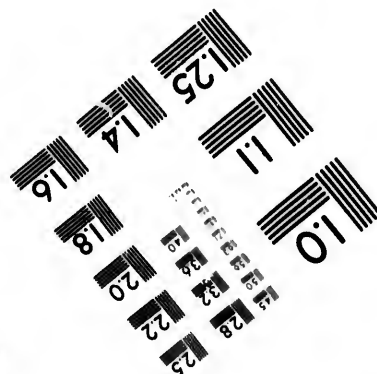
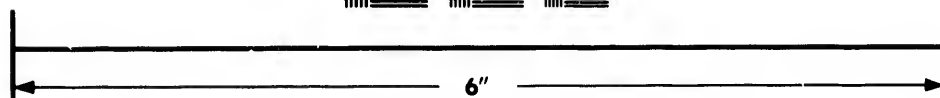
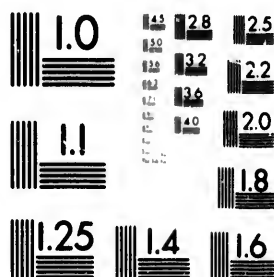


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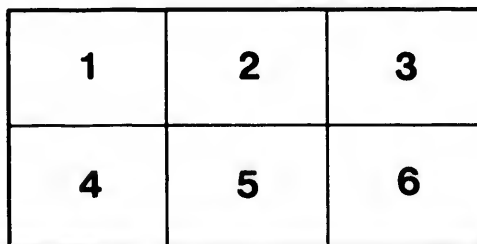
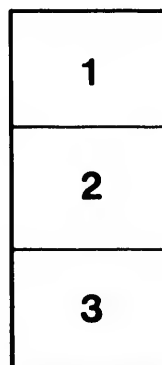
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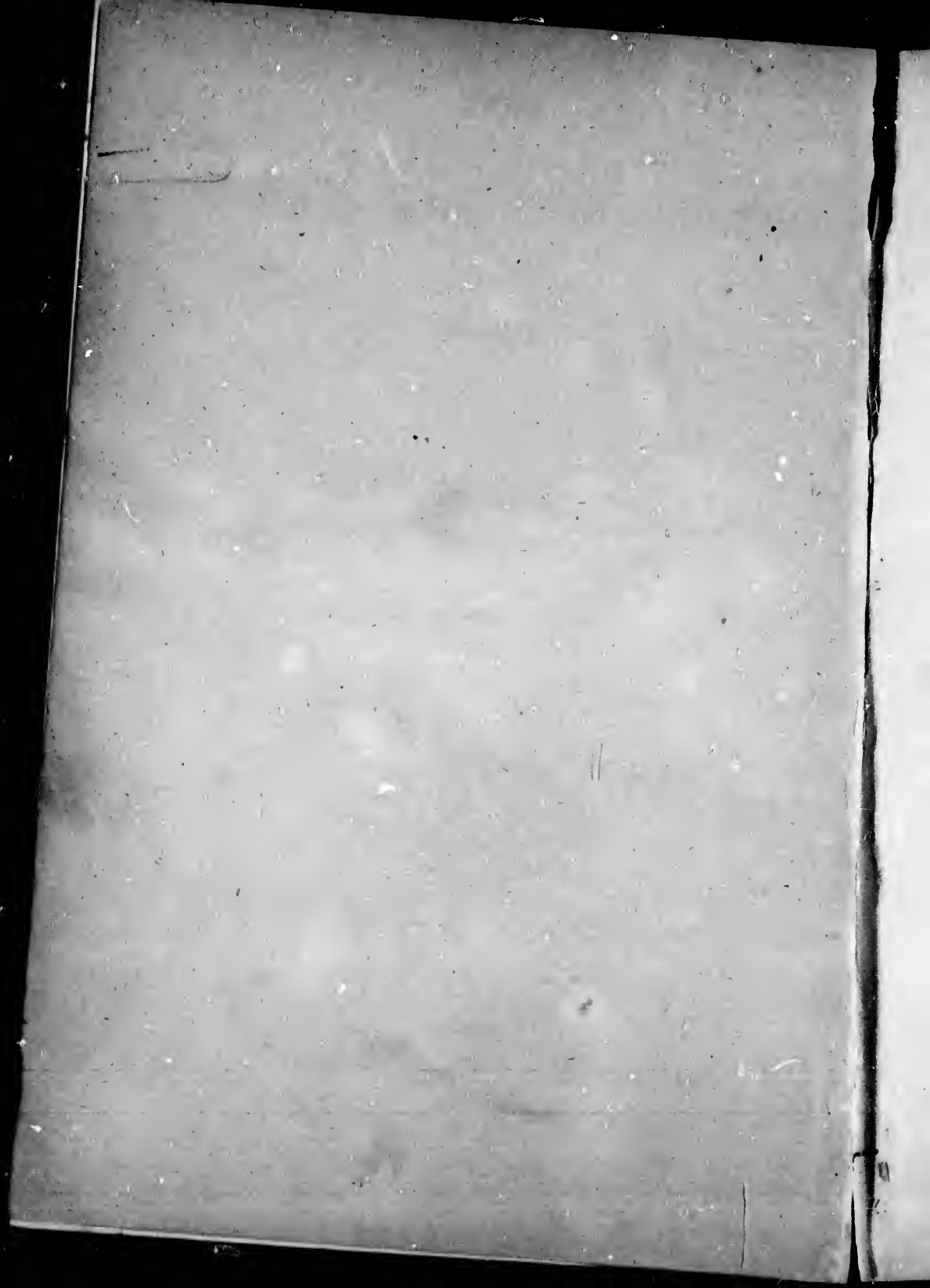
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THE

ROMANCE OF A BACK STREET:

A Hobelette.

BY

F. W. ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF "SECOND COUSIN SARAH," "LITTLE KATE KIRBY," "FOR HER SAKE,"
"NO MAN'S FRIEND," ETC., ETC.



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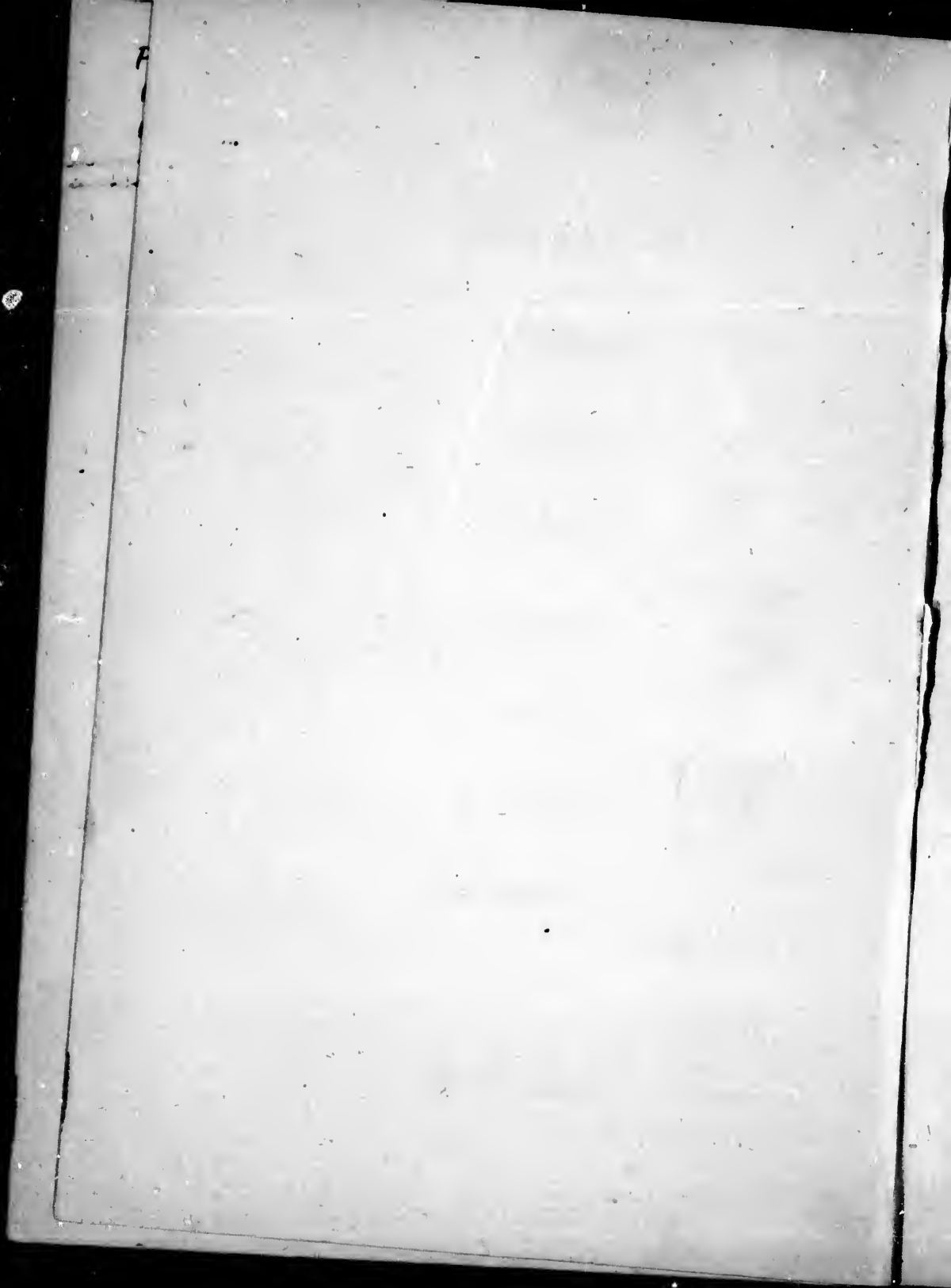
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THE ROMANCE OF A BACK STREET.

