

## AUNT JESSIE.

## CHAPTER I.

In a small back room in a narrow street of one of our large overcrowded manufacturing cities, a woman sat alone at work one wet February afternoon. In consequence of the already waning light, she had drawn her seat as near as possible to the window, whilst she held her work close to her eyes, which she was straining, to enable her to continue yet a little longer at her task.

But darkness seemed to be coming on apace, the heavy clouds—which had stretched themselves like a curtain over the city that afternoon, and had been persistently discharging themselves in torrents of rain for hours without even now showing any sign of cessation—having helped to shut out daylight almost an hour before the usual time.

After further vain endeavors to thread her needle and set a few more stitches in the shirt she was making, the lonely worker gave up the attempt as hopeless; and suffering the garment to fall from her hands, she pressed them over her eyes, as if the latter ached and smarted. Then she sat a while dreamily gazing out through the little window; though the prospect from it was neither cheerful nor extensive.

It was a sweet face that was turned away from the darkening room, where the corners were already in shadow, towards the few remaining rays of light which yet came struggling through the thickly-falling rain-drops. It was a face which, if not strictly beautiful—as the features were worn and thin, whilst the eyes were hollow, and the hair fast becoming grey and scanty—was strangely attractive and expressive. It seemed almost like an open page, on which the history of a life had been written, and the workings of the mind within had stamped themselves. Care and suffering—either past or present, or both—were printed there; but so were also patience, and quiet strength, and the courage of endurance. She might have pain to bear, but she was evidently content to bear it.

She sat on for some time, seemingly lost in deep thought; for though the clock struck once or twice she heeded it not.

At length, however, she roused herself from her reverie, and rising, groped her way to the chimney-piece. Striking a match, she lighted a small candle, and then, still groping, brought out her little tea-pot, and made some tea. But she only allowed herself one cup, and reserving the rest, put the pot on the hob to keep warm.

The rain came against the window, driven by the wind, which howled and moaned, and swept up the street as though it would carry everything before it.

"Poor child! what a walk she'll have! But I hope she's in sheltering somewhere; for it isn't fit for her to be out to-night."

But even as she said this to herself a light tread might have been heard on the stairs. Then the door opened, and a young girl of about seventeen or eighteen years of age entered the room.

The worn face which had been watching for her broke into a bright smile of welcome. "Come at last, Esther!" she exclaimed, as if the time had seemed long. "But I was half hoping you wouldn't turn out such a night as this. How have you managed to walk through all this rain and wind, my child?"

"Oh, I got on very well, Aunt Jessie. It isn't as bad out of doors, perhaps, as it sounds to you here."

When she came nearer the light, she displayed a smiling face—something like her aunt's might have been in youth—with a blooming colour which battling with the wind had called into her usually pale

cheeks. Her dark brown hair had been blown out of its customary smoothness into some disorder; and as she stood stroking back into their proper places a few stray locks which had straggled into her eyes, she stole, unperceived, a quick observant glance at her aunt's countenance.

"Come near, and let me feel if you are very wet. You must take off your damp things, Esther."

"Yes, aunt, I'll do it at once, and then I can come and sit down by you," replied the girl, retreating, meantime, rather than advancing, as though she did not wish too close an inspection of her state to be made.

Still keeping at a distance, she stooped, and drew from her feet a pair of boots, limp from the rain which had soaked through them, and with signs of holes in them which appeared more unmistakable than ever to-night.

"Let me have your boots, Esther, to put by the fire to dry."

"I can put them down, thank you, aunt dear. There! they'll be all right there," said Esther, placing them as far from the other as possible, as though she wished them to escape observation. Then, kneeling on the floor at her aunt's feet, she laid her arms on her lap, and looking up with her own bright eyes into the faded tired ones of the older woman, she said, coaxingly, "Do put by your work for to-night, auntie. I'm sure you've done enough for to-day: for it has been so wet I don't expect you've been out at all, but have just sat stitching, stitching all the time."

"But what should we do, dear, if I didn't?"

"Ah what, indeed!" and a shadow seemed to dim the young eyes for a moment. "But I'll go on with your work now," and she tried to take the shirt from her aunt.

