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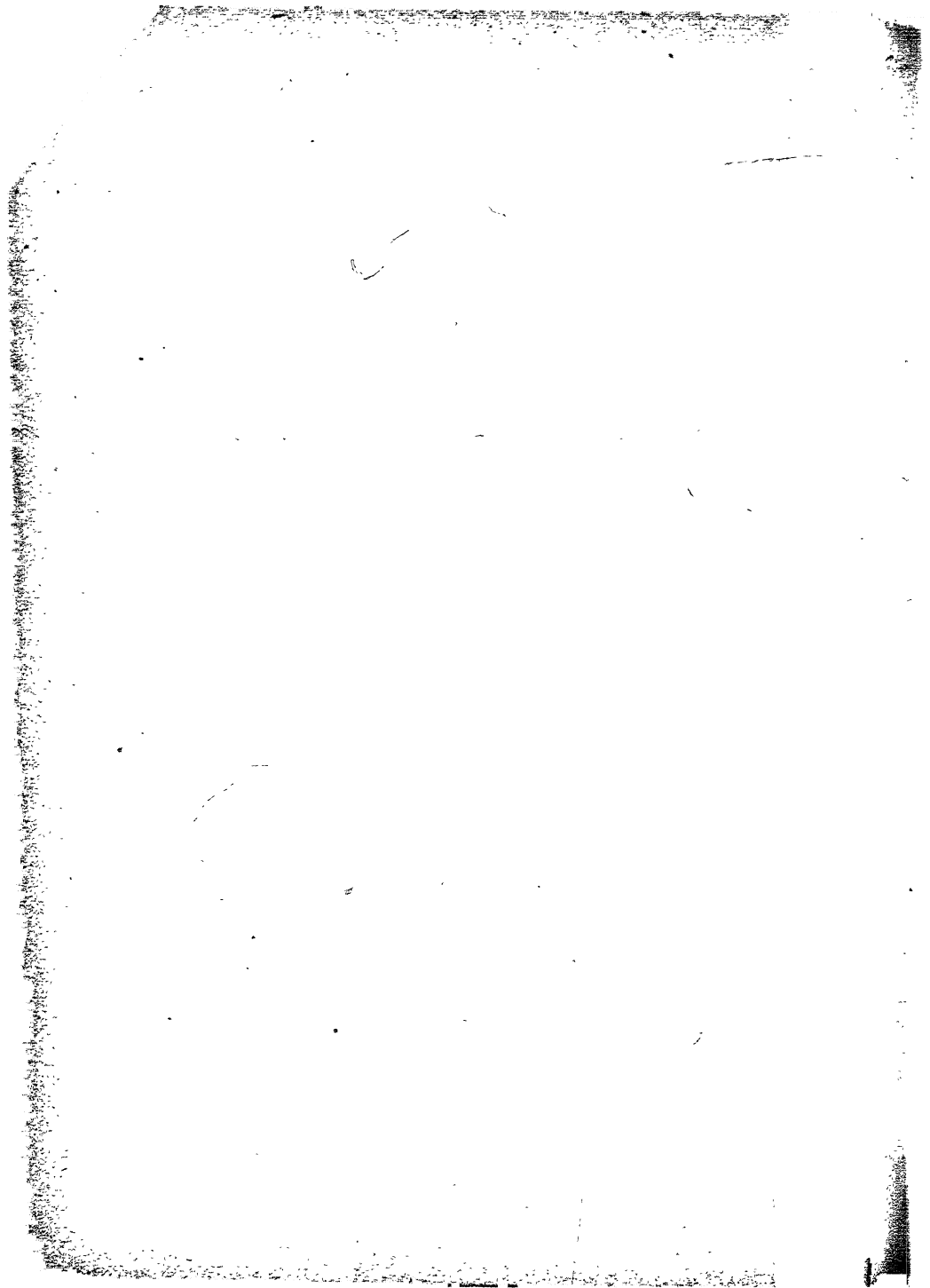
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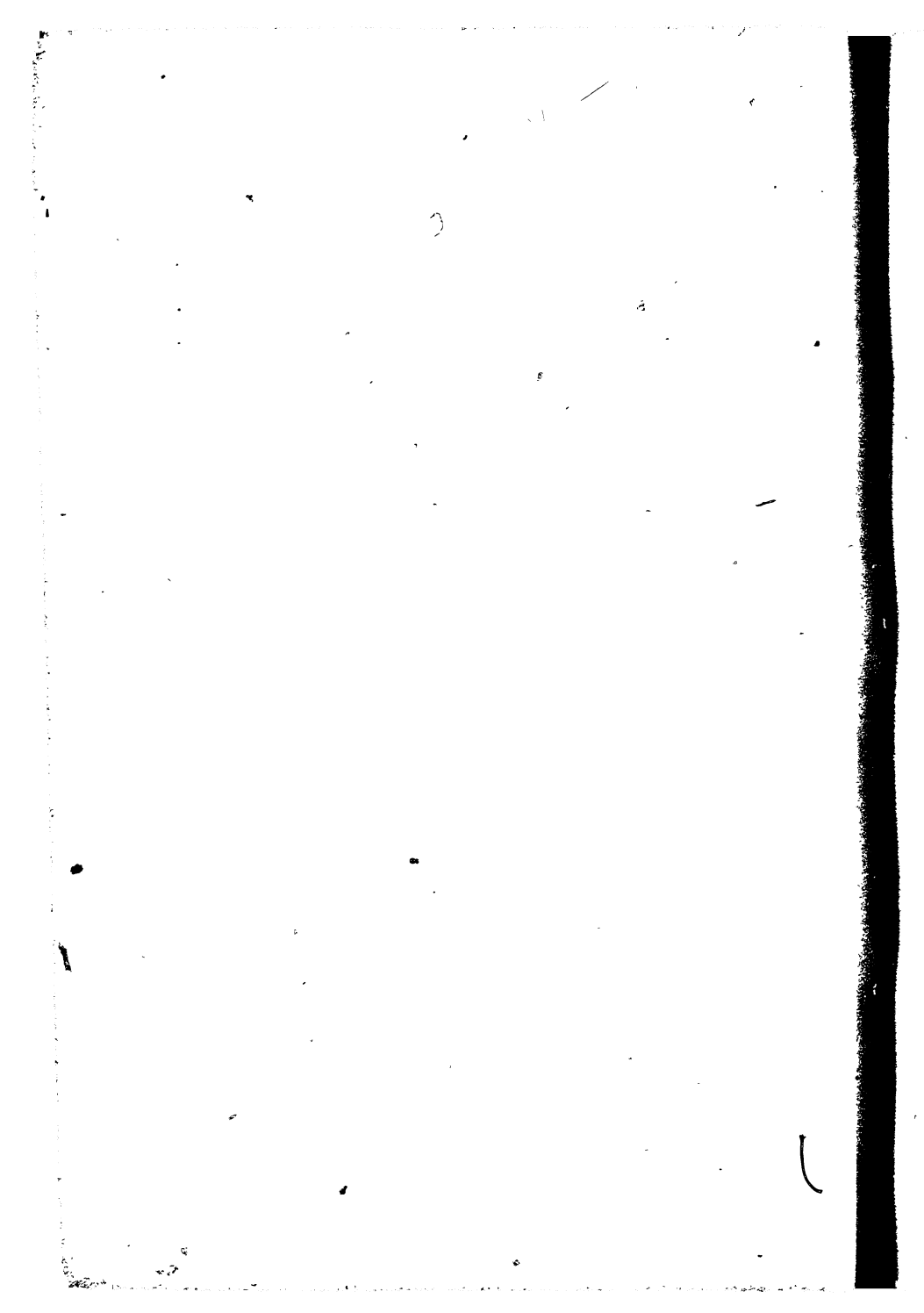
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MRS. KEITH HAMILTON, M.B.





Frontispiece.] "I OPENED THE CARRIAGE DOOR AND JUMPED OUT." [p. 232.

Mrs. Keith Hamilton, M.B.

*MORE EXPERIENCES
OF ELIZABETH GLEN*

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN

(Mrs. Burnett-Smith)

AUTHOR OF

'HOMESFUN,' 'A BITTER DEBT,' 'A FOOLISH MARRIAGE,'
'ALDERSYDE,' ETC.