CHAPTER I.

JOHN DAX.

THE fancy repository in Gibbon Street, Lambeth, was no ephemeral affair—none of your fly-away businesses, subject to strange accidents, defalcant tenants and missing keys, at those embarrassing quarters of the year when the landlord wants his rent. Meagre and poor to look at, “Morison’s Repository” had evidently been a good one to go, if the board between the first-floor windows could be relied on for veracity, the business having been established in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety-eight. No one doubted the fact in Gibbon Street; the oldest inhabitant had no recollection of any name save Morison over the little square windows of the shop, where business was far from brisk, despite the date of its first start, and the claims of old associations which it asserted over all new comers to the neighbourhood.

There were two Morisons left to manage the shop at the date our story opens—two pale-faced young women, who would have been pretty in another sphere, with a fancy reposi-

tory off their minds, and a struggle to keep afloat in the world less perceptibly manifest. Morison's Repository could *not* be doing well down that shadowy back street, where grim facts were more patent to the locality than fancy goods; there was little in the window to attract the attention of passers-by making their short cuts to Waterloo Road and Kennington, and the regular customers were always few and far between. The stock did not change much from year's end to year's end; there were wooden and leather dolls, that seemed as old and time-stained as the bricks of the edifice; there was a superior wax doll, under a cracked glass shade, which had been once the glory of the firm, but which had let in the flies of late days, and spotted irretrievably the image of youthful beauty still simpering beneath it. In their proper seasons there were a few new half-penny balls, shuttlecocks, marbles, and kites; but they went off slowly, and there was always a heavy percentage of them lying in odd corners of the window, long after the demand for them had subsided. The rent was not paid by the profits on these fancy goods we may assert at once. A written announcement, in Italian hand, framed and glazed, and hung up at the back of the window, told the old story of hard work and small pay: "Dressmaking done here," had been formally announced three months after old Morison had died, leaving a second wife and two daughters to the mercies of Gibbon Street, and then dress-making killed the second wife off-hand, and made of the

daughters two sunken-eyed, hollow-cheeked, sad-looking young women, whom the neighbours respected and pitied, and helped with orders when they were able. Time was when the Morison girls had been considered stuck up ; that was when their father was alive, a clerk in the Customs, with a scanty salary that helped towards paying the rent, and kept him every evening in fours of whisky and water hot, at the "George," over the way. People said, till he died, that he had made a pretty penny by the business; and then his wife and daughters half ruined themselves with the expenses of his funeral, and it began to be whispered abroad that they were "down on their luck," even for the denizens of Gibbon Street. Still they never gave way, never acknowledged that they were poor or hard pressed, even when the mother died, and three years afterwards they were still the Misses Morison, of the Repository, with a smile and a nod—the former forced at times—to those who gave each in her turn good day at the front door, or in the murky recesses of the shop.

They were young women seldom, if ever, seen together—work would not allow it, or the shop stopped the way to the society of each other ; for if there were no pressure of business, there were many questions as to the price of goods, from peniless children of an enquiring turn of mind and with much time upon their hands. One week Mary Morison, the younger sister, worked at dress-making behind the counter, and Ellen, the elder

by two years, and only one-and-twenty, was to be seen, over the wire-blind of the parlour door, stitching quickly and steadily, and thinking of old times, perhaps ; and next week the position would be reversed, and Mary would be indoors, and Ellen waiting for all customers. They went to church twice every Sunday, and were good young women, who did not run after the chaps on Sabbath evenings, as was the fashion amongst the girls of Gibbon Street, take them in the aggregate. It was remarked by curious folk that they did not go to church together, but that each went her own way and to her own particular place of worship, as though their religions differed, or a week's hard work together had rendered them weary of each other's company. And Sundays, or week days, they always looked gravely at the world before them and took life as a serious undertaking, which it was to them. They kept no company, and they never called upon their neighbours, save in the way of "measuring," and "fitting," and taking home their work ; want of time was their excuse, whenever excuse was necessary, to those who would have liked to call them friends.

Mary and Ellen Morison had no friends, unless we except John Dax, who was their "humble and obedient servant to command," and who came every morning at seven, and every evening at ten, to take down and put up the shutters before the windows of the establishment. This was an occupation that had begun when John Dax was a lanky youth of seven-

teen, and before old Morison had gone the way of all flesh, and for five years or more had been continued. John Dax had been first discovered on the door-step of the fancy repository, quietly shivering himself to death, until he had been helped in by father and daughters, and supplied with something warm and filling for the nonce. Then they had learned John's history—that he was out of work and times were bad, and his father was a vocalist, that is, a gentleman whose especial mission it was to howl nautical ballads in the street, and to depend upon the patronage of those who stopped to hear him. It had been hard work that winter with John's father, whose voice gave way about the same period as his legs, which were taken suddenly with paralysis, and spoiled business, and so John Dax from that time forth had done his best to work for his father and himself, not always with success, and not at any time to the satisfaction of his parent, who was an exacting man, a mercenary man and hard to please. When John Dax came home with less than one-and-sixpence, John Dax's father swore profanely ; and when John brought no money home at all—which was occasionally the case—the father would fling his crutches at him, and bid him keep away until he was of service to him, and money could be had in some fashion.

“Gort's truth—ain't there any hankerschers hanging out of back pockets, now?” he screamed forth one day in his rage ; but this might have been in a moment of excitement, and not

intended as a hint to his son and heir, standing by the doorway, and keeping a watchful eye upon the crutch. At all events, John Dax never brought home pocket-handkerchiefs, though he loitered much about the streets when there was no work for casual hands to be found in the factories, and no spare cash to hire a barrow, and heap it up with damaged fruits, and go costering in the New Cut and Lower Marsh.

John Dax was not a strong youth, and hard work and indifferent living had told against him, till the night of his collapse on Mr. Morison's doorstep, as they were telling against him, even more forcibly, five years and some odd months afterwards. He was the shadow of a young man at that time, a patient and uncomplaining being, whom the wise folk down his court, where his father lived, considered "half a fool"—he was so awfully quiet, and took his troubles with such strange philosophy. The life of the boy was the life of the man, with very little difference, luck having been dead against John Dax from the unfortunate day of his birth—factory life, street-barrow life, shoeblack life, life from hand to mouth, which means the mouth wide open and nothing for the hand to put into it.

Patience and perseverance in this weak, old-fashioned young man ought to have accomplished something for John Dax, if there be any truth in aphorisms; but there were certain obstacles in his way, and he was only surmounting them by degrees. Five years ago he had been unable to read and write, and Mary

Morison had told him she was ashamed of him for that, and he had begun in odd moments afterwards, and under terrible difficulties, his father's grave objection being one of them. He had succeeded partly in his efforts—that is, he could write his own name and spell a few facts out of the columns of a newspaper. Mary Morison, unwittingly, was another obstacle to his advancement, for we may say at once that John Dax was over head and ears in love with her, and would have declined any situation under the sun that would have prevented his opening and shutting the repository, and catching a glimpse of Mary's face, and of being warmed to the heart's core by Mary's sad, but pleasant smile. Mary was a princess to this ill-clad, ill-fed young man—a divinity in rusty black—and as far above his dreams, or his ambitions, as the other goddesses. She was a fair obstacle in the way of his advancement, nevertheless, but she never guessed it, and as for imagining that he loved her, she would as soon have dreamed of love from the fly-blown doll, under the glass case in the window. He was no hero to her—only a poor sickly mortal, who put the shutters up for ninepence a week, and went cowering home afterwards in the shadows of the narrow streets beyond, where crime was rife and penury was plentiful.

Still John Dax had his romance, and that is why the history of it, and all that came of it, may be worth telling in these pages.



CHAPTER II.

LEFT IN TRUST.

WHEN it was Ellen Morison's turn to keep watch and ward behind the counter of the little shop in Gibbon Street, John Dax saw but little of the younger sister. Ellen was equally kind in her quiet way, equally gentle and sympathetic in her patronage, but the kindness and the patronage were not Mary's.