The latter resisted. "No dear; you must dry yourself first. And, see, I've kept a cup of tea for you; so drink it off, and I hope it will help to keep out the cold."

Whilst the girl was obeying, the neighboring church clock struck ten.

"How late it is, Esther, before you get home now."

"Yes: we are always so busy I can't be spared any sooner. But now, aunt, let me have the work."

"No; it's time for you to go to bed, dear; after your long day at the shop, standing all the time, you must be tired enough, my child."

"Not so tired that I want to go to bed yet, auntie, for I'm getting used to the standing now; it's only at first people feel it, they say."

Esther gained her point; and whilst her busy fingers stitched she chatted cheerfully, relating all the little events of the day, until the careworn expression gradually passed away from the elder woman's face as she gazed lovingly upon the features of the other—gazed with a wistful, fixed look, as if she foresaw a time coming when she would no longer be able to study them, and so was trying before hand to impress them upon her mind's eye. But the other appeared unconscious of the gaze, as she worked on without lifting her head. At length, however, Mrs. Lang insisted that it was time to put up.

Esther made but a short night of it. Long before daylight, in the cold chilliness of the winter's morning, she was up, though moving cautiously and quietly so as not to disturb her aunt; of whose waking, however, she had not much fear, as she knew she was apt to lie sleepless for a good while in the earlier part of the night, and then, towards dawn, worn out, she would drop off into a sounder slumber.

She lighted the candle, and then—as though it were a thing she was accustomed

to do—she took out the shirt at which her aunt had been working on the previous day, and began hastily unpicking the greater part of what had been done before she came in—at the least every stitch that the other had set after dusk or by candle-light. The young face wore a grave sad look the while, but the busy fingers never paused, and just as she had accomplished the task of doing again what she had undone, and had put it by, her aunt awaking and the clock striking simultaneously, told her that it was time to light the fire and prepare the breakfast, and then get ready to set forth to her daily employment.

## CHAPTER II.

A few evenings afterwards, when Esther came home as usual, her quick eyes perceived in a moment that something was amiss with her aunt. It was not only that the patient face looked even paler than its wont, but there was a deeper shade of sadness on it—so deep that even the smile of welcome with which she always greeted the returning one could not entirely chase it away.

"What is it, Aunt Jessie?" said the young girl, coming across and taking up her favourite position on her knees in front of the little fire, and close beside her aunt's chair. "Has anything been vexing you?"

"I'm afraid I've been vexing myself, dear, and fretting a great deal more than I ought, when I've so many blessings left me."

"But what have you to fret about, aunt?—I mean, what new thing?" and Esther looked up with that searching inquiring gaze with which she so often lately had scanned her aunt's face.

"I took the shirts back to-day, Esther, to Mr. Jones."

"Did you?" exclaimed the girl, with a start, as she thought upon the heavy sleep which had prevented her awaking the last two or three mornings, until so late that there was not a minute for work. "I thought they weren't finished," she added.

"Yes; I finished them this afternoon, and went with them directly, because, you know, Mr. Jones was in such a hurry for them. But Esther—"

"What Aunt Jessie?"

"He says he can't give me any more to do."

The last words were spoken in a sad tone, and brought tears into the eyes of the young girl. She tried to blink them away unperceived, looking earnestly into the fire meantime; and then, in as quiet and calm a voice as she could assume, asked, "Why won't he give you any more, auntie?"

"Because"—and the speaker paused, as though reluctant to bring out the words—"because, he says, they are so badly done—some of them, at least—that he could never sell them with such work in them. He said he couldn't afford to pay me for simply spoiling the goods."

"Oh, Aunt Jessie!"

"So I had to come away without any more. Only he picked out two or three, and said I must do them over again, and put better work in them."

"Oh, auntie, how could he!"

"It was quite natural, dear, if they were badly done."

"But you've worked for him so many years; and I'm sure you need to put beautiful work—nobody could have done better."

"Used to, perhaps; but I don't now, I'm afraid. Mr. Jones has found fault several times lately; and at last he says he can't employ me any more."

There was a moment's pause, during which time Esther remained motionless, with her head resting on her aunt's lap, and her face hidden from view.