*With full-page Illustrations by
D. MURRAY SMITH*

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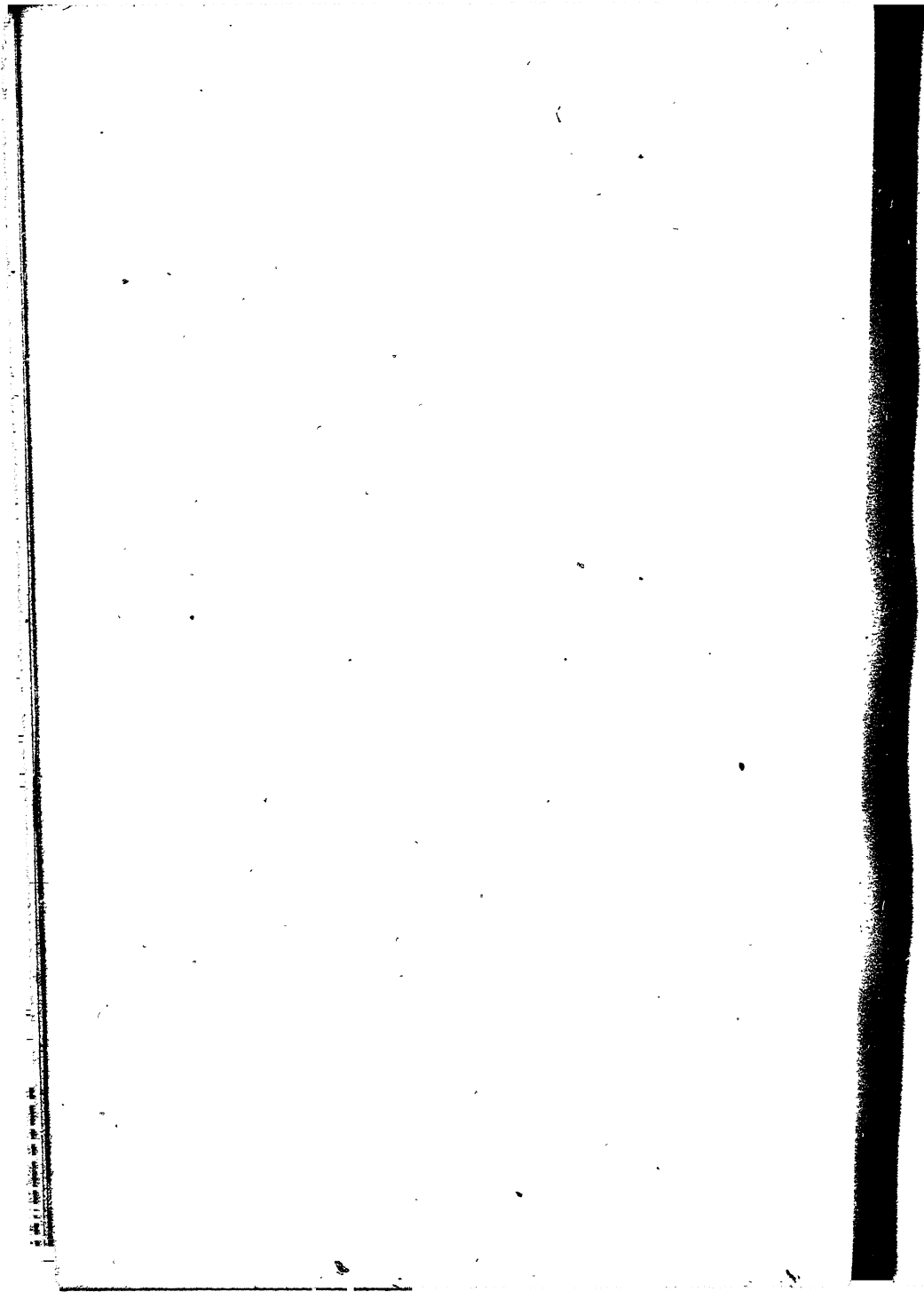
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I.

AT HER GATES.



I.

AT HER GATES.

"THERE is no help for it, Elizabeth," I said. "You'll have to give me a few more peeps into that diary of yours. I've put people off as long as I can. Don't you see it would be to your credit to give to the world a few more of your experiences, just to show that they have been very varied?"

We were sitting together in the window of the morning-room at Flisk on a cold April day. I had been tempted to take that most unusual luxury, a holiday early in the year, and I found spring still afar off in my friend's northern home. There was scarcely a green blade on hedge or tree, and though the grass was fresh and restful to the eye as the spreading lawns merged into the noble park, there were no daisies, and not a primrose on the river's brim. But there was all the freedom of the open: miles of lovely country, brown fields beginning to

smog! freshly of the new season, and a certain promise of the laggard in the twitterings of the birds among the boughs. Also that delicate and subtle clearness of the atmosphere which makes the breath of life a delight, and gives one wonderful ideas of space and distance and eternity. Elizabeth's home was worthy of her—a sombre, stately, venerable pile, standing erect and unashamed on its little eminence, its grey battlements showing clear cut, like some aristocratic face, against the delicate crystal of the sky. It was entirely unadorned, save where all about the western wing the green ivy had crept tenderly, harmonising exquisitely with the cold grey granite, giving to it the necessary touch of colour and of life. It was many windowed, and within the rooms were noble, yet filled with a solid comfort; in a word, it was a home.

Elizabeth had wisely not interfered with its substantial and fitting furnishing; only her private rooms bore the stamp of her own personality. In the window of the room where we now sat stood the table from the consulting-room in Rayburn Place, and in the dear old revolving chair Elizabeth had a trick of sitting, as she had so often done in those blessed old days when I could see her when the

spirit moved me, with her elbows on the morocco arms and her chin in her hands. She was so sitting as I made my statement, and she looked at me keenly with the merry, penetrating, lovely eyes which gave such character to her face.

"I believe," she said, solemnly, "that you came for that purpose. Indeed, Keith said only this very morning he believed you had designs upon me; that he entirely mistrusted your seeming innocence. He believes you to be insatiable for copy."

"I shall make copy out of him presently, to punish him for such an aspersion on my character," I said. "May I ask you a question, Elizabeth?"

"You may, though it must be something more pronounced than usual to call for such rare humility."

I was looking very earnestly at Elizabeth as she spoke; and somehow the need for the question seemed to disappear. She had now been married eighteen months, and there was upon her sweet face a look of absolute content such as is seen on very few. Sometimes in the old days there had been lines of care and worry on her broad brow; these were now all smoothed away.

"Elizabeth, you are an unutterable fraud. You'd pass for one-and-twenty any day. Don't you think

black burning shame, as Marget says, and your husband's hair so hopelessly grey?"

She smiled charmingly.

"You are hedging, madam. What secret do you want to wring from me by those bare-faced flatteries?"

"I only want to ask you, Elizabeth, whether you don't regret the old busy, harassed life. Have you enough here to fill up that great heart of yours, with its boundless capacity for work and care? So many want to know."

Elizabeth laughed a little, but presently her eyes grew grave.

"It is a very different life; its restfulness lies upon me like a great flood. I cannot speak about it. Why should I have so much when others have so little? The injustice of it weighs upon me. I have only to wish: the thing is there; my husband lives to make me blessed."

"Not entirely; he sometimes thinks of others, and works for them too, dear; and even if he didn't, you are worthy of it."

"So he says, and you, because you love me; but in that great city, where you and I have seen something of the unspeakable sadness of life, there are

AT HER GATES.

many as worthy, or worthier, and with capacity for joy as keen, who are denied everything, everything but pain. I am fully satisfied. I am, God knows, only sometimes haunted by the fear lest prosperity, freedom from care, absolute happiness, should render me selfish or hardened to the sorrow of others."

"It will never do that, Elizabeth; you need have no fear."

"We do what we can, but poverty and evil do not press here as in cities. It is within the reasonable grasp of dealing. We are building a cottage hospital at Port Ellon, and it will be perfect of its kind, so that we can deal with ordinary cases, and even extraordinary ones. But after all it is very little; we have not the absolute misery of despair and want meeting us on every hand; it is like playing at doing good."

"You can plunge into the old paths when you come to London next month," I said, suggestively.

"Yes, I can; but I found myself last year a good deal hampered. Elizabeth Glen could go where Mrs. Keith Hamilton is not welcome. I have closed up many doors of usefulness by my marriage."

"But opened others," I said, hastily, for I could not bear to hear her even seem to hint at disappointment.

“ Oh, of course ; to begin with, there is Keith : to see a man so guilelessly, completely, and absolutely happy is something, and his career is more interesting to me than any case I ever had,” she said, with a lovely blush. “ I am even ambitious, I believe, within certain limits. Why, who is that coming up the avenue ? Do you recognise anybody, dear ? ”

I stood up and looked out between the heavy hangings, to see a solitary figure coming somewhat wearily up between the bare, wintry-looking trees. A woman evidently, and young, walking slowly and with effort, as if her limbs were weary or unaccustomed to the exertion.