One evening in Ellen's week, John Dax became suddenly more absent and confused than ordinary, and Ellen, an observant young woman, even when work was pressing, detected a change in his demeanour before he had put up the third shutter of the shop, and nearly succeeded in driving the corner of it through the upper glass window.

When he came in for shutter No. 4, she said, without looking up from her work—

"Is anything the matter, John?"

"Yes—there is—a little the matter," he said, in a hesitating manner.

"Are you ill?" asked Ellen Morison.

"No, I ain't ill," answered John Dax, "but the old 'un is."

"Your father?"

"Yes; he's going off the hooks, at last."

John was not refined in his discourse—even in his grief the poor fellow was slangy; and there was real grief at the bottom of his heart for the man who had brought him up badly, and been never grateful for a son's attention.

Ellen Morison said a few words of comfort to him, quoted one or two texts applicable to his condition, and stitched on in her usual swift and silent manner. John listened, nodded gravely and went away, returning a moment afterwards, and leaning across the counter to say, in a husky voice—

"Tell her."

"Tell whom?" asked Ellen Morison, surprised.

"Miss Mary; she was asking after the guv'nor last week."

Ellen moved her head slightly, as if in acquiescence.

"*She* is well, I suppose?" asked John, glancing askance at the wire blind.

"She is quite well, thank you," answered the elder sister.

"She was looking very pale last week, I fancied," said John.

Miss Morison did not reply to this, and John, after waiting a minute, as if for his answer, took himself off the premises. The next morning, when he knocked at the door of the repository, he was agreeably surprised to find it was Mary Morison who opened the door to him. He had arrived a

quarter of an hour earlier than usual, and Mary was the first down stairs.

"You are before your time, John," she said, as he began to unscrew the inner bolt of the shutters.

"Yes, I thought I'd come earlier—I couldn't rest."

"What is the matter, then?"

"The guv'nor died in the night. I said he would."

"Your father dead!" exclaimed Mary. "I'm very sorry for you."

"Thank you," answered John; "it's kind to say so. You've been expecting it, mayhap."

"No, I've not."

"Didn't Miss Ellen tell you last night, I thought it would be soon?"

"No."

"Oh! she forgot, I s'pose."

"Very likely," answered Mary, "she is busy just now."

John thought of this reply after he had taken the shutters down, and was disposed to believe that there was a lack of sympathy with his orphanage, until Mary said—

"Is there anything I can do for you in this distress, John?"

"God bless yer, Miss, nothing," he blurted forth.

"I'm afraid you cannot do much for yourself, my poor fellow."

"I must leave it to the parish," said John.

In the evening he came as usual, but this time with a deputy—an overgrown, bullet-headed youth of stolid aspect. John came in with his face very white, and his hands shaking with excitement, and Ellen Morison, at her old post behind the counter, thought he had been drinking.

"I couldn't stop away and leave you in the lurch," he said at once; "but I ain't up to the shutter business—I ain't well—I've been flurried and flustered, and somethink has 'appened and took me off my feet, and off my head, I think. I can't tell you now."

There was an old cane-bottomed chair on his side of the counter, and he dropped into it, spread his thin hands before his face, and began to cry, keeping all the noise to himself, and only gurgling internally now and then.

"I'm better now—don't mind me," he said at last.

"Is your father dead, then?" asked Ellen Morison.

"Yes; didn't Miss Mary tell you all about it?"

Ellen Morison hesitated for an instant, as if there were a difficulty in replying to this question.

"No, she did not," was the decisive answer at last.

"I told her this morning, when I came to open the shop, and she seemed cut up to hear it."

"We have lost a father, too, John," said Miss Morison, sadly.

"I'm glad of that—I mean I'm glad you know what my feelings is about it; not that that's floored me, all of a heap,

like this, but somethink else, which I'll let you know of presently—not now, I'm too flustered—wait."

"I should go home and rest," Miss Morison suggested; still with the idea on her mind, that grief had driven John Dax to the gin-shop.

"I will—thankee—I will. You won't mind his doing the work for a day or two, 'till the funeral's over?" he said, dragging forward his deputy by the fragile lappel of his jacket. "He's to be trusted, or I wouldn't have brought him, 'pon my soul!"

He went away, to return again after his old fashion. It was a habit of John Dax to come back for a last word, or to hazard a final remark; and even in his excitement he seemed bound to re-appear. On this occasion it was with a purpose, at any rate.

"I nearly forgot it," he said, as he stooped and took up a bundle from the floor. "I put it down when I came in first, and there I might have left it altogether—only at the corner of the street I thought of it. What a lark to leave it there!" And to the surprise of the listener, he began laughing so hysterically that it was a mercy when he came to a full stop.

He placed the bundle on the counter—it seemed very heavy, and very tightly tied together—and pushed it towards Ellen Morison.

"Will you ask Miss Mary to take care of this till I come back again?" he said; "will you—will you mind my giving it her myself?"

And then, for the first time in his life, he took the liberty of walking to the parlour door, turning the handle, and entering the room where Mary Morison was supposed to be at work. But Mary was sitting at the table with her work unheeded, on her lap, and her hands spread before her face. John thought she was asleep, till the hands dropped and showed she had been crying, and then John said, quickly—

“Oh, Miss Mary, what is it with you?—what is it?” and forgot his bundle till it fell with a crash on the floor.

“How dare you come into the room?” cried Mary, indignantly; “who told you to enter? What do you want?”

“I—I beg parding—I am very rude—but I’m going to be away a bit, and I want you to mind this till I come back.”

“What is it, John,” asked Mary, softening at his appeal, and at his wistful looks towards her.

“I want you to mind it, not the ’tother one,” he said; “to keep it and what’s in it, if you don’t see me any more—that’s all—good bye.”

“What is it?” asked Mary, curiously.

But John did not answer her. He backed out of the shop and ran away from Gibbon Street, and it was six months before the dressmakers saw him again.



CHAPTER III.

A DOUBLE CONFESSION.

JOHN DAX came back to Gibbon Street in the winter time, when the snow was falling. He had been away six months, and the Morisons might have forgotten him altogether, had there not been a bundle in the bed-room cupboard to remind them of the goods he had left in trust. He came back to find nothing changed in the repository ; the window stock was unaltered, the doll still simpered beneath its cracked glass-shade, the gas burned as dimly and fitfully as ever ; one sister sat at work behind the counter, grave as Fate, and by the fireside in the parlour worked the other at the eternal dressmaking. He had hardly expected to find the place and those who had endeared it to him, in the same condition ; there had been so great a change to him that he could not believe in life flowing on in as silent and monotonous a fashion as he had known it in his day. He had turned into Gibbon Street with an awful heart-sinking ; he had wondered what he should do if the shop were closed, and an announcement that the premises were to let was affixed upon the shutters he had put up and taken down so often ; he had prayed even that all might be

as he had left it, as he stepped from the deep snow-drift into the well-known shop.

It was Ellen's week again, and he knew it. He had even calculated the weeks to make sure of it, for a reason of his own that will presently appear. He entered the premises so changed himself, for all the snow upon his shoulders, that Ellen Morison did not know him, to begin with.

"What can I serve you with, sir?" she asked, after waiting for orders in vain.

"Miss Morison, don't you know me?" he exclaimed, leaning over the counter, and looking hard into her face. She recoiled at his impulsive movement, and put her hands to the bosom of her black dress as if afraid to look at him; then she drew a long deep breath of relief, and came close to her side of the counter, regarding him more critically.

"I don't think I know you," she said, hesitatingly.

"My name is John Dax," he said.

"John Dax," repeated Miss Morison, "not—not the man who used to come here every day—to—"

"To help with the shutters—yes."

"You have altered very much," she said, extending her hand to him, as to an old friend, "and I am glad to see it."

"Thankee," said John.

He had altered very much for the better, Ellen Morison meant, and John took it as a compliment, and was grateful for

her opinion. He had tried hard to better himself from the day of his father's funeral, and he was glad that he had succeeded—that he had not striven in vain. He was still thin and pale, but he had grown a big brown beard, which became him, and rendered him more manly of appearance; he held his head erect, and looked steadily, not furtively, at his opposite neighbour; he was well-dressed, and it was difficult to associate him with the rags and squalor of six months ago.

"Nothing has changed here much," said John, looking round.

"Nothing—much," was the echo.

"Miss Mary," he said, with a great gulp, "is there?"

"Yes!"

"And well?"

"Quite well."

"She sits by the fire just as she used—it's a picter—picture," he said, correcting himself, "I have often seen whilst I have been away."

Miss Morison looked critically at him again, and then resumed her stitching.

"I'll sit here with my back to the parlour, if you don't mind," John said, "because I should like to ask you a few questions before she knows I'm here, because I should like to tell you, her sister, straight out, what's upon my mind."

Miss Morison resumed her stitching after another critical glance in his direction.

