

something human and friendly in his life—he could lighten little Mary's burden, at any rate.

Mary, too, despite her father's growing infirmity, and the fact that every night his pain had to be assuaged with drugs before he could sleep, was happier than she had ever been. She looked forward to her nightly chat with the tall, brown-faced man with eagerness, counting the hours until her father should go to rest and the bright moment arrive. As she got to know Barlas better, and their intimacy ripened with incredible quickness, she found herself talking to him with ease.

"I can say anything to you, Mr. Barlas," she told him one night, "though I don't know why it is."

"It's because we are friends, Mary," he answered gravely, his eyes full upon her.

For his part, Barlas was thinking how much prettier she was growing, expanding under their friendship as a flower expands beneath the sun. And her eyes, her great brown eyes with their long black lashes, they were beautiful, no less!

"Brown eyes are the most beautiful of all," said John Barlas to himself with a sigh.

On Christmas Eve Barlas raided the big glittering shops in Church Street. An invalid reading-stand for Mr. Yates, a pile of books also; a little gold watch upon a slender chain, and a dozen pairs of gloves for Mary, fruit and bon-bons arrived, such as never before had made their appearance at 100, Clough Road. The little house overflowed with Christmas fare.

"Happen you've come into a fortune, Mester Barlas," said old Yates, his hands trembling as they strayed over the richly bound set of Dickens, the first that he had ever owned. "And that watch for Mary—she's a proud lass to-night, I tell you! Eh, but you've got a good heart!"

It did not occur to Barlas to think about the goodness or otherwise of his heart, but he began to realize with a strange sense which was half joy and

half fear, that something unusual—unknown since he had been a lad of nineteen—was troubling that organ.

"What a fool I am," he thought. "I'm five and forty, what girl would ever look at me? There's no fool like an old fool."

Of course he was shrewd enough to know that with his money there were many girls who would look upon him very kindly—if they knew. But Mary did not know, and if she did, Mary could never have a mercenary thought. For John Barlas knew now that Fate, or the Providence that leads the blind steps of men, had indeed brought him home!

Each day he discovered new beauties in the girl as they talked together by the fireside. Her shy playfulness, her quiet sense of humour was only another charm, a decoration upon the steadfast and simple purity of her nature.

Not with a passion of youth but with the sincere conviction of a mature and seasoned mind, John Barlas was in love.

They had been to church together and had heard the grand old Christmas hymns thundered out in the tuneless Lancashire voices. They had made a merry Christmas dinner in Mr. Yates's room—roast duck, Christmas pudding, and a bottle of Australian Burgundy, Barlas had not dared to go as far as champagne. And now the old man was sleeping more tranquilly than usual, and the other two sat alone together. Outside the snow was falling thickly. The great mills were silent, there was not a sound in the street, all the folk were within doors keeping the Feast.

"I've had such a happy day, I don't know when I've been so happy, Mr. Barlas."

She looked up at him, and he saw there were tears in her sweet eyes, and at that, passion flamed up in him like a torch. He rose from his chair and caught her to him, little featherweight as she was.

"Oh, my dear," he said, "my little girl, be always happy, be happy with