“ I don't know her,” said Elizabeth. “ But she is in trouble, that is quite evident, and a mere girl. I wonder what it can be.”

“ We shall see presently. How natural it is that the troubled and the sad should seek the gates of Flisk, even as they used to besiege your door in Rayburn Place ! ” I said ; and before Elizabeth replied there was a knock at the door, and Margaret looked in.

“ I thocht I'd come mysel, ma'am, to explain. That's Jeanie Falconer that was ; she cam to the kitchen door.”



"WALKING SLOWLY AND WITH EFFORT."

[p. 8.]



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"I don't know her, Margaret. What does she want?"

"She wants to see you, ma'am. The maister kens the story. It happened afore we cam. She ran awa."

"And she has come back, I suppose, in trouble?"

"Aye; and they'll no tak her in at the Mains, even her ain mither. Will ye see her, mem?"

"Yes; put her in the library, Margaret, and see that the fire is good," said Elizabeth, and as the door closed she turned to me. "I remember the story now; Keith told it to me. There was an Edinburgh artist at the Mains two years ago, painting the strath. Pretty Jeanie was fair amusement for him. He persnaded her to run away with him, but we thought they were married. What an old story it is! How often have you and I seen it played!"

She seemed saddened by the thought, and presently went down to see the suppliant, and I was left alone. But not for long. It was almost tea-time, and Mr. Hamilton usually turned in at that time, and we often said it was one of the jolliest hours of the day.

"Hulloa, you're there, and as sober as a judge," he called out cheerily, as he put his bright face inside the door. "Where's Elizabeth?"

"Somebody wanted her downstairs—somebody in trouble."

"Oh!" said he, meditatively. "Did you happen to hear the name?"

"Falconer, I think—Jeanie Falconer."

He gave a long whistle.

"So she's come back, poor lassie: well, it's a case for Elizabeth, not for me. Has she been telling you about her pet scheme—the hospital at Port Ellon?"

"She has just mentioned it; it's a fine idea, Mr. Hamilton, and Elizabeth must have some outlet for her energies."

"But you don't think she finds it slow here, do you?" he asked, and the anxiety on his handsome face indicated how great a matter it was to him.

I could not forbear a smile.

"You have only to look at her face. She is more than content; but it is not possible for her to sit down and be idly happy. To be doing for others is the litany of her life."

"Don't I know it?" he said under his breath, and if ever adoration was expressed in a man's face, I saw it then.

"Suppose we go upstairs and wait for her; surely she won't be long."

We went up, and after waiting about ten minutes I persuaded Mr. Hamilton to let me pour out his tea. And almost immediately Elizabeth joined us. Her face was flushed, and I saw that she was a little excited.

"Oh, Keith, I am so glad you are in," she cried. "That's poor Jeanie Falconer—Mrs. Tom Gilchrist really; he did marry her after all."

"And what's she doing here, then?" asked Mr. Hamilton, with all a man's abruptness. "A wife ought to stop with her husband. Isn't that your creed, wife?"

"Yes, other things being equal," replied Elizabeth, with a significant smile.

"Well, what's gone wrong? Were you going to tell us?"

"In a minute. They've married in haste and they're repenting at leisure, apparently. Poor Jeanie overheard him telling an artist friend that his marriage had been a frightful mistake, and the poor little thing acted on her first impulse to run home to her mother. And they wouldn't take her in."

"Wouldn't they? Well, it was a blow to them. Poor old Falconer has never held up his head in kirk or market since."

"That's because he didn't believe them to be married. I've got the certificate right enough here. I'm going over presently to the Mains to let them see it. Margaret will take care of poor Jeanie till her father comes to fetch her."

"You'll be a witch if you get Falconer to give in so quickly as all that. He's slow to anger, but he keeps it up."

"I'll make him come if I stop all night, dear," said Elizabeth, and she looked as if she meant it. "There isn't any time in life to keep up feuds, especially in families; oh, it is too short."

"Are you going to take Jeanie with you?" asked Mr. Hamilton after a moment.

"No, she'll stay here, and Margaret will see to her. Will you go with me?" asked Elizabeth, turning to me. "And if Falconer is amenable, we can take Port Ellon coming back, and see the hospital."

"Don't attempt too much in a day, wife," said Mr. Hamilton, gravely. "There are seven days in a week, and she has promised us two weeks at least."

Elizabeth smiled and gave him a little pat on his big broad shoulder, and her look was one of the most exquisite confidence and love. But I saw that

her heart was in her mouth, and that she still hid the sorrows of others in her soul.

In less than half an hour we were in Elizabeth's little Ralli cart, her strong, capable hands on the reins, and the groom behind. Elizabeth was fond of her horses, and proud of them too; the beautiful creature she drove that night seemed to know and respond to her lightest touch.

"Spring tarries here, Elizabeth," I said, as my eyes wandered across the varied landscape, seeking in vain for the green glory of her skirts.

"Yes, but when she comes it is like a Queen, dear. To see Flisk in June is to get some idea of Paradise. But I like winter too, the wideness of the landscape, the bareness of the trees, the wild winds whistling down the glens. Look at the light on the moor yonder; you would never get that dark glow in summer. Port Ellon lies just beyond; the sea is there; when the wind is southerly you get the salt of it even at Flisk."

"I have a lot of things to see, Elizabeth," I said. "Most of all, I think, the lych gate where you and Keith parted so bitterly in the long ago."

"That's at Glenspeed, dear, and we need a long day at Glenspeed. There is the Mains. It is just

six, so we'll catch Falconer as he comes in. They're all busy on the land just now, planting potatoes."

The Mains, a snug, blue-slatted farmhouse on the roadside, with its outbuildings clustered about it, looked a very tidy, well-managed place. A good garden, with a grassy lawn in front, separated it from the road, and was entered by a green wicket gate.

"You can come in if you like, dear. They won't mind," said Elizabeth, as she sprang to the ground.

I hesitated a moment, and then followed her. A little maidservant, evidently much flustered, showed us in, and we were left quite a long time in the old-fashioned sitting-room, which was so exquisitely clean, and smelt so sweetly of lavender and thyme and all the old-fashioned herbs beloved of country housekeepers.

"Now, I wonder why Mrs. Falconer doesn't come," said Elizabeth, rather impatiently. "Well, here's the old man himself."

He opened the door, and gave us good evening, with the rugged courtesy of these well-mannered people; and Elizabeth introduced me briefly. The difficulty was that he had not the remotest idea why we had come; and though it was by no means unusual for Mrs. Hamilton to drop in upon the

tenants, where she was always welcome. I saw he suspected something unusual. He was an old man, and aged perhaps before his time, but his face was hale and ruddy, and his eye had lost none of its keenness. I walked over to the open window, and looked out, wishing almost that I had not come in.

"Perhaps you'll think me an impertinent meddler, Mr. Falconer," began Elizabeth in her direct way. "But really in this I can't help myself. I've just come from your daughter, Mrs. Tom Gilchrist."

I felt that the old man frowned, but I did not look round.

"She's at Flisk, and I want to know why she isn't here. Where's Mrs. Falconer?"

"She's tendin' a sick woman at the men's hooes," he answered. "Mrs. Tom Gilchrist, as ye ca' her, has made her bed, an' she can lie on't. I'm for nae returned goods here."

"Now that's all nonsense," said Elizabeth cheerily, though I am confident, had these words been addressed in such a voice to me, I should have beat a hasty retreat. "She isn't returned goods at all. It was the most natural thing in the world that she should take a longing to see her mother, to say nothing of you."

"I'm for nane o' her here," he retorted, angrily. "An ungratefu' hizzie, bringin' disgrace on folk that wad hae deed to serve her. She maun mak the best o' her penter body noo she's got him, as I telt her the day; an' it shows what a puir craven spirit is in her that she wad gang wi' a puir face to you, mem."

"It was surely better to come to me than to some who would take joy in spreading the tale," Elizabeth answered quickly. "Did her mother see her to-day?"

"Her mither sees eye to eye wi' me, as she should," replied Mains, sternly.

"I daresay you dared her to say a word on her own account," observed Elizabeth, drily. "Come now, Mr. Falconer, be sensible. Jeanie has come back to see you, and a bonnie talk it will be in the countryside if she stays at Flisk instead of here, where she ought to be. She was afraid you wouldn't believe she was really married, so she brought this with her. Don't you think it will be wise to make the best of a bad job?"

She handed him the certificate, and he did glance over it, but his brows did not relax.

"She maun learn that her faither an' mither are

no auld boots to be kicket about, onyway. She can gang back to her man. It's whaur she should be, onyway."