"You was both—I should say, you were both very kind to me when I was fighting hard to live : for years I came back'ards and for'ards, always meetin' with kind words, often with kind help when you seemed—don't mind my saying of it now, miss—hardly able, the two of you, to help yourselves. This shop was a kind of heaven to me, and I was very wretched out of it. Then my father died."

"Yes," said Ellen Morison, softly, as he paused.

"Died rich."

The dressmaker left off work in her surprise.

"There was saved up in the mattress of his bed one hundred pounds, in five-pound Bank of England notes, and about as much in soverins—sovereigns, I should say. He had been scraping and slaving all his life for this, and no one a bit the worse save hisself, and it was only by chance I found all about it, after he was dead."

"I congratulate you on your good fortune, John."

"My first idea was, it had all been stolen," John continued, "for the gov'nor kept bad company, and rum people came to talk to him when I was out. On the day you last saw me what do you think I did?"

"I don't know," was the simple answer.

"I took the notes to the Bank of England—making up my

mind to be took—taken up—with 'em, if they knew the numbers, as I thought they would."

"That was an honest act, John," said Ellen, warmly.

"No, it wasn't," answered John, quickly, "for if the numbers had been known, I could have said how I had found the notes, you see, and got clear off. *She*," he added in a whisper, "would have had the gold."

"What gold?"

"The hundred pounds in the bundle I left here—they could not have proved the money belonged to any one in partickler, and she would have been the better for it."

"This was wrong," exclaimed Ellen Morison.

"Yes, I suppose it was; but I didn't know wrong from right very clearly, and I only wanted to help her. Nobody could have proved the gold belonged to her, and I wanted to help her, you see," he said again.

"I see," repeated Ellen.

"The perlice—the police—would have bagged the lot; it would have gone to the Crown, or something, if it had been found along with the notes; and what good would the money have done anybody then?"

"This is shallow reasoning, John," said Ellen; "the newspaper would have betrayed you, too, and told us the whole story."

"You never read the paper."

"We should have heard it from our neighbours."

"I should not have given my own name."

"Well, well," said Ellen Morison, resuming her needlework, "the notes were not stolen, and you have come back for your money."

She arose as if with the intention of fetching it, when John Dax leaped across the counter and seized her by the arm.

"No, no! God forbid!" he cried; "sit down, please, whilst I tell you the rest of my mind. She's not looking up; she's brooding over the fire just as I have seen her a score of times before, and does not know that anybody's here."

"What is there more to say about her?" asked Ellen, sitting down again, thus adjured.

"Something much worse, you'll think, I dare say," he said; "but I can't help it. It's on my mind, I say again; and I want to tell you, to begin with."

"Well?" asked Ellen, as he paused.

"I've kept away six months in order to learn to read and write in earnest, and be less like the wreck of a chap I was," he said frankly, "in order to be fit to be your friend and hers—especially hers. You've been a couple of angels to me, and I want to make a kind of a return with that money for both of you, for I shall never want it."

"Thank you, John, but we are never likely to take it," was the proud reply.

"I want you not to think of that at present," he said, "to let it wait there for me, then, till I come to fetch it. But I want to tell you, outright, now, how I love your sister—how I have been loving her for years and years—right on, by God, without a break!"

It was a strangely excited face now that glared across at Ellen Morison—it was full of pathos and passion, and a terrible anxiety.

"Why do you tell me this?" cried Ellen Morison, in a now harsh voice.

She was excited herself, and scarcely heeded his wild looks.

"Because you can help me—because you can tell me if she is liked by anyone else—if there will ever be a chance of her learning to like me—not now, of course not!—if I may come here as a friend at first, a humble friend, teaching himself to be worthy of her by degrees—if she would mind my coming, not knowing that I liked her yet—not guessing at it for an instant."

"Would you come if there was no chance for you?" asked Ellen.

"No," he said, after a pause, "I fancy not. Then I should be glad to hook it, for good."

"There is not a chance," affirmed Miss Morison, severely; "and you are a poor fool to think there is."

"I didn't think there was," muttered John Dax, hanging down

his head ; " I didn't dream of it hardly—but I thought I'd ask."

" Ask for yourself, and see what she will say," said Ellen.

" No, no ; I can believe you," said John, shrinking at the suggestion. " God bless her, why should I trouble *her* ? But if some day you will say to her——"

" Don't take my word for anything," cried Ellen, as excited as himself ; " don't tell me what to say—don't ask me to speak to her. *She and I have not spoken to each other for three years !*"





CHAPTER IV.

CAST DOWN.

JOHN DAX was completely prostrated by Ellen Morrison's avowal. His strength for a while suddenly deserted him, and he relapsed into the old cane-bottomed chair, wrung his hands together piteously, and glared at her who had bewildered him by a strange and awful statement.

What could it mean? What terrible secret did it portend? —Beneath the everyday exterior of this monotonous business, the placid surface of what had ever seemed to him, two gentle, patient, uneventful lives, what deadly grievance, or cruel ill-feeling had prevailed?

He was in a dream, and stupefied by all its wonderments. What mystery of the past, what irreparable wrong, could have held those two young women in silence for three years, living and working together, and sleeping under the same roof, and yet never exchanging a word with one another?

"For three years," he faltered forth at last, "and you two not speaking all the time!"

"We have grown used to the position—it is not painful to either of us now."

"But——will you tell me——"

"John, I cannot tell you anything more," said Ellen, firmly ;
"I have betrayed too much already. You are never likely to know what has estranged my sister from me, or me from her, and why we hate each other very bitterly."

"No, no—don't say that—it is not possible—you two !" he exclaimed.

"Ask her presently, if you will. Hear what she says—repeat to her what I have told you," said Ellen Morison excitedly again, "and then tell her your own story if you dare."

John felt already that he dared not, that in the past life of Mary Morison lay the barrier to any confession of the wild dream that he had had, and to any hope which he had formed. It would have been wiser if he had not told the elder sister— if his avowal had not, as it were, wrung forth the secret which these two silent women had jealousy guarded from the world: he thought he would have been happier to have lived on in ignorance of so terrible a truth.

He rose and walked towards the door in a dream-like fashion, as though the vision lasted still that had oppressed him. This was not real life yet—the stern reality of all his after-time. At the threshold he turned, for the sweet pale face of Mary was looking towards him from the half-open door leading into the

little parlour—he felt that she had left her work and was nearer him, before he had glanced round. She remembered him, too, and that was marvellous, considering how Ellen had been perplexed at the first sight of him. She came towards him at once with hands extended, and a faint smile of welcome flickering at her lips.

“Surely it is our old friend John Dax,” she cried, “and he has not deserted us for good!”

“Not for good, Miss Mary” stammered the man. “I thought I would come and have a look at the old shop, just for once!” he added.

“For once!” she repeated, wonderingly. “Yes—I am going away presently—not yet,” he said with a great effort.

“Well, it was kind of you to think of us, John.”

“As if I was likely to forget you, and your sister,” he said, [“as if I haven’t been telling her already how I remember the goodness of you both when I was without a friend in the world.”

“We could not help you much,” said Mary, “but I hope we did our best.”

“You saved me,” said John Dax.

“Oh! no—you saved yourself—with heaven’s help,” answered Mary, warmly.

This was unlike a girl who could bear malice in her heart, and live for years in enmity with her sister—surely it was Ellen’s fault that the great difference had arisen, and existed. Mary

was a woman all gentleness and sympathy. Why had he acted so rashly in the first moments of his return and told Mary's enemy the great secret, the great ambition of his life?

Looking at Mary Morison, he felt that he could not lightly surrender his one hope, or believe in all that Ellen had told him. He would wait and watch for awhile—no one understood his real character yet—the shadow of the streets was still upon him.

Mary Morison talked to him as to an old friend, rather than an old servant; she heard the little story he had already related to his sister, with the exception of the money in trust upstairs, and that he was silent concerning, and Ellen stole away and left them together. The elder sister offered him his chance to speak, his opportunity to learn the truth for himself, but he would not avail himself of it. He was afraid to ask any questions bearing on the past, or appertaining to the future—he had not the courage to risk so much again. To tell all that was in his heart, was to shut away this dear face for ever from him; he could come no more after his mad avowal of attachment. He would be more discreet; he would be content with seeing her for awhile, and letting time plead for or against him; under any circumstances it was beyond his strength to say good-bye.

He thanked her for past kindness, as he had thanked her sister Ellen, but he hinted not at the romance which had brought him to Gibbon Street. He expressed a wish to look in at the Gibbon Street shop now and then, and talk of old times, to ask her ad-

vice, and her sister's, as to his future course in life, and she said that she should be glad to see him when he was disposed to visit them. He went away almost happy with that assurance, until all that Ellen Morison had told him rose up like a wall between him and his dream-land. In his own room in the Waterloo Road—he had never been far away from them—he was not sanguine of results, and his spirits sank to zero at the misty prospect lying beyond that day.





