

"I strike him!" broke out Mattie, with sudden passionate agitation. "I strike an old man; and *that* old man! Why—he was good to me. He loved me!"

The piteous, indignant appeal that rang in these three last words produced a strange commotion amongst the hearers. Women were seen to weep, and even men looked at each other with a sort of hesitating pity and doubt in their faces. So young, so innocent-looking! Was it possible?

But that passionate outburst had exhausted all the strength of will that Mattie could bring to bear upon the subject. They must do as they would with her. She could make no more protests, and trouble herself with no more hopes and fears. She knew when it was all over; she had a vague idea that some voice in authority told her she left the court with no stain upon her character,—free; and she wondered if the speaker knew what a mockery such words seemed to her. She remembered afterwards that some one had drawn her hand within his arm; had put her into a cab; that peering eyes were at the door to stare at her as she passed; that curious people even stopped in the streets to look in at the cab windows, but she saw those only like faces in a fog; knowing nothing definitely until she stood once more in her own home and saw the widow, not strong yet, but better, trying to rise from the wicker chair to meet her.

Then Mattie sprang forward with a low cry, and knelt down with her head on her mother's lap, breaking into a fit of terrible, tearless sobbing.

"Oh mother, mother, they have let me off; but it's all the same. Some one did it; and who will believe me innocent? There wasn't enough proof, but no one will believe that I didn't do it."

The widow could only stroke the black hair, and sob a little too? There were tears for her, but none for Mattie, yet.

"Hush, hush, my dearie. Dost think *I* don't believe thee? There's One that knows. We must wait His time, and trust."

CHAPTER VI.

THE HOUR BEFORE DAWN.

RICHARD GREY never bore witness to Mattie's guilt. A heavy hand was upon him, and he recovered from his bodily bruises only to ramble on in a childish sort of way, sometimes about the love of his youth; about the dead John Grey who had supplanted him; about "little Mattie," though it was doubtful whether he then meant mother or daughter; and oftener still about his money. The doctor who attended him held it possible that some sudden shock might still restore him to reason, since he was not so very old; not old enough for senile childishness; but the housekeeper scouted such a notion as simply absurd.

And Mattie's life dragged on wearily. She was right when she said that no one would believe in her innocence, in spite of her acquittal. When she passed up the court slatternly women turned their heads away, and young girls, whose giddy ways and bad