"Well, she will go back to him by-and by," said Elizabeth, desperately, for it was like beating against a stone wall. "The poor thing is ill and weary. She needs her mother's advice and help. It was the most natural thing in the world she should seek it just now."

"What for did he no come wi' her, an' own up as a man should that he's been a rascal?" said the old farmer, sourly.

Elizabeth made no reply for a moment or so. I was waiting for her to explain that there had been at least some little difference between poor Jeanie and her husband, but she never said a word.

"Well, what's to be done, Mr. Falconer?" she said presently. "Am I to go back and tell poor Jeanie that she must return to Edinburgh tomorrow?"

"It wad serve her richt," he said, dourly; but I, who knew his kind well, detected relenting in his voice.

"Where's the cottage where Mrs. Falconer is nursing? I think I'll go and see what she says about it," said Elizabeth then.

“Ye needna fash. I’ll yoke an’ gang up to Flisk for the lass, although it’s sair against the grain; but she canna bide here mair than a night. I gied her my mind this efternune. I’ll never forgie her: it’s jist to save you bother, mem. She had nae business to intrude upon you.”

Elizabeth went up to the old man and laid her hand on his arm, looking at him with those deep, sweet eyes of hers, whose appeal few could resist.

“The father’s heart is speaking now, Mr. Falconer, and you are thinking of the days when Jeanie pu’d the gowans on the roadside and said her prayers at her mother’s knee. She is not less your bairn than she was then. Deal with her as we all pray God will deal with us for our rebellion and disobedience to His will.”

“Maybe I’ve been ower hard,” he said, almost in a whisper. “But she was my idol, an’ a broken idol’s sair to thole.”

“Jeanie’s heart is full of love and of sorrow for all she has done. She will make it up to you, and her mother will sleep to-night, I know, as she has not slept since Jeanie ran away.”

“Maybe you’re richt,” he said. “Weel, I’ll yoke an’ gang ower.”

"At once?" said Elizabeth, anxiously. "We're going on to Port Ellon, but we'll meet you coming back."

"Yes, I'll gang the noo."

He went away out with speed, not deeming it necessary to say a word of thanks to the laird's wife for the trouble she had taken. Gratitude, I found, was in the hearts of these plain folks, but seldom on their lips.

"You didn't tell him that Jeanie had run away from her husband, Elizabeth," I said, as we walked out to the trap.

"No, it is long since I learned to be as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove when dealing with family matters," she replied, soberly. "Besides, she hasn't run away; she's going back if he doesn't come to fetch her."

We climbed to our places and drove off rapidly along the bare road on the moor edge, and presently we saw the sea. It was very grey and cold looking, but its wideness did not fail to satisfy; there is no mood of my nature which the sea cannot soothe and satisfy. Port Ellon, a little fishing hamlet, lay scattered between two headlands, and was well sheltered on either side. It was a picturesque little

spot, with such yellow sands and sheltered crannies among the rocks, that I wonder it has not been over-run long ago.

"There's the hospital—look, just behind the church. We need not drive up to inspect it, or we shall be late for dinner. You see it is going to be a very fair building. I supervised the plans myself, and it will be a model. I often say to Keith they'll come from far and near to see it."

"And will you be a visiting physician?" I asked.

"Why, yes, that's the object of it. What's the use of everything—my London M.B., for instance, of which I'm so proud—if I can't do that much? I'm quite looking forward to it, but Keith won't let me spend a penny on it. It's his, every stone and brick, but it'll be mine when it's done. Don't you think I have a devoted husband, dear?"

I did not say what I thought, that these two, united in heart and in purpose, had but one desire—to serve their day and generation to the very best of their ability. And I thanked God for high position and great wealth so humbly and graciously used, for lives devoted to the Master's service. But I grudged them to their quiet home, where the need was less great than in the city where Elizabeth had laboured

so faithfully and with such signal success. We were rather quiet as we drove back, and about a quarter of a mile past the Mains we met the gig with Jeanie and her father in it.

Elizabeth did not stop, only waved her hand and cried cheerily, "I'll come along to-morrow morning."

"It's all right," she said in a satisfied voice; "he's given in: that was the hard bit. Now he won't know what to do to make up to Jeanie for being hard on her this afternoon. Oh, my dear, what would I not give to be sitting beside my dear old dad!—to think he should only have lived a month after I came to Flisk, and I looking forward to years by his side; but I'm thankful he lived to see me Keith's wife. I shall never forget his face the day we came home. He looked just like Simeon, and I know he was saying in his heart, 'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace.' When he died he told me he had not a single wish on earth unfulfilled."

"Not many can say that, Elizabeth."

"Not many lived like him, an Israelite indeed, without guile. God gives such a special benediction. Did I tell you, dear, that Keith was dining out to-night?—a bachelors' dinner at Corrybreck. We'll have a dip into that old diary to-night."

And we had, and Elizabeth said she would allow me to take as many pages from it as I liked. But I said I would rather take the stories down from her lips, for I felt sure my readers wanted to hear her speak again.

Next morning, as we walked in the grounds near the lodge gates a hired fly drove rapidly down the road.

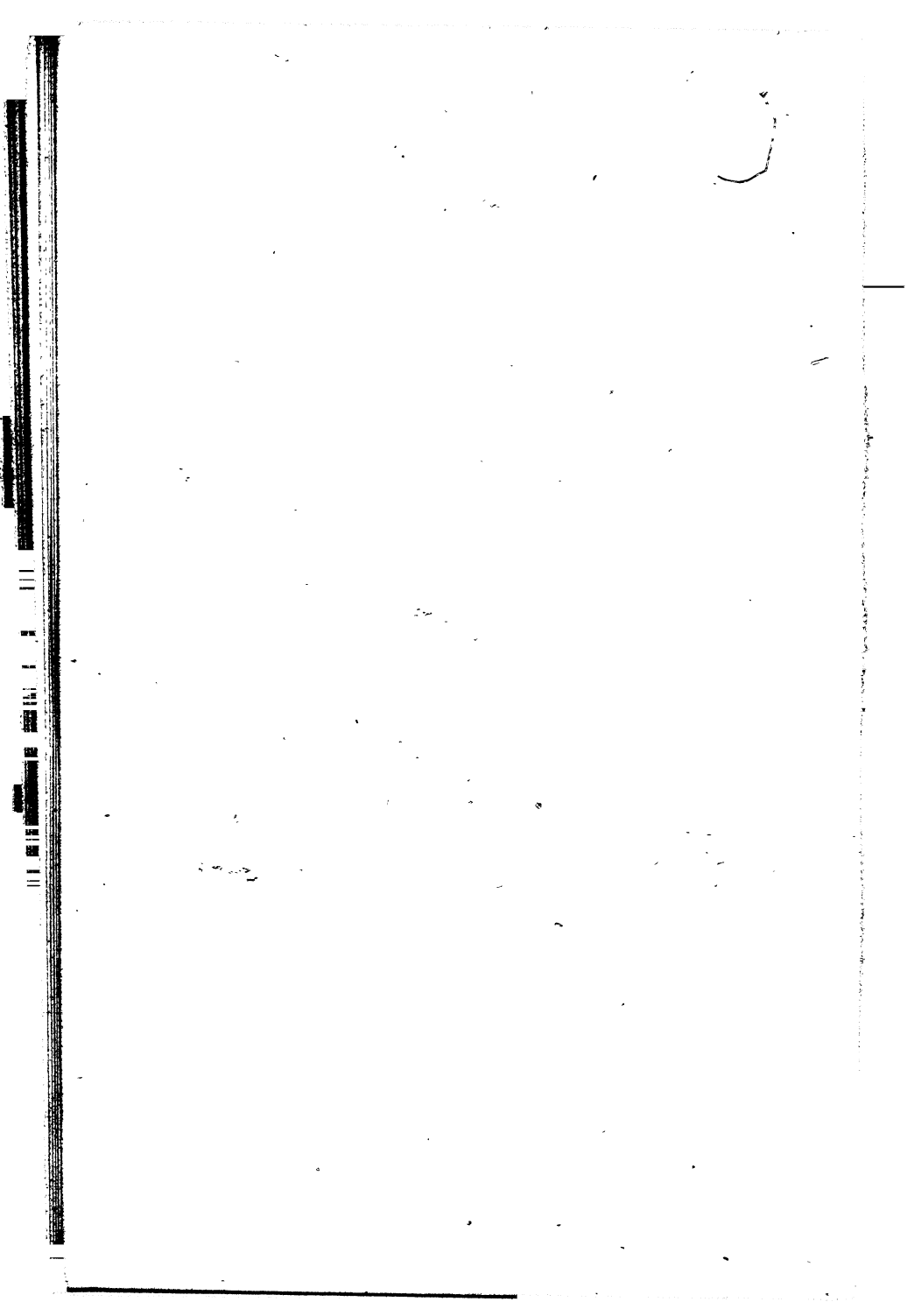
"Do you know who that is, dear?" she said with a satisfied nod. "It's Tom Gilchrist, the artist. He's going to the Mains now, and it'll be all made up. I guessed how it would be. How foolish these young people are, and how they play with their life's happiness as if it were a game at marbles!"