CHAPTER V.

A TIME OF TRIAL.

PATIENCE was one of the rare virtues of our commonplace hero. He had borne much in the old days without a murmur ; in the time of his prosperity, and with a new ordeal to face, he was still the same uncomplaining individual. He was a man content to wait after all ; for six months he had had the courage to keep away from Gibbon Street, for six months more he played the part of humble friend, and bided his time, although in the first impulse of his despair he had told Ellen Morison that he could not come there.

True, he had another mission in life at first, and this kept him strong. If he were unrewarded by a sign of affection, still he was Mary's friend, in a way, and there came no one else to Gibbon Street ; and the new task that he had set himself was to help towards a better understanding between the two sisters, and to endeavour by degrees, and by some common object of interest, to draw those two together who had drifted so strangely and awfully apart. It was a giant's task, and beyond his strength, but he did not learn that readily. He had faith in his

powers in this direction, and the more he saw of the sisters Morison, the less he could believe in their unforgiving natures, or deep-seated wrongs. Either sister apart was gentle and affable, with the rare art of saying kind words in a kind fashion ; little acts of neighbourly attention, of friendly service to folk poorer than themselves, told of earnest, thoughtful, charitable women, as forcibly as in the time when John Dax was poor. How was it possible that to each other these two should remain obdurate as fate? Poor John was not a philosopher, or a man of any degree of depth ; his little efforts to make them friends were exceedingly transparent, his futile appeals on trivial matters from one to another, when by some chance they were together, were very plain, and at times awkward, and finally they brought the schemer into trouble.

It was Mary Morison who faced him with reproof on this occasion. The days were drawing out towards the summer then, and John Dax called once or twice a week.

"I have seen for some time, John, that you are acquainted with a secret which my sister and I had hoped to hide from most people," she said to him one evening ; "will you tell me why you interfere?"

"You do not speak ; I cannot understand how so long a quarrel as this can last," he answered readily. "You will not blame me, Miss Mary, for trying in my humble way to end it?"

"Why should you?" she inquired.

"It ain't natural; you and Miss Ellen should be the best of friends."

"It is unnatural, John, but it is not to be prevented. Do not interfere between us, please, or ——"

She paused and looked steadily at the young man, who said—

"Or what, Miss Mary? Don't be hard with me."

"Or it will be my place and hers to ask you not to come near us again—to keep away for good. For the good," she added a moment afterwards, "of the three of us."

John was crestfallen. He could do no more after this. His own position, wherein he fairly hoped at times he had advanced a little, was in jeopardy, and he could not afford to be dismissed unceremoniously, and for ever, from her presence. If he could only save her from the misery of this isolation by taking her to himself—if she would step some day from the eternal silence and gloom of that dreadful house—it had become dreadful to him now, knowing the ill-feeling that was in it—and let him devote his life to making hers more happy than it possibly could be in her home. If she would only pity him—and herself! Loving Mary Morison very truly, if very madly, it became natural on his part to distrust by degrees the elder sister, and to fancy that he read in Ellen's thoughtful gaze at him, a growing dislike towards himself. He had sided indirectly with Mary; he had disregarded the advice of Ellen; he was there as often as excuses could take him to the house; he could not believe in any faults

of the younger sister bringing about the cause of offence or distrust ; in his place, and despite his effort, there was no stand to be taken on the neutral ground. Love held the scales, and turned the balance in Mary's favour.

"How long is this to last?" Ellen asked of him one day.

"Is what to last?" rejoined John, for the want of a better reply at the moment.

"This wasting of your life," was the sharp explanation proffered.

"Until I know the truth concerning her."

"And yourself, you mean?"

"Yes."

"It is very plain to see, but you come here with closed eyes," she said ; "it is as I told you in the winter time, and when you took no warning."

"I will hear all from your sister—let her give me my answer in good time."

"I am not likely to interfere between you ; but you are not sane, John Dax, to dream on in this wilful fashion."

"It is not to be helped now," John said, moodily.

And it was not. He had erected his idol—it had been his task from the days of his vagabondage, when Mary Morison was first kind to him, and when it collapsed it would crush him.

John Dax was not idle during his term of faithful service ; in acquiring money he had learned the value of it, and the necessity of storing it. He was not living wholly on his means ; he

had found employment, if not any great degree of pay, at a book-binder's, where he was slowly and laboriously, being somewhat dull of application, learning the craft. It would come in handy some day, when Mary had learned to like him, he thought at times, in the few sanguine moments which he had, and to which a kinder word or a brighter smile than ordinary, would give birth. She blushed crimson, and turned her head from him at times too—he was sure of that. Six months passed completely, and it was summer time beyond the murky precincts of Gibbon Street, when Mary was missing from her customary post. The place behind the counter was occupied by Ellen Morison, but the gas was turned low in the parlour when the long daylight had gone, and there was no one now at work within. John noticed this on the first visit, and it was so uncommon an occurrence—so out of the common track of the dullness of life at the repository, that he said quietly, even nervously—

“Where's Miss Mary?”

The face of the elder sister took a deeper shade of gloom as she answered, reluctantly—

“She is unwell to-day.”

“Not very unwell?” he asked.

“No ; not very, I hope.”

John was not content with these laconic replies, but was compelled to accept them. He went away in a moody and dissatisfied condition, and the next morning he passed round by Gibbon

Street on his way to business. The house was open, but there was no one in the shop or parlour, and he sat down and waited with shaking hands and quivering lips for some one to appear. His passion had taken a strong hold upon him now, and he was a very child in his excitement. He did not know how weak he was ; he hardly knew how deep had become his reverence for Mary Morison, until there seemed some hidden danger threatening her.

Presently Ellen came down stairs very pale and stern, and stared with surprise at John's early visit.

"I could not go to work until I knew how your sister was," he said humbly and apologetically.

"She is no better," was the answer.

"Has a doctor been sent for?"

"Yes."

"What does he say? what does he think?" asked John.

"He says she is very weak and low."

"Pray have further advice—let me—"

"She is in good hands—she will have the best attention," Ellen replied gravely.

John Dax reappeared in the evening once more—and once more had to wait in the deserted shop wherein the absence of its owner made but little difference to the business. He had something on his mind now which he wished to unburthen to Ellen Morison, and had been brooding upon it all day. It had stood

between him and any honest application to work, and, at all hazards, he must say it.

When Ellen came down stairs at last, she said quietly, as if she had expected to find him waiting there—

“She is no better, John.”

It was the same information as he had received from her in the morning, but it foreboded sadder news to him.

“No better,” he cried, “and you so calm as this!”

“Hush! hush!” she said, as an expression of pain flitted across her face; “it is my duty to be calm.”

“Is she in any danger?”

“God knows!” she replied. “The doctor tells me there is nothing to fear at present.”

“*At present!* Then—”

She laid her hand upon his arm by way of caution.

“You are too loud-voiced, John, and the sick-room is only a few stairs above us. She is sleeping now—don’t wake her for the world.”

“I beg pardon—I am very sorry,” he said, in his new confused way, “but you know—oh! you can guess how her illness troubles me.”

“Yes,” she said, “looking at him sorrowfully, “it is not hard to guess. But do you think I have no trouble, too?”

“Oh! yes, you must have now, for all these long years of injustice towards her.”

"You are foolish and cruel," Ellen returned, half-angrily ;
"how do you know I have been unjust?"

"You told me."

"It is she, poor woman, who—but there, I cannot explain to you. You must not talk of it at a time like this."

"You are kinder in your heart towards her—she is lying ill, dangerously ill—you speak to her now?"

"She does not speak to me," was the reply ; "to hear my voice is to aggravate her fever."

"She shall not lie like this neglected. Who is the doctor?—let me seek him out—let me tell him—"

"Nothing of our lives, or of our enmity, if enmity it be now," she said, interrupting him. "John Dax, you must not interfere. Leave her to me and to God."

She put her hands to her face and murmured some low words, as of prayer, before she took them down again ; and John Dax had it not in his heart to distrust any more then. It was only in the streets, which he paced that night till a late hour, that the old doubts came back with tenfold force, that he thought down all the manifestations of the elder sister's grief, and read from the blurred pages of his heated brain a wild history of neglect and apathy—possibly revenge. He must interfere ; he must warn some one of Ellen Morison and of the old feud between her and her sister ; he must not remain passive, with the woman whom he loved in danger, and that other woman, who surely hated her,

her only nurse. His distrust was weakened again by the calm force of Ellen Morison's demeanour, when, more white and haggard than herself, he faced her the next morning.

Before he could ask the question she had answered him, and for the third time with the old heart-crushing words—

"She is no better !"

"She is dying," John Dax raved, "and you are keeping it from me."

"No, no—there is hope—great hope ; I pray," said Ellen, "don't think that, my poor, weak fellow."

