

A THORNY PATH.

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

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

But her dread grew stronger every moment. Coming upon a place in the wall where the boys had pulled out some of the bricks in order to climb up it, she placed her feet in the lowest hole, and laid the baby safely on the green turf above it. It was easy then to make her way into the empty and silent glades of the Gardens.

There was something very wild and mournful about this solitude in the heart of the din and tumult of London. Here were no familiar lamp-lights sending streams of brightness down into the deep shadows which surrounded her. Her weary feet caught against the roots of the trees. Not a footstep beside her own broke the stillness, which seemed more still because of the distant roll of wheels and the busy sounds of city life, which came, as it were, from afar to her ears. She felt as if she was in some other world, darker, colder, sadder than any she had ever left.

But the sky, and whatever than it could ever be, she could not hurry on her search, for her limbs felt stiff, and the baby lay like a dead weight on her bosom. But yet she crawled along, shivering and heavy-hearted, to the spot where she had left her father and her little girl.

There was nothing to be seen when she reached the narrow by-path. But through the trees the water in the Round Pond, where children float their little boats by day, gleamed with a pale and ghostly light. In the dead hush of the place she could hear the tiny waves lapping against the stonework which inclosed them. Was it impossible that the blind old man and the little child she had forsaken might have strayed this way and fallen into the sullen water? She recollected hearing of an aged workman having lost his way in a fog, whose corpse had been found there. She paced round and round the great pond, feeling half-asleep and half-dead, yet compelled to pore, now and then, over some speck floating on the surface, too far off to be distinguished clearly. Was that Dot's white little face showing just above the water, where the pale light seemed to lie? Or could it be her father's gray head? Or was it merely the reflection of some break in the clouds, which she could not see where she was standing?

Then, with a moan, she turned away to seek those she had lost among the trees; and fancying she could catch some sign of them, as she searched behind one big black, thick trunk after another. It did not seem long since she had played at hide-and-seek with Dot round the same trees—

only that was in the summer sunshine, and whilst her husband looked on at the game. Was this search only a terrible dream? Once or twice she came upon a heap of leaves gathered about the roots of a tree, which looked almost like the figure of a prostrate man stretched upon the damp ground. If she could find her father and Dot lying dead somewhere, all she felt was a dull desire to lie down beside them, and die too.

But her search was in vain. Sometimes she sat down to rest on the seats, and seemed to sleep a little while; but as soon as she aroused herself, she set out once more on her wandering round the glimmering yet black pool, and in and out among the dark, moaning trees. Now and then she called, though her voice, un-

she was going, or what she was to do. Like one blind and deaf she staggered on into the road, still as dark as midnight; when suddenly she heard the rattle of wheels close upon her, mingled with the trampling of a horse's hoofs, and the angry shout of its driver. But it was too late; she was already under the horse's feet, and knew and felt nothing beyond that.

CHAP. IV. A DAY OF SADNESS.

At five o'clock in the morning there were not many people about, yet a little knot of working men and women quickly gathered about the cab. The driver had been driving fast, counting upon the road being clear at such an hour, and he found it impossible to pull his horse up in time. A man, dressed

"God forbid!" exclaimed the railway-guard, whose face wore an expression of anxiety. "Look here; take her sharp to the hospital, and lose no time about it. My name's Abbott; everybody knows me at Paddington. I'm just in with the night train, and my poor mother's on her death-bed. She was dying last night, when I started from Birkenhead, and I was hurrying home to see her once again, if she's alive yet. But here, lift the poor creature into the cab; I'll go home afoot. I'll come and see after her by-and-by."

He placed Hagar in charge of a woman who had been passing by on her way to work, and staying for a moment to watch the cab start off in the direction of the hospital, he started hurriedly onward to the home where his mother had been dying all the night, or was now lying dead. It had seemed a very hard and sorrowful thing to think of during the long hours of the journey, as the train he had charge of was rushing through the darkness, although to him it had seemed moving almost at a snail's pace. That had been his mode of life for several years; running down to Birkenhead one day, and coming back the next; spending only every other night, and every other Sunday at home. It was a life that suited him, for he was active, and loved variety. He had found no fault with it until now, when his old mother, dearer to him than any other human being, was lying at death's door, and might have crossed the threshold with no last, loving smile for him on her face, and no last good-by from her dear lips.

Abbott turned into a quiet and pleasant street, dark this November morning, but in summer days, when he came home at the same early hour, peaceful and shady, with trees planted before many of the houses, and flowers blooming on the window-sills. He and his mother had chosen to live here, in the area-floor of a large house, rather than in a higher story of a dwelling in closer and busier streets. The upper portion of the house was occupied by a distant relative of theirs, who was a dressmaker. A few steps led down to their own separate door in the area, where some red leaves still fluttered on the Virginia creeper, which had made their front window green and shady in the late summer time. The front room was a large and pleasant kitchen; whilst the back room, where his mother slept, looked out on a little plot of grass, kept green and cool by her constant care of it. His own bed-chamber was up in the attics, to which he had to pass through his cousin's part of the house, where it was as quiet as it could be in London, for his sleep through the morning hours. He had a latch-key to the area door, though it had been



HEAD OF MAORI CHIEF.

known to herself, never rose above a whisper. That strange, wild whisper, "Father, Little Dot!" could not reach any ears. No ear but God's could catch that cry; no eye but His could see her misery.

There was not a sign of day-break when the gates were opened at five o'clock in the morning. The sun would not rise for nearly three hours yet; but Hagar felt herself disturbed by the occasional tread of a workman going past on his day's labor. As in a dream she made her way to one of the gates to the north of the Gardens. She was benumbed and bewildered. The baby had been moaning for the last few hours, and though the low, mournful sound filled her ears, she felt unable to do anything to hush it. She did not know where

in the uniform of a railway guard, sprang in an instant from the cab, and was the first to pull Hagar and her baby from under the frightened and plunging horse.

"It's a woman," he cried, "with a child in her arms!"

A policeman marched up briskly to the spot, and turned the bright side of his lamp upon Hagar's face. The guard had lifted her out of the road on to the curbstone, and kneeling down, was keeping her from sinking to the ground. The light fell upon her worn and haggard features, and the thin, drenched clothing clinging to her form. There was no sign of life about her, though her arms still clasped the baby tightly to her bosom. But the baby's pitiful wail had ceased forever.

"Both dead!" said the policeman.