"I know somebody else who played with her life's happiness," I said severely, "and who nearly wrecked it too."

"Suppose we go back to the house, dear," said Elizabeth, demurely, "and see what Keith is going to do for our amusement this lovely day."

II.

AN AMERICAN HEIRESS.



II.

AN AMERICAN HEIRESS.

"I ONCE had a very curious experience with a family of Americans in London," said Elizabeth one afternoon, when we were discussing various national traits. "Perhaps you would like to hear it."

"I certainly should," I replied readily. "Did I ever tell you how favourably I was impressed with the American women I met in their own country?"

"I am not sure, but I am rather glad to hear it, and a little surprised; but I believe it is true that it is the globe-trotters we chiefly see here, and they are pretty often objectionable. This family amused me very much, when they did not disgust and irritate me."

"Birds of passage in a hotel, I suppose?"

"Well, no; they lived in London for the time being, the women of the family at least; they rented a furnished house in Manchester Square."

"What was their object—'husband hunting'?"

I said, haphazard.

Elizabeth laughed.

"I believe you have hit it; but I had better begin at the beginning and tell you the whole story, though I warn you that it is not only an absurd, but a highly improbable tale all through."

"Go on," I said, calmly. "Your stories are always readable. Think how every one delights in real experiences."

"Do they?" inquired Elizabeth, innocently. "I'm sure I for one enjoy my own experiences immensely."

"You were ever a greater favourite than Margaret Grainger; and had to be revived sooner or later. There is no doubt the charm lies in the individual. Anybody would prefer listening to a young and beautiful doctor, rather than to a middle-aged schoolmistress."

"I am middle-aged, dearest," observed Elizabeth, without a shade of banter, but with a quite audible sigh. "Thirty-five the other day. I grudge these empty years that have gone."

"Empty!" I cried, indignantly. "Elizabeth Glen, how dare you? Empty, and that fat diary on your lap, and a thousand hearts over the border cherish-

ing your name as that of a saint. I say again, how dare you?"

"Keep calm. I was looking at my age, my child, from one particular point of view."

"Mrs. Keith Hamilton's?"

She nodded.

"But you don't look a day more than twenty-five, and you know that Keith thinks so. He told me so the other day, bemoaning his own grey hairs. What an absurd couple you are! If you had as much to do as I and mine have, you would have no time to trouble about each other's appearance."

Elizabeth smiled an aggravating smile, and watched through the window the flight of a swallow, the first we had seen.

"One swallow does not make a summer," she observed, irrelevantly. "Well, do you want to hear the tale of three American women and one American man?"

"Yes," I said, meekly. "Please to go on."

"It was at Easter, an early and particularly lovely Easter, that I first made the acquaintance of Mrs. Seth B. Strong and her two daughters. I found a message from the house in Manchester Square one afternoon when I came in from my round, and

drove there at once. I was shown up to a large and well-furnished drawing-room, where I was left a much longer time than was agreeable to me, but finally a young lady entered the room. She was *petite* of figure, and her face was interesting, being regularly featured and lit by a pair of almond-shaped eyes of great softness and beauty. She was prettily dressed in a well-hung tan-coloured skirt, a plaid blouse, and an antique silver waist-belt. She wore her hair high, as if to increase her height, and at first sight, with her clear brown skin and dark eyes, might have passed for an Italian or a Spaniard.

“‘Good afternoon, doctor,’ she said, pronouncing my title as if it were spelt with a broad ‘a’ in the first syllable, and leaving no doubt as to her nationality. ‘Very good of you to come so quick. It’s ma who wants you ; she’s real sick ; been all day.’

“‘Yes; well, I can see her, I suppose?’

“‘Why, yes, in a minute. Hannah, that’s my sister, is just making her a bit smart. Did they leave the name right? Ma’s Mrs. Seth B. Strong, of St. Paul’s, Minnesota. I’m Minnie, and Hannah’s my elder sister.’

“ ‘*Yes, to England?* ’ I said, sitting down again till Mrs. Seth B. Strong should be made smart.

“ ‘ Well, no; not exactly. I guess we’re almost English now; we’ve just come from Mentone a fortnight ago. But we live here. We’ve had this house three seasons running. I guess pa thinks we’ve caught on here; we ain’t been back to St. Paul’s nigh two years. He says it’s rough on him, an’ talks of comin’ to fetch us, but I guess he won’t yet awhile.’

“ I had often heard that it is not uncommon for American families to be split up in this fashion, and to me it did seem a trifle rough on ‘pa and the boys’ to be left so cavalierly to fend for themselves, as we say here.

“ ‘ The boys are your brothers, I suppose? ’

“ ‘ Yes, Seth and Reub. Seth’s gone to business since we’ve been here, but Reub’s to college yet. Perhaps they’ll come over in the fall. Ma was real pleased to hear of a woman doctor; we’ve lots of women doctors in America. They’ve caught on; but I always thought English folks preferred men.’

“ ‘ So they do, as a rule, Miss Minnie. We profit by the exceptions,’ I replied, and Miss Minnie laughed heartily.

“That’s good. We’ve heard you’re awfully clever, Doctor Glen, and now I’m sure of it,” she said, frankly.

“Before I had time to reply to this pretty compliment, a servant appeared with the request that I would step upstairs to Mrs. Strong’s room.

“I found her sitting up in bed, attired in a very elegant dressing-jacket and looking the picture of health. She was, of course, a middle-aged woman, and very good-looking, though in no way resembling the daughter I had seen.

“‘Good afternoon,’ I said, and I saw that she was observing me keenly. ‘What do you complain of, Mrs. Strong? I think you look at this moment remarkably well.’

“‘I never lose my colour, Doctor Glen, and so I get very little sympathy,’ she observed. ‘Won’t you sit down? I’ve been more than sick for two weary days.’

“I remembered that Americans use the word ‘sick’ in place of ‘ill,’ so I sat down and took her hand. I was not at all surprised to find the pulse absolutely normal. Her skin was quite cool, and she looked in as perfect health as I was myself. She was playing a little farce, and it was interesting to me to find out the reason why.

“‘I have an all-gone feeling, and my head simply splits,’ she began. ‘The girls would send for you, afraid in case I should be taken real bad.’

“‘Oh, but you won’t be; possibly a little indigestion,’ I said, cheerfully. ‘I shouldn’t stay in bed, were I in your place, but get up and go for a nice drive.’

“‘I couldn’t think of it,’ she replied, flatly. ‘I haven’t the strength of a baby. Had any talk with my daughter Minnie downstairs?’

“‘A little,’ I replied, guardedly.

“‘She’s told you about us, I guess. Did she say her pa was dead set on us going home to St. Paul’s?’

“I shook my head.

“‘And we’re as dead set on not going. I hate the place. I told their pa I shouldn’t come back when I left. I want him to come and live in England. He says he can’t for business. That’s all nonsense too. Men get like that grubbing along at business for ever. A manager could do just as well; and I’m going to hold out till he can’t hold out any longer. He says in his last letter he won’t send any more dollars, but I guess he will. I’ve just been getting the girls a new rig-out for the season; and won’t he stare when he gets the bills?’

“I looked at the woman silently, amazed at her almost brutal frankness. Was she really so selfish, so callous, so unwifely as she appeared?”

“‘He’s been putting on the screw rather tight lately. He says dollars is scarce, an’ there ain’t a word of truth in it. Why, everybody knows Seth B. Strong’s good for half a million and more. I’ll cure him of that. But it’s his cruel way of going on that’s made me feel so bad.’”

“‘It must be rather hard on Mr. Strong, being left so long,’ I observed, flatly. ‘Nearly three years, I understood your daughter to say.’”

“‘Yes; but if he wants to see us badly, he knows where to find us, I guess. I won’t have my girls marry Americans. I’m dead set on everything English.’”

“‘And hope to see them English peeresses, perhaps,’ I said as I rose.

“‘Yes, I grant it was rather rude, but you see the woman aggravated me beyond measure. She did not take it at all amiss.