"Why do you leave her to herself—that is to yourself—when kind words, kind looks, are wanted to keep her brave and strong ?" he cried. "Great heaven ! to think I can do nothing—that she is lying there without a friend."

"I am the best friend she has in the world, perhaps," she murmured.

"It is not true—it can't be true," cried John ; "you have quarrelled with her, she never hears your voice."

"It would not benefit her now," said Ellen, wildly.

"You are wrong."

"No, I am right, she does not know who I am, or where she is ; she is delirious."

John wrung his hands in his despair. He would have raved forth again in his grief had not Ellen's hand, as on the first day of tribulation, rested on his arm and checked him.

"I asked you yesterday to leave her to me and to God," she said very sternly. "I demand it to-day as my right. You must not come again to unnerve me ; if you are thus childish, you had better keep away, for her sake."

John was awed by her manner—once again the belief that he had misjudged her stole to his mind—once again when he was away from her all the doubts returned. By these doubts beset he sought out the doctor who attended at the sick house and harassed him with many questions, troubling him with injunctions as to secrecy as regarded his visit, and puzzling that worthy, but small practitioner, very much.

"She is in a critical state," he said, when closely pressed by John Dax's inquiries, "but in no immediate danger. She may rally suddenly from the fever, even, for she is young."

"Is she well nursed—well cared for?"

"She has her own sister, who watches night and day. Ellen Morison is killing herself with over nursing."

"Tell her so, please——"

"I have told her so already, but it is no use."

John Dax groaned.

"Are you in any way related to my patient?" the doctor asked, curiously.

"No, sir."

"Ah! a sweetheart perhaps," he said, with an effort to put a cheerful tone upon the subject of discourse, "if so,

I hope I may give you permission to see her in a day or two."

"No, sir, not a sweetheart," he answered mournfully, "but if I might only see her—only be sure——"

And then he came to a full stop, lest he should do Ellen Morison an irreparable injury by his doubts of her. There was innate heroism in this weak fellow's character—he was distrustful, but he would not injure her by a word whilst there were only his own doubts to fight against.

The next day there was the same soul-depressing news, but on the day that followed there came hope.

"She is a little better."

On the day following that she was conscious, but very weak. It was the weakness now which Mary had to fight against, the doctor had said only a few minutes ago, and from that she might sink if great care were not exercised. John waited for the doctor, who told him the same facts, regarding him very curiously and critically meanwhile.

On the third day of better news Ellen Morison came down and faced him with the old grave aspect.

"Not worse?" he cried, in new alarm.

"No, not worse."

"Better then?"

"I hope so."

"The doctor has been?"

"Yes. He tells me that Mary is very anxious to see you."

"To see me!" exclaimed John; "she has thought of me then—spoken of me?"

"Yes. Will you go up stairs and see her? Can I trust you to be calm, whatever she says?"

"You can."

"Her life may be in your hands, remember, but she will see you now."

"I am so glad of that!"

"Ah! do not be mistaken in this hour, for the truth is very near to you."

"Do you know what she is going to say then?" he asked.

"Yes, I think I do."

John looked inquiringly at her, but she pointed to the narrow stairs on the right of the parlour, and he went up them with a faltering step and a heart that beat wildly with surprise, fear, and even joy.





CHAPTER VI.

CONFESSION.

JOHN DAX went softly into the room where the one romance of his life was sinking fast away. Surely sinking from life, as well as from romance, was the wan and wasted figure lying there, with two great anxious eyes regarding him very wistfully as he entered.

"Oh! poor Mary," murmured the man as he advanced with noiseless step to the bedside, where she seemed to vanish for awhile in the thick mist which rose before him.

There was a silence of some moments, for John was mastering his emotion and growing brave by slow degrees. He had promised Ellen Morison that he would not break down, and was fighting hard to keep his word. It would disturb Mary, too, and that was of more importance than any promise he had made. Presently Mary spoke, and in so faint a whisper that he had to lower his head to catch her words.

"You must not mind me asking you to my room, John," she said, "but it is hard to guess when I may be downstairs again.

I have been anxious about you for some time—very, very anxious to tell you something.”

“I am listening,” said John, “don’t hurry. There is plenty of time.”

He sat down by the bedside and laid his hand for an instant on her arm, which was too weak to stir beneath his gentle pressure. The mist rose up before his eyes again, and his heart beat very fast. Was she going to tell him that she had read his secret—he who had made no sign of his affection, and had been always grave, and silent, and subservient, like the poor waif whom her charity had seemed to love long years ago? Was she going to pity him, and say good-bye? Was she going to tell him that with health and strength returning she might even learn to love him in good time, and that he must take heart and grieve for her no longer? Had the feud ended between the sisters, as at such time as this it should have done, and had Ellen told her of his passion? Was he as near the truth, as she was nigh unto death, in that hour?

“You seem to have been my friend so long, John,” she continued, “to be the only one left to me.”

“You are very kind to say so, Mary. May I call you Mary now?”

“If you will,” she answered; “if you wish it.”

“Yes, I wish it,” he murmured; “and if it is no offence to you,” he added anxiously, “for after all—I—.”

"You are the one friend I have," she repeated ; "when I came back from all those dreadful dreams, I thought of you first as one on whom I could rely."

"God bless you for that."

"I knew you would aid me, and not be too severe with me."

"I am glad to help, of course," replied John, somewhat bewildered.

"I cannot ask Ellen—you know I dare not speak to her," she said in a more excited whisper.

"Not now ! will she not speak even in this hour ?" asked John ; "well—."

"Hush ; not her fault, but mine," said she, interrupting him. "I am weighed down by an awful oath which I dare not, will not break. There is no help for it, unless you help me."

"Is it in *my* power ?"

"I pray it is—I think it is," she answered.

"Ah ! there is no happier task you can set me Mary," he cried.

"You were always warm-hearted, John—kind, unselfish, faithful," murmured Mary ; "The little good I ever brought to your life will be repaid a hundred-fold to-day."

"What can I do ?"

"You must put your hand on mine again, and promise to forgive the poor, weak girl lying here before you. That is the beginning, John, of—of all that is to come !"

She was very feverish and nervous again. In the excitement she struggled hard to raise her voice, and he hastened to assure her and to calm her.

"I promise to do everything, Mary, but you know, you must know I have nothing to forgive," he cried; "great Heaven what have you ever been to me, but the one blessing of my life."

"A man different from yourself might learn to curse me, John."

"No—no."

"For I have been very weak and guilty, and it is my crime that has helped to lay me low," she replied. "I—I discovered, long ago, that there was money in that parcel which you left in trust to me—and I have spent it all!—given it all away to bring back hope to me. Pity me, forgive me. I could not live on in my misery any longer."





CHAPTER VII.

THE CRUEL TRUTH.

MARY MORISON'S avowal was a revelation unlooked for by John Dax, but he bore it with equanimity. He was startled, even thunderstruck for an instant by the confession of the sick girl, but not a muscle of his countenance betrayed him.

"Is that all?" he said cheerfully; "why it *was* yours!—it was always intended for you, Mary."

For him and her if they should ever marry—for her if he should die—for her at any time even if distress were near and money wanted, and surely it had been wanted at a time of need, for her hand to touch it without consulting him. He could not blame her; could not express even surprise lest she should think he was sorry, and if it could make her happy, or set her mind at rest to say that it was freely hers, why let him say it readily. He did not grudge her the possession of it.

"For me—that money," she said wonderingly.

"Yes, for you. What did I want with it, when you were struggling on here?"

"You did not say so."

"I thought you understood it?"

"If I had it might have saved me many weeks of mental torture, John," she said; "and—why should I have had the money?"

"You were kind to me in the old days."

"Ah, so was Ellen."

"But not with your kindness. There—say no more about it," he urged, "your cheeks are red—this is putting you out—I won't listen."

"John, I must tell you all," she cried, "I shall never rest till you know my miserable story."

"Cannot your sister Ellen tell me as well as you?" asked John.

"Yes—presently; part of the story, not all. She does not know about the money."

"We have explained all that, Mary."

"Not why I took it—why I robbed you."

"It was not robbery—but go on, my poor girl."

"Why Ellen and I for years have stood apart, she will tell you in good time—what a cruel jealousy arose—what bitter quarrels—misunderstandings, for we were both in love with him."

"With *him*!" repeated John in his amazement.

"But I loved him best though latest—I did not know, to begin with, that I was breaking Ellen's heart to love him, and to let him love me back—but I think it broke when he liked me," Mary continued. "She turned upon us then—she separated us—she set my poor father and mother against him—even me, for a while, and in despair he enlisted for a soldier. Then my heart broke too, I think sometimes"—

"This is the story your sister should tell me—not you," said John Dax, very moodily; "for God's sake spare yourself."

"And me," he might have added in that hour of his bitterest discomfiture.

