

opened the door, and entered without knock or warning. A fire burned on the hearth, on each side of which sat a coarse-featured man of middle age, and a sickly-looking boy of fourteen. The wife and mother was busied in preparing the table for the evening meal; a handsome woman, very different from her husband, there was a refinement in her manner and a grace and gentleness in her movements, which was, however, contradicted by the fierce spirit in her eyes. It had not always shone there. Two-and-twenty years ago Rachel Penford, a dress-maker's assistant, had been the counterpart of what her daughter was now; but in an evil hour she had married John Ford the mason, believing that under the rough exterior there beat a heart which would always be warm and kind for her. Like so many of her sex, she found she had made a mistake. A few years of kindness, a large number of indifference and neglect, and then harsh treatment and ill-usage were Rachel Ford's story. A woman of her husband's own stamp would have sunk even below his level; Rachel did not. They had fierce quarrels sometimes, and her naturally high temper acquired force and violence as the years went on; but she never lost her refinement of mind. Perhaps, in her love for her daughter was the main-spring of her character. She saw in Elsie what she had once been, and trembled to think that as she was now, so her daughter might one day be. The woman's whole nature was expended in a passionate attachment to her child, and her heart went out in a great craving to save the innocent young life, by any means, from such a fate as had overtaken her own.

"What makes you so late, Alice?" growled her father as she entered. "Haven't I often told you to come straight home?"

"Are you wet, my child?" was the mother's greeting, as she passed her hand over Elsie's shoulders. "Thou must not take cold."

"The streets were slippery, father, and I was tired and could not walk fast. No, mother dear, I'm not wet," said Elsie answering both parents at once.

"And how is it thou'rt not wet when

thou'st been i' the rain?" asked the mason.

"Where hast been?"

"Nowhere but in the street, father."

"That's a lie," said the man, coarsely. The girl burst into tears.

"Now I tell you what it is, John Ford," interposed his wife, "you let the girl alone. Isn't it enough that you make her work beyond the strength God has given her in that factory, without abusing her when she comes home tired and ill? Hush, my child; never mind him, and don't cry."

"She has strength enough to go gadding about the streets for two hours after work-time, and I'll not have it. If you can't look out for your own character, my wench, I'll do it for you. You'll find me at Barton's gates to-morrow; it's the last day you'll come home alone."

The scarlet flush that spread over Elsie's face and neck could not escape observation. "Do you think the blood comes up that way for nothing?" said Ford to his wife with a sneer. "He's a lucky man that's got a pretty daughter, say I."

"It's fever, that's what it is," returned Rachel, fiercely. "The girl's as ill as she can be. I tell you John Ford, if you must have the money, I'll work for it or beg for it myself, but I'll not have my child slaved to death before my eyes. You may say and do what you like, but Alice shall go to that mill no more."

Such was Elsie's welcome home.

## CHAPTER II.

Beyond the smoke of the factory chimneys, four miles from the town, "caged in old woods," moss and ivy-grown, and stained with the storms of four hundred years, lay Donningdean—the home of the Challoners.

Either by persuasion, or more probably by the powerful inducement of a double fare, Allan had been enabled to reach it five minutes before the ringing of that bell, disregard of which was high treason in old Mr. Challoner's estimation. After a toilet hurried through as he best could, he entered the drawing-room, and found to his great relief that his father had not yet come down.