“‘Stranger things have happened, and the girls, especially Hannah, would grace any peer that ever lived. You haven’t seen Hannah,—she’s a beauty, and no mistake.’”

"Her garrulous and unsophisticated pride was most amusing.

"Well, really there's very little I can do for you, Mrs. Strong," I said, reverting to professional themes. "I can send you a little tonic if you like, but so far as my judgment goes it is quite superfluous."

"She stared at me rather indignantly.

"Well, I never! that's rich. Do you suppose I sent for you for that? Why, I'm sick, real sick—sick to death if you like, and I want you to say so in writing, so that I can send it to my husband, and show him that it would be certain death to me to leave England."

"But I can't say anything of the kind, Mrs. Strong, because as a matter of fact I think you ought to go back to your husband."

"I didn't send for you to hear what you thought," she replied uncourteously. "I heard you were mighty clever, and a woman's doctor, and I thought you'd be on my side. You're a fraud, and I shan't send for you again. A man would see through the thing at once."

"I see through it very well, Mrs. Strong, but I'm not going to do it," I replied goodhumouredly. "I suppose I may wish you good afternoon."

“For answer she lifted a silver handbell on the table by her bed, and rang it violently. Immediately a young lady entered the room, her elder daughter, I supposed, but she did not introduce me. She was certainly one of the loveliest creatures I have ever seen, and might have belonged, so far as grace and aristocratic bearing were concerned, to the highest in the land.

“‘Show Dr. Glen down, Hannah, or ring for the girl, and I guess she won’t come back.’

“Hannah Strong slightly elevated her eyebrows, but being evidently less talkative than her mother and sister, made no remark whatever, and showed me politely to the top of the stairs. Curious experience, wasn’t it? and could you conceive of a situation more absurd?

“But I had not heard the last of the Strongs by any means. That very evening, as I was paying my evening visit to a house in Portland Place, where there was a serious case of pneumonia, I heard the name of Strong mentioned. You have heard me speak of the Claud Musgraves, haven’t you?”

“Yes, and have met Mrs. Musgrave at your house.”

“Oh, well, you don't need me to tell you much about them. They have always been poor, of course, as most younger branches are; and they harassed themselves trying to live as if they were rich, entertaining even in the most lavish style at Portland Place in the season. I knew Mrs. Musgrave very well, and often attended her, for the harassing anxiety of her life was too severe a strain on her nervous system, and she collapsed always two or three times in the season. Though she was an out-and-out woman of the world, I liked her very much. She was frank and sincere, and had the kindest heart in the world. Often I used to try to reason with her, pointing out that a quiet life at their sweet little place in Sussex would be much better for her than the constant excitement in which she lived and moved and had her being.

“‘My dear doctor,’ she would say, with her gay, coaxing little smile, ‘you may hold your tongue. I could no more spend my life at Musgrave Place than I could fly; besides, I have the boy to think of.’

“Considering that the boy was five-and-twenty, and had never entertained a serious thought in his life, I generally at this juncture took her advice and held my tongue.

"She had caught cold at an evening crush, and was really seriously ill. I found her that night even more fevered than she had been in the morning, and was not surprised to hear that something was worrying her. When her maid left the room for a moment, she turned eagerly to me.

"'Doctor Glen, you must get me well at once, for I'm worried to death nearly.'

"'Well, I'm doing my best, and I was quite pleased with you this morning. What have you been doing to yourself to-day!'

"'I? nothing. It's Claud: he's raving about a new girl, a dreadful American creature he met somewhere—I believe at Lady Casselrode's, the other night; you know what a heterogeneous collection she gathers under her roof, and I must get up to look after him.'

"'Is she an American heiress?' I inquired.

"'Oh, I don't know. Claud says she is—that Betty Casselrode told him so. They've a house in Manchester Square, it seems.'

"'In Manchester Square,' I repeated. 'What's their name?'

"'Oh, I don't know—didn't inquire. But, my dearest doctor, I must get up to nip this thing

in the bud. We're poor enough, Heaven knows, but we're not going to bolster up Musgrave poverty and pride with American dollars.'

"Many do, who count their escutcheons as fair as that of the Musgraves,' said I, admiring her for her pluck and her good old family pride.

"That may be, but my dear husband would turn in his grave at the very thought of it. If there was one thing he hated on earth, it was America and everything pertaining to it.'

"Well, my dear Mrs. Musgrave, if you want to get well, and go on this new warpath, you must not worry, so long as you are obliged to lie still; and if you dare to rise before I give you leave, I shall not be answerable for the consequences.'

"And in the meantime Claud will go and get himself engaged to this impossible creature, and then death will be preferable.'

"It was no use to reason with her, and I was rather perplexed as I went downstairs. It therefore was a relief to me when the library door opened and Claud looked out. He was five-and-twenty, as I said, but I never thought of him as other than a boy. He was decidedly good-looking, but there was not much strength of character in his face.

Everybody liked him, but nobody thought him brilliant or likely to succeed.

“‘Good evening: how’s the mater?’ he asked, and I was intimate enough in the house to walk into the library unasked.

“‘She’s worrying about you, Mr. Claud. What’s this you’re about now?’

“He reddened a little.

“‘I suppose she’s been telling you. Don’t you think she might wait till she sees Miss Strong?’

“‘Perhaps when she does see her she will relent. I happened to see Miss Strong myself this afternoon. I am certain I have never beheld a more beautiful creature.’

“‘I wish you could have seen the boy’s face. It positively shone.

“‘You have seen her!’ he cried rapturously. ‘Oh, Doctor Glen, won’t you put in a word for me? The mater will do anything in the world for you, and it means just everything to me.’

“‘I promised, and next day I had a little talk with Mrs. Musgrave, which considerably improved her state of mind. Soon after that, when she was convalescent, I had a great rush of serious work, and did not call at Portland Place for a few weeks.

In that time, of course, I had heard or seen nothing of the American ladies in Manchester Square.

“One afternoon, when I returned rather late from my round, I found the smart, well-appointed Musgrave carriage at my door, and in the house Mrs. Musgrave, a trifle impatiently awaiting my arrival. One glance at her face sufficed to tell me she was in good health and the highest spirits.

“‘How do you do, you careless, neglectful creature? I might be dead for all you care. Perhaps the day will come when you will find it does not pay to neglect good patients,’ she cried merrily.

“‘My neglect sits lightly on my conscience when I look at you, Mrs. Musgrave. I have never seen you look better.’

“‘I am perfectly well, and in good spirits too. Can you guess what I have come to tell you?—that Claud is engaged to his American star, and that I am proud to be the bearer of the news.’

“‘If so, I am proud to hear it,’ I answered, heartily.

“‘A most perfect creature, and the sweetest nature. I love her already as my own. And not only sweet, but clever and strong and self-reliant. Doctor Glen, she will make the boy, positively make him; and

her mother tells me her father is a millionaire, and that her dowry will be princely. Here sits the happiest woman in London.'

"Her joy, so sincere, so frankly expressed, was infectious. I felt happy too, and told her so.

"'How do you get on,' I ventured to inquire, with a little smile—'how do you get on with Mrs. Seth B. Strong?'

"Mrs. Musgrave made a little wry mouth.

"'She is rather a tough morsel, and I cannot conceive how she can be mother to that perfect creature. The other daughter is passable. She can hold her tongue when necessary, and that is a good deal. The mother cannot. But perhaps,' she added innocently, 'though Hannah becomes Mrs. Claud Musgrave, we need not of necessity see much of Mrs. Seth B. Strong.'

"'Perhaps by that time she will be reconciled to St. Paul's, Minnesota,' I answered.

"'What did you do to her, Doctor Glen? She could annihilate you. We have agreed to differ about you, and your name is never mentioned.'

"'If she did not tell you, I need not, dear Mrs. Musgrave. I only spoke my mind.'

"'As you do to me on occasion. Well, I hope

they'll be married before the end of the season, and that you will be their family physician. It seems Mr. Strong is coming over. He decided to come directly the news of the engagement was sent to him. Well, I must positively run. I'm going to pick up Hannah and drive through the Park. She makes a sensation there, I can tell you, and I enjoy it.'

"So she fluttered away, and I mused for a little over the odd turn events had taken, little dreaming how soon the shadow of a terrible tragedy was to fall upon this general happiness. One night about six weeks later I was summoned in hot haste to the house of the Strongs in Manchester Square. When I arrived I found there a state of confusion and consternation, and Mrs. Strong in her room in one of the most violent and obstinate fits of hysterics I have ever seen. It took me quite an hour to get her calmed. All the time Hannah, my dear friend's future daughter-in-law, was in the room helping me; and I could not but admire her self-control, her quick intuition, her womanly helpfulness. All the time I felt that something serious had happened: the girl's face was ashen-hued, and her eyes full of despair.