"Well, well, you guess now why Ellen and I can never speak. When I discovered it was by her means he had been led to doubt me, I swore to Heaven that I would not speak to her in all my life again, till he came back to me. It was wrong—but I have kept my word—I may die keeping it. It is best perhaps to face my Maker without a lie upon my lips."

"You will live, don't talk like this," said John Dax.

"I may live if he comes back to me. Oh! John, I love him so dearly—he is the one hope of my life—he is true to me still. I would be at peace with Ellen—and for this, and more than this I have been working on for years, with Ellen aiding me, in silence."

"I do not make out ——" he began in his old confused manner, when she commenced anew—

"Let me finish, please, before my voice gives way," she entreated.

"Yes, Ellen and I have been working on for years to purchase his discharge, and we have been always balked at the eleventh hour. It has been impossible to save— I have tried hard, and we have been always poor! He seemed beyond all hope when the regiment was ordered to India, until the discovery and the temptation of your money came to me—not Ellen—never to her, who had outlived all love for him. I schemed on—I wrote to the Commander-in-chief's office—I studied all the rules by which he might be rescued; finally, in desperation, with your money, John—forgive me once again—I bought his liberty—his passage home—and he his way to me at last."

She had forgotten her fault in the thought of his return. John Dax could see that by the light upon her face. Ah! woman is weak.

"When will he return?" asked John, in a hoarse voice.

"Soon, I hope," she whispered, "very soon."

There was a long pause; the confession had been made, and John Dax had offered all the absolution in his power. But he did not move away at once from the bedside; he sat there like a man stupefied by the revelation which had been made, and which had cut down every fair green shoot of promise his own folly had allowed to spring up. He had served long, and waited

long—and failed. There are some men who seem born to wait always and to fail in everything on which their hearts are set ; and John Dax was one of these.

“You have not told me again, I am forgiven,” said Mary, faintly at last.

“I have nothing to forgive,” replied John, as he rose, “always believe I meant the money for you, I never thought of it for myself.”

He wished that he could have spent the money in her cause, as she had spent it—that was the one regret he had concerning it. And it was of the man who had been saved, and not of the money which had saved him, that kept him very thoughtful.

“You say this to set my mind at ease,” she added.

“Don’t think that ;”

“Presently we shall pay you back ; when Alec ——”

“Don’t say anything more to me now, please. You are very weak still. Good bye.”

He rested his thin hand upon hers again for an instant, and then passed out of the room.





CHAPTER VIII.

ELLEN IS GRATEFUL.

IT was thus that the idol fell which John Dax had worshipped. A wild fancy had given way to reality, and Mary Morison, of Gibbon Street, was a poor weak mortal after all. In her passion and despair, she had betrayed the trust which John had placed in her, and taken his money to restore a lover to her side. The man's legacy had been the means of destroying the one hope that he had ever had ; he had shut himself out of the daylight for good. He understood now why Mary had blushed and trembled of late days, and before her illness, at meeting him occasionally—it was remorse. There was no wild thrill of pleasure at that recollection now—his romance was at an end. After all, it was only the romance of a back street, and what could such a hero as John Dax have expected.

He went downstairs into the parlour, where Ellen awaited him. She looked anxiously into his face and said, reprovingly—

“You have let her talk too much ; you have been inconsiderate.”

He was always in the wrong, poor fellow.

"I have been as careful as I could," he said, by way of excuse, "but your sister had a great deal to tell me."

"Of our long quarrel?" she inquired, moodily, "ah, it was hardly necessary you should know it."

"I think it was," he answered, thoughtfully.

"And yet she was anxious about you of late days—there was a reason for it, I suppose," she asked, a little curiously.

John Dax saw his opportunity here. Even in his disappointment, he was considerate for the woman he loved.

"Yes, Miss Ellen, there was a reason. The money upstairs—you remember."

"What of that?" was the quick inquiry, "she—she never——"

"It was lent to her to buy Alec's discharge; to pay his passage back to England; to help him in any way upon his journey," said John Dax, coolly and firmly.

"Lent by you—for her sake!" exclaimed Ellen.

"What use was the money to me, when she was fretting for the soldier?"

"You can never be repaid," said Ellen.

"I don't care to be," answered John, "though I am not so sure of it for all that."

"John," said Ellen, seizing his hands in her's, "I did not think you could be so kind and generous. Why did you not tell me before?"

"It was a little surprise of mine," he said, with a short laugh.

"A surprise, indeed—and you have known Mary's love story all this while, and sympathized with her, and helped her, and forgotten your own poor foolish dreams, and yet——"

John interrupted her second train of thought.

"I have not known everything very clearly until to-day," he said; "there was a little mystery—not much—and Miss Mary has set that right at last. As for Alec"—he spoke as if he had known his rival, and been interested in him for years, and his manner of recital helped to deceive his listener, "although I shall be glad to see him back for your sister's sake, I think I shall be gladder for yours."

"What do you mean?"

"His coming will end the long quarrel, won't it?"

She flushed crimson, and wrung her hands together.

"She was never to speak to me till he came back again," she murmured, "and he is on his way. Yes," she added, gravely, "for that one reason I shall be glad to see him."

"I thought you would; you don't bear malice now?"

"Malice!" she repeated, quickly, "do you think I——" then she paused and looked at John, attentively, and substituted another question for the one that remained half-finished on her lips.

"Has Mary told you the story of our quarrel?"

"Most of it; she said you would tell me the rest."

"How I loved Alec Williamson first, and how she came between us?"

"Yes, and how you continued to separate them until——"

"Until, in the bitterness of his disappointment, he enlisted for a soldier, poor martyr," she said, sadly rather than bitterly. "Well, well, John, let her version of the story stand, it is not deserving further explanation, and I am too proud to offer it."

She looked a very proud woman at that moment, John thought, and he regarded her as an enigma very difficult to solve. For an instant there flitted across the dull mind of this one-ideal man the suspicion that it was Ellen Morison who had been injured and cast down, and who was deserving of all kindly consideration, from the early days of a cruel disappointment until now, and then he thought of Mary, lying ill upstairs, and his charity sided with his pity of her. Mary had been deceived, and her unforgiving sister Ellen was the evil genius of her life—that was how he read the legend to the last.

"There is one favour I want to ask you before I go away this morning," John said, after a long silence between them. It had been in his mind ever since Mary's revelation, and he had not found the courage to mention it till he was standing at the door ready to depart.

"You cannot ask a favour of us that will be refused, if it lie in our power to grant it," she exclaimed readily.

"It is in your power only."

"What is it?"

"When I first came back, I spoke of my foolish love for the poor girl upstairs."

"Yes."

"It died out, of course—that is, any hope I had died off clean when I heard about the soldier, and when we were arranging our plans to buy him off, and so on."

"I am glad you did not brood upon it at all," said Ellen.

"And my only trouble now is that Mary—Miss Mary as I ought to call her still"—he added, apologetically, "should ever hear of my silly fancy for her. I don't want anybody to know this. I wish I'd never told you a word about it now."

"It might do her good to hear the story some day," mused Ellen.

"No, it wouldn't," John said, flatly contradicting her, "and it makes me look soft and stupid. I'm both—I know that—you know it too, and are smiling at me, though you try hard to look serious; but I couldn't help liking her a great deal once. But don't tell her so—ever—will you?"

"I will not," Ellen Morison promised.

"That's right," said John, evidently relieved in his mind, "I can go back to my work now, jolly; it seems all squaring

round so well. Miss Mary getting strong—forgetting and forgiving everything you have done to her—and her young man coming back to make her heart light for ever and ever. Why, this is capital.”

“And all this your doing,” said Ellen gratefully, and her hands were extended towards him again, “it is from your sacrifice that the happiness will spring. What have we done to deserve it?”

“You were kind to me in the old days,” he stammered forth, “I can’t forget it.”

“And, John, we will never forget you.”

“Thank’ee, thank’ee,” he said twice.

“Our only friend—our best friend ; God bless you,” she said, gratefully ; then she released his hands and let him go away, standing and watching his thoughtful progress down the street, and whispering her blessing after him again.

He was not deserving of it ; he had not acted as she thought he had. Mary had not left him the chance of being worthy of one poor woman’s gratitude. Of these three shadowy characters of Gibbon Street, not one fairly understood the other to the end of time.



CHAPTER IX.

HAPPY TOGETHER.

JOHN DAX had become a hero in spite of himself, and there was no dropping the character. There were two young women grateful to him ; Mary for his forgiveness, his warmheartedness, and all he had said to assure her that the money was her own to dispose of as best pleased herself ; and Ellen because he had done so much to bring happiness to the repository. It had not come yet, but he was none the less a hero. Heroism had been thrust upon him, and it did not seem, at first glance, as though it was agreeing with him. A good action had hardly been its own reward, and he was dull and grave until the question came uppermost one day—Did he regret all that he had done to help them ?

No, no ! he did not regret it. He was not sorry he had parted with his money to bring back Alec Williamson—he was glad of it, but he should not be truly happy until the lover's return.

