

THE DEBTOR.



HE rain was beating against the car-windows. There were but a few passengers, and most of them were dozing. Worthington found it impossible to sleep, impossible to do anything but anathematize the chance that had first delayed him and then the train.

With contracted brows he was gazing sulkily into the black night outside, when his attention was drawn again to the nervous movements of the woman opposite. Her eyes shone from her sunken cheeks, her lips continually parted in smiles as she laid her hand uncovered save by the hard, coarse skin, upon the bosom of her dress. She was of middle age, the careworn lines about her face were deep and permanent.

"New Durham!" shouted the conductor thrusting in his head for a moment, and then banging the door again.

The woman started to her feet, and hurried out. Worthington buttoned his coat, seized his grip-sack and umbrella, and stepped off on the small covered platform, placarded as *New Durham Station*. At the farther end was the ticket-office. He called out to the man who was standing in the lighted doorway:

"Has Dr. Miller's carriage been here?"

"Don't know," responded the official without moving.

"What's the time?"

"About two."

Worthington turned away, and muttering to himself, opened his umbrella, drew his hat down firmly and set out into the storm. He made his way through the darkness to the road, which ran westward behind the station to the Village of New Durham. After wading on for a few steps in the mud he came to an abrupt standstill. Directly in front of him, he discerned the outline of the woman's form bent beneath the heavy torrents of rain. The next instant he had overtaken her.

"If you are going to the village, madam, let me offer you the slight protection of my umbrella."

"All right," said the woman peering at him, "but I'm in a hurry."

"I am also. What a wretched Christmas morning!"

"Taint neither; it's the best Christmas morning I've seen for many a year."

And she laughed.

Worthington found it difficult to follow her uneven gait.

"Are you returning home?" he asked.

"No, somethin' better."

"You don't live in this neighborhood, then?"

"I live away off in the city. I was raised here. I ain't been here, though, for some time. Lord! I thought I'd never get back."

He was about to respond in some vague way, when the woman exclaimed:

"I'm wonderin' how he'll look."

She strove to make still greater headway.

"Every Christmas I kept sayin', now I guess I'll be able to go back this day year. I wanted to go back on Christmas day, fur that were the day I left."

"I see."

"I got the money in November, an' then I waited round to see how things would go. But Jimmy sloped after all"

They were struggling painfully forward, unable to see more than a few yards along the road, the zigzag fences on either side were barely defined. The woman spoke in a coarse agitated voice, and coughed frequently. He knew that her hand was still fumbling about the bosom of her miserable garment.

"I think it will clear, presently," Worthington remarked.

"I'm bringin' him back the money, every bit, every cent of the two thousand dollars, and more too, so he can go on with a new trade."

"You are paying a debt, are you?"

"I'll tell you what I'm doin'. When I lived here—I was handsomer in the face then—I was goin' to marry

Jimmy Elwood. He could write beautiful, he wrote too beautiful—I've kind of hated the thought of layin' hands on a pen since. If he'd only have wrote his own name—but he wrote other people's, an' he'd have been in jail, without I'd got the two thousand dollars."

My Lord! how much further is it? I'm willin' to walk the world for this, though. My feet is swimmin' wet."

"It cannot be very much farther."

"You'd like to know how I got the two thousand dollars fur him. I went straight to John, an' told him. He gave me the money, he'd been savin' it fur a long time to start a new trade. He gave it to me as if it was my own."

She drew a deep sigh.

"Jimmy, who I'd always been kind to, who wasn't fit to fasten the other's shoe, he sloped after all. I went away then on Christmas day, without speakin' to anybody. I aint been here since. I've just kept workin' and workin', so as to bring back the two thousand dollars to John. I've worked my hands to the bone, but I've got the money here. I'm wonderin' how he'll look."

Worthington was lost in amazement. Here was a human being apparently devoid of the idea of time. She spoke of what must have been twenty years ago, as if it had been yesterday. He pictured to himself the young girl, full of strength and passion, leaving a little country village, losing herself in the labyrinth of the great metropolis, struggling desperately in order to get food to maintain her life, and money to pay this debt. Years had passed, youth had passed—unnoticed. Now with the money gained, the young girl was returning—She was the old woman at his side.

"Do you live in these parts?"

"No—I did at one time."

"Mebbe you'd know him, John Trench, the blacksmith."

"John Trench!" shouted Worthington, recoiling aghast.

"You've nothin' against him."

"No, woman, no."

They were standing in the middle of the road in the cold rain. He shivered in an agony of hesitation.

"I can't wait here," she said, hastening forward.

He followed hopelessly. Confused images were passing through his mind. Now, he saw the woman toiling through the streets at night to her miserable garret, now, the swing of that strong, patient arm above the anvil. He remembered the grandeur of the man, his life a constant sacrifice, his desires never satisfied, his troubles never told, his spirit never weakened. He beheld the woman stumbling on, all the empty years of her life converging into this blank centre.

"I'm wonderin' how he'll look," she cried, and then halting suddenly, "you've got to tell me what you know about John Trench."

"Friend," he said very gently, "I know nothing about him now, nor can you."

He bent his head as if to receive a blow. She straightened herself and stood erect and silent. Presently her lips began to move, but they gave no utterance.

"He died five years ago," said Worthington almost inaudibly.

Again there was a silence. In the field close by, there were two trees. One, full-grown and tall with all its branches, sighed and swayed beneath the wind and rain; the other charred and burnt to the solitary trunk remained quite motionless. At length she said:

"I'm goin' back."

"I shall go with you."

"I'm goin' alone."

"But, friend, stay, the village is so near, come with me! It is so wet and dreary."

Slowly and sternly the old woman answered: "I don't care about nothin' any more."

And turning, she plodded back into the darkness.