“When the violence of the attack passed off, Mrs. Strong was left in a prostrate, almost unconscious state, but I was no longer alarmed about her. When I felt myself able to leave the room, Hannah followed me, and took me convulsively by the arm.

“‘If poor mother can be left, may I speak to you a moment? Have you time?’

“‘Yes, yes, my dear,’ I said, pushing open the door of the nearest room, which was the girls’ bedroom.

“‘Papa came this afternoon, Doctor Glen,’ she began in a low, strained kind of voice, ‘a few days earlier than we expected him, and brought dreadful news. His business is wrecked completely, and he is a bankrupt, and even worse. They are seeking him to prosecute for fraud. I think that was the word he used. Of course it was a terrible shock to mamma, but I cannot think it was right of her to speak to him as she did, upbraiding him for having brought us to beggary, and saying such cruel things. Then papa got angry too, and said it was our extravagance that had ruined him, and that it was we who ought to be punished. Oh, it was a dreadful scene; and he ran out in the end, banging the door, and saying he would make an end of it, and we do not know where to find him.’

“Her blanched lips trembled, and her great startled eyes looked despairingly into mine.

“‘Oh, he will come back, dear girl, and this sad time will be forgotten,’ I said, not knowing how to comfort her.

“She shook her head.

“‘I don’t think so. I feel that the worst is going to happen to us. Perhaps we deserve it for the false life we have led. I have often felt how cruel we were to poor papa, and now I know it, though mamma always said he didn’t care. Sometimes I begged to be allowed to go home to him myself, but she would not allow me. All her life mamma has made everybody do just as she likes. And I have been so happy. God help me! I thought myself the happiest girl on earth, and now——’

“I have never forgotten the sight of the poor girl’s anguish, and my thoughts were bitter against the selfish woman in the adjoining room, who was solely to blame for it all.

“I stayed a long time with her, and I could not sleep that night for thinking of the Strongs, and of my friends the Musgraves, who would be so seriously affected by it. I confess that when I

reflected on the pride of Mrs. Musgrave—I saw but little hope for Hannah Strong. Future developments proved how mistaken I had been in my estimate of Evelyn Musgrave's character, though I had known her long and well. Next day the worst fears of poor Hannah were realised. Her father was found in Regent's Park in the still hours of the morning, dead, with a bullet through his heart. His wife's reproaches, heaped on him in his extremity, had driven him to the last act in that sad tragedy. I hold her to this day guilty of his death. What did Mrs. Musgrave do? Not what I expected her to do, I assure you. I waited to hear that the engagement was broken off, and that the Seth B. Strong's had retired ignominiously to their own country. But it is the unexpected that always happens. Mrs. Musgrave, who had learned to love the sweet American girl as a daughter, insisted that the engagement should be carried out.

“It is you Claud and I want, my pet,” she said to the amazed girl, ‘not your dollars. But we must have you alone.’

And I think she was right. They were married after a suitable lapse of time, and though Mrs. Seth B. Strong was permitted to attend the marriage,

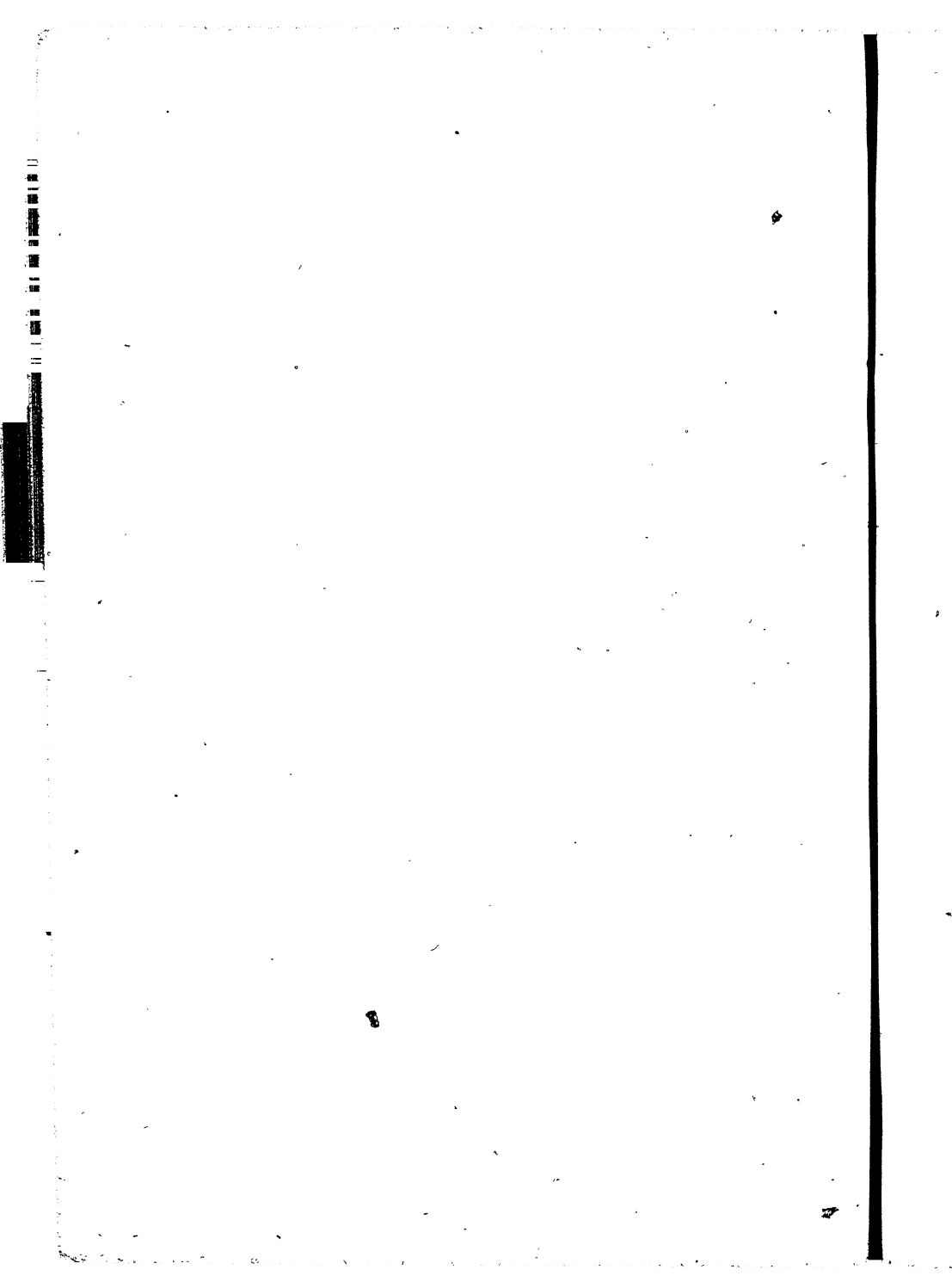


"HER FATHER WAS FOUND DEAD.



she saw her daughter there for the last time before she returned to her own country.

“It was as Mrs. Musgrave had said, Claud’s wife was the making of him. She brought brains, if not dollars, as her dowry, and she stirred him up to a true estimate of what he owed to his position and his name. Now he is a rising diplomatist, and she is one of the younger leaders of society. Between her and her husband’s mother exists adoration pure and simple, and there is not a happier family in England.”



III.

THE SIN OF THURSTON GALE.



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"A CHRISTMAS story," said Elizabeth, dreamily. "Yes, I think I have one, or even two if you want them. I shall call this one 'The Sin of Thurston Gale.'"

"You remember that very hard winter we had a few years ago, when we had frozen pipes and general discomfort for weeks on end? That was the year I saw the first and last of Thurston Gale."

"Man or woman?" I asked.

"Man, and a poor one at that; at least, he was sadly lacking in qualities you and I are accustomed to admire in the men we know."

"Tell me what they are, Elizabeth," I said, coaxingly, for it occurred to me that my readers might like to know what particular qualities in man Doctor Glen most admired.

"Oh, you know them very well," she said, rather flippantly, as I said, for so serious a subject. "Honesty, unselfishness, purity and truth—in a word, high religious principle, which guarantees all the rest. The longer I live the more firmly am I convinced that in religious principle we have the only guarantee of happiness or peace in this world, as well as in the next."

"Elizabeth, you have the knack of expressing my thoughts and opinions exactly," I said, with a sigh. "I am quite sure you ought to have been the writer of books, and not I."