This, or something like this, was his reply. He was only

thoughtful for fear that his efforts had been in vain, and that the better times would never come.

For these assurances he was always welcome to Gibbon Street. Mary knew why he talked in this strain, and took the task on himself to screen her from suspicion. Ellen only read a noble and disinterested nature in the man who had done so much for them. There were bright smiles and friendly pressures of the hand for John Dax now. The shadow of his past estate did not rest upon him, they had forgotten their rescue of him from the streets in the winter's snow, and respected him, nay revered him as a man who had done much to clear away the clouds about their lives.

He came every day till Mary was downstairs again, and Ellen at her old post behind the counter. Here was the same situation as of old, but they were waiting for the change to it. There was a shimmer of happiness already about the house. There were smiles between the sisters. There was no bitter wrong between them, only the affliction of a rash vow, which both were truly sorry for, and of which both were longing to see the end.

And the beginning of the end came when Mary had been downstairs a fortnight.

John Dax was proceeding at his usual slow rate down Gibbon Street one evening, when Ellen, cloaked and bonneted, met

him on his way to the repository. He would have passed without seeing her had she not caught him by the arm.

"Ah! Ellen, is that you? There's nothing the matter I hope," he added, as he became aware that she was paler than usual.

"There is nothing wrong—but there is something the matter, John," said Ellen. "Can't you guess what it is?"

"Yes, I think I can," he answered.

They walked on in silence for a few steps, then John said—

"He has come back?"

"Yes."

"He is at the repository?"

"Yes."

"Was Mary very pleased to see him?" was the third question.

"Very pleased," answered Ellen. "I did not hear what she said. I came into the street and left them together. I could not stop."

"Not to speak a word to Mary after all these awful years," he exclaimed.

"I shall see her presently," replied Ellen, becoming a shade paler beneath his sharp reproof. "I did not wish to mar the first moments of their meeting by my interference. They will not miss me, and I thought I would come and meet you."

John did not thank her for the trouble she had taken—did

not think of thanking her. It did not strike him that she had left her work and come out of her way to spare him the sting of the first shock—to prepare him for the fact of Alec William-son's return. He did not even know that he needed preparation, but Ellen Morison did. She had watched him closely of late days, and knew how weak he was, for all his air of self-command.

"The happiness has come at last. I am glad," he said, in a low tone, as Ellen turned and walked back with him in the direction of home.

"Very glad?" she asked, curiously.

"Yes," he answered, with more firmness than she had anticipated. "It settles the matter, you see."

"I think I see more than this," she said.

"What's that," he asked with cogency.

"That you are the most unselfish man whom I have ever met."

"Oh! nonsense."

"The one unselfish man, I might have said, more truly," she added dryly, "and yet there was a time when Mary and I looked down upon you, pitied you and patronized you."

"And if it had not been for your pity and your patronage—"

"Pray don't be grateful to us any more," said Ellen, shivering. "The times are changed, and we have changed places with them. Here is home."

"It will be like home at last, I hope," said John.

"Amen. I hope so," answered Ellen Morison, fervently.

They walked into the shop together. John hung back, and took a long deep breath as they approached the parlour, but Ellen Morison went in with an unflinching gaze, and a step that faltered not. She had the courage to face the old love boldly—but then the love had died out, and was past any chance of revival.

She went towards her sister, sitting by her lover's side, with her hand in his, and said :—

"Mary."

The younger sister was weak still, she rose, trembling in every limb, and put her wasted arms round Ellen's neck.

"At last," she whispered, then both women were unnerved for a little while.

Ellen was the first to recover. She turned to John, and confronted him with Alec, a tawny-haired and handsome Scotchman, for ever on the smile—as well he might be at that early stage of his return.

"This is the best friend we have ever had in our lives," said Ellen. "Your best friend too, Alec, for it was his sovereigns that saved you."

"Sir, I thank ye," said Alec, in a broad accent, as he rose and crushed our hero's fingers somewhat remorselessly in his

own. "I am proud to make your acquaintance. A friend of my Mary's is a friend of mine for life, sir—for life."

"You are very good," said John, when he had got his hand out of the vice.

"You will be glad to hear, John," said Mary, "that Alec has seen some of his relations, and he is likely to obtain a situation almost at once."

"Yes. I am glad of that," echoed John.

"In a wholesale warehouse—somewhere; then we shall begin saving for you," cried Mary, "putting by something every week—."

"If ever so little," added Alec cautiously.

"—— to pay off the debt we owe you."

"You need not trouble about that—for a year or two," answered John.

"Sit ye down, mon, sit ye down—ye have been a good friend to us," cried Alec heartily, and John sat down for a few moments, and stared at the fire, and thought himself very much in the way of all this happiness, which had come in a great rush to Gibbon Street at last.

He was uncomfortably conscious, too, that Ellen Morrison watched him more furtively than he watched the lovers, and he resented this in his heart.

He did not like to meet her eyes, to see in them a concern for him; a fear that he should break down, and make a scene

there, as if he were not above that kind of thing, and strong as a lion. He had accomplished his task, and every one was content, and it would soon be time for him to leave these lovers to themselves, although it was difficult to quit them in the face of their united protestation for him to remain. Presently they seemed to forget him more, and to talk in a lower tone of the past and the future, without much respect for the "proprieties." Alec put his arm round Mary's waist and drew her closely to his side, whilst the fair young head drooped trustfully and affectionately upon the shoulder of her lover. Now and then Alec addressed the company generally, talked a great deal of his chances in the world, and a great deal more about himself, allowing his listeners to see, if they cared to see, that he had a very strong idea in his mind that he was a clever sort of fellow. He was hardly the hero whom John had pictured claiming Mary Morison — he was too big and boisterous and beefy—but he loved the little dressmaker very much, and Mary was very fond of him, and they would live happily for ever afterwards.

John Dax was interested in his conversation.

"I should think soldiering not a bad idea f ke it altogether," he observed.

"Ay, for a mon who goes awa' to serve his countrie honestlv," cried Alec, "for there's glory in it. But its vera ill soldiering with a trooble or a wrang at the heart."

"Ay, but for a fellow with no ties, no wrongs, no troubles, nothing to keep him at a trade, and only an empty top room that he can call home, I should say the army was the thing now."

"Why, *you* are not thinking of the army, John," said Mary, with a merry little laugh at the idea.

"Why should I?" rejoined John, laughing too for a minute, and whilst Mary was looking at him, and then the subject was dismissed, and the lovers began to whisper together again.

John Dax was sure that he must be considerably in the way—he was quite sure of it when Alec and Mary forgot him altogether, and Alec's big red whisker—the left one—was crushed against the cheek of his betrothed, and Alec looked down into her eyes, and once kissed her unblushingly before company. There was no particular etiquette about this kind of thing in Gibbon Street, and John was not shocked at the demonstration. He was only certain that it would be perfectly advisable to get away from it all, and when a chance customer took Ellen away, he seized the opportunity of the door being ajar to walk softly from the parlour too. He was right. Alec and Mary did not know that he had gone, that he was passing cautiously, almost on tip toe, across the step towards the fresh air beyond. He looked at Ellen, and nodded a good night, and from her post behind the counter she said:—

"Wait an instant, John."

He waited at her request till the customer was served, standing at the door, and looking dreamily down the ill-lighted street. Ellen Morison startled him at last by her hand upon his shoulder.

"Have you bidden them good-bye?" she asked.

"N—no. They were busy——."

"Busy?"

"That is, they were very happy, sweet-hearting," he said, "and it was a pity to disturb them."

"But you are going away for a long while?"

"How do you know?" asked John surprised at this exhibition of clear sightedness.

"I read it in your face to night. Is it not true?"

"Well—yes—for——."

"For what?"

"For it's no use coming to trouble either of you again. I—I shan't want to come now."

"They will be glad to see you at the wedding."

"Oh! no," cried John, "no, thank you!"

"You are her friend and mine, and we are short of friends. Mary will go soon to her new home, and I shall be very lonely here, if even *you* will not look in to say good evening sometimes."

Her voice faltered, but he did not perceive it. If she were making love to him, he never knew it, never took the hint,

conveyed by Ellen's manner, never thought it possible to be loved even by a good-looking girl, a little older than himself. He had sketched forth his future too—and he went away that night in search of it.

He bade Ellen good-bye, he desired her to remember him kindly, most kindly to Mary and to Alec, he promised to write some day soon, that they might know where to send the money to him when they wanted, and then Ellen Morison watched him out of her sight into the night mists, that were thick in Gibbon Street, and through which the lonely man was never seen returning to a woman still more lonely than himself.

John Dax enlisted for a soldier, and died of fever on the Gold Coast, before he had ever smelt powder. Even in the pursuit of glory, it was his ill-fortune to meet Yellow Jack instead. He was one of the many who are for ever out of luck's way.

THE END.

