toy terrier, was asleep in Aunt Jane's lap; Scipio reposed luxuriously at Aunt Ruth's feet.

It was a peaceful scene; yet it had its mild excitements. The two aunts began at once to explain.

'We are so glad you are come in,' said Aunt Jane.

'Because old Rooker has been,' said Aunt Ruth.

'And with such good news! He has heard from his boy—'

'His boy, you know, who ran away,' continued Aunt Ruth.

'He is coming home in a month or two, just to see his father, and is then going back again—'

'Back again to America, you know—'

'Where he is doing well—'

'And he sends his father five pounds—'

'And now the old man says he will not need our half-crown a week any longer—'

'So we can give it to old Mrs. Wimple, his neighbor—'

'A great sufferer, you know, and, oh, so patient with it all!'

'Really,' said Claudia, a little confused by this antiphonal kind of a narrative.

'Yes,' continued Aunt Jane, 'and I see a letter has come in for you—from home, I think. So it has been quite an eventful morning.'

Claudia took the letter and went up to her own room, reflecting a little ungratefully upon the contentment which reigned below.

She opened her letter. It was, she saw, from her mother, written, apparently, at two or three sittings, for the last sheet contained a most voluminous postscript. She read the opening page of salutation, and then laid it down to prepare for luncheon. Musing as she went about her room, time slipped away, and the gong was rumbling out its call before she was quite ready to go down. She hurried away, and the letter was left unfinished. It caught her eye again in the afternoon; but again Claudia was hurried, and resolved that it could very well wait until she returned at night.

The club was amusing. Mrs. Warwick, its leading spirit, pleasantly mingled a certain motherly sympathy with an unconventional habit of manner and speech. There was an address or lecture during the evening by a middle-aged woman of great fluency, who rather astounded Claudia by the freest possible assumption, and by the most sweeping criticism of the established order of things as it affected women. The general conversation of the members seemed, however, no less frivolous, though much less restrained, than she had heard in drawing-rooms at home. There was a sensation of freedom in the place, which Claudia felt to be new; but she could not at the time determine whether it did or did not commend itself to her sense of right.