"I shouldn't talk nonsense, were I you," observed Elizabeth, severely. "Now listen to Thurston Gale. It is half-past eight. I believe Keith will be home before I finish my narration."

"If he should come, I have no doubt he will listen patiently to its conclusion," I said, settling myself for a delightful evening.

We were in the inner portion of the large double drawing-room, and the heavy curtains shut us in. A great log fire blazed and crackled on the hearth, and the candles in two great silver candelabra made a steady radiance over the room. The floor was oak, and uncarpeted, except where some priceless

prayer rugs made a warm patch of colour. We had a big easy chair each, covered in that beautiful old flowered chintz which seems sacred to country houses. On a little Moorish table between us stood the coffee tray, and Elizabeth filled the cups before she began.

“Doctors see a good deal,” she observed, looking at me across the diary. “And they learn among other lessons—some of them bitter—to hold their tongues. My conscience troubled me once or twice because I held my tongue about Thurston Gale, but I am glad now, because there is no doubt my silence saved a soul from going down to the pit for ever.

“I was very busy that winter, you remember, the water famine and the extreme cold combining to make people generally miserable. I had come in from a long round one afternoon, and when I found a message to go at once to Burton Crescent to see people called Gale, a name quite unfamiliar to me, I felt inclined to pay no heed. But the fear, more or less present with every medical man who feels inclined to shirk such cases, lest a human life may be jeopardised by his carelessness, made me turn out reluctantly. I had not sent the carriage

away, and it took me in a few minutes to the house. I was not surprised to find it a lodging-house, of a very second-rate order. I was taken up to a poorly-furnished sitting-room, in which a woman sat alone in an untidy dressing-gown, and looking generally the picture of negligence and unloveliness. She was exceedingly plain-looking, a large bony person, with a somewhat freckled face, reddish hair, and light blue eyes. Her age seemed to be about six-and-thirty.

“‘Are you the patient I have to see?’ I asked, bluntly.

“‘Yes,’ she replied, languidly; ‘I’m Mrs. Gale: sit down.’

“‘I haven’t time to sit down,’ I made answer. ‘I have more work than I know how to accomplish before night.’

“I then proceeded to ask her a few professional questions, and came to a conclusion regarding her state of health.

“‘You’re run down,’ I said, as I sat down to write a prescription. ‘Have you had a good deal to worry you lately?’

“‘Not more than usual; but that isn’t saying much. I have the misfortune to be married.’

“‘Marriage is not always regarded as a calamity by our sex, Mrs. Gale,’ I said, looking round rather interestedly ; but her face gave no sign that she heard me, nor her words when she spoke.

“‘To a man who is ashamed of me, who hates the sight of me, and wishes I were dead ; but I’ll take care I don’t die yet awhile. There isn’t much the matter with me, you think?’

“‘Not much ; but it will be to your advantage, Mrs. Gale, if you adhere to total abstinence principles while you are under my care. I forbid stimulants of every kind ; do you hear?’

“She nodded languidly. She was a very unlovable, uninteresting-looking person, yet somehow I felt interested in her a good deal.

“‘Your husband is out all day, I suppose?’ I said, as I rose from the table ; ‘you are left a good deal alone?’

“‘Yes, he is engaged in newspaper, or rather secretary, work through the day, and he plays in the orchestra at a theatre every evening. He sleeps here, and occasionally dines.’

“She did not say this querulously, but with a certain slow bitterness which left a painful impression on my mind. I felt inwardly indignant with the

absent husband, Mr. Thurston Gale, and in spite of many lessons I had had regarding hasty judgments, I formed my own opinion of him there and then.

“‘You require a little cheerful society. Do you ever go downstairs?’ I asked. ‘Sometimes there are very pleasant people whom circumstances compel to live in boarding-houses.’

“‘Thurston won’t let me. He says I must not associate with them, but I do when he isn’t in. There’s a very jolly little American widow here, and a nice Frenchwoman. I sometimes go with them to a theatre of an evening. I’ve even been at his theatre. How riled he would be if he knew!’

“It seemed useless to make any further remark. The pair were evidently ill-assorted and unhappy, and nothing I could say would be likely to mend matters. I stayed a few minutes longer talking to Mrs. Gale, and left with the impression that she was a vulgar, under-bred, and decidedly unattractive person. I was glad to banish her from my mind until I had to see her again. I did not call for two days, as I was very busy with much more serious cases. When I did go back, I found

her decidedly worse. She had been drinking a good deal, and had a serious inflammation of the lungs. The American widow, introduced to me as Mrs. Summers, was sitting with her. She was a pretty plump little person, with a perfectly appalling capacity for talk. She irritated me to such a degree, I could scarcely be civil to her. You know that officious, fussy way some women have, especially in sick-rooms, always wanting to be mysterious and confidential, and to display all the medical and other knowledge they happen to possess. Such was Mrs. Summers. Mrs. Gale was in bed, and when I went back to the sitting-room Mrs. Summers followed me. I stepped back, and shut the door between.

“‘Are you in charge of Mrs. Gale, madam?’ I inquired. ‘Nursing her, I mean?’

“‘La, no—well, yes, I daresay I am, poor dear, though only for friendship and pity’s sake. That Gale ain’t worth a cent as a husband; he wants setting right, *he* does.’

“‘If you are nursing her, perhaps you will take a few directions from me,’ I said, not encouraging her to hold forth regarding Mr. Gale. ‘I absolutely forbid stimulants. Can you undertake that she won’t have any?’

"Mrs. Summers pursed up her lips and gave a little squeak.

"'Laws, no; that's one thing I can't do. She'd think nothing of getting up, doctor, and careering across the street for it, into Euston Road as soon's not, with nothing on but a nightgown.'

"'When does Mr. Gale usually come home? I should very much like to see him.'

"'He's got no hours; he comes when he likes, an' that ain't often. It's loneliness that's drove the poor thing to it. He reckons himself a gentleman, but if he's a gentleman, save me from such.'

"At that moment there was a heavy foot in the passage outside, and the door suddenly opened to admit Mr. Thurston Gale. I must say his appearance caused me the most profound surprise. He was a man of about six-and-thirty, and one of the handsomest I have ever seen. Not only that, but high-bred gentleman was stamped on his face and visible in every action. His manners were perfect—just the proper mixture of courtesy and respect.

"'I am glad to meet you, Doctor Glen,' he said at once. 'How do you find my poor wife to-night?'

To my great relief, Mrs. Summers presently slipped out of the room. I could see her uncomfortable in Thurston Gale's presence, though his manner was perfectly courteous to her. When he closed the door I sat down. He was a man I could talk to, a man of intellect and breeding. The wonder and mystery of his condition and surroundings lay heavy on my soul.

"Your wife is very ill," I said at once, looking at him keenly. He half sat on the edge of the table, and met my look.

"Very much under the influence of drink, do you mean?" he asked, with just a touch of sarcasm.

"I was not particularly referring to that; she has got a severe touch of inflammation, and I think you had better have a nurse."

"He got up and walked across the floor. Perhaps I imagined that a kind of eager light leaped in his eyes.

"For two reasons," I continued. "That she may be attended to for her illness, and watched regarding the drink."

"I am quite willing to do anything that is necessary," he said. "Will you make the arrangement, or shall I?"

“I can do so. One of my own nurses is disengaged at present, a capable and reliable woman. She can be here by eight o'clock.”

“Thank you very much,” was all he said.

“I shall see her before she comes, and she will have all her directions, but I may possibly look in about ten myself. One thing, Mr. Gale: it might be as well, I think, if Mrs. Summers did not come up here very much, at least while Mrs. Gale is so ill. You can say with perfect truth that it is imperative that she should be kept absolutely quiet.”

“I think you are quite right. I’ll see that she doesn’t come,” he said, gravely, and I went away. The man’s sad face, so full of power and yet lacking something, haunted me till I saw him again. I sent my nurse in, armed with full instructions, and after my consulting hours were over went back to Burton Crescent.

“I found my patient much more comfortable, the nurse having created a different atmosphere in the sick-room. She was asleep, so I did not disturb her. I was just about to leave, when Mr. Gale returned from the theatre. His evening dress set off his fine figure to advantage, and I was again struck by his noble bearing, which was out of all

keeping with his surroundings. I wished he would tell me something about himself, and he did.

“‘I find Mrs. Gale a good deal easier,’ I said, cheerfully. ‘There is a great deal of comfort in a good nurse.’

“‘I am much obliged to you. Will she sit up all night, or only part of it?’

“‘She had better remain in the room all night; she can lie down on the couch for an hour or two. Mrs. Gale will probably sleep after the draught she has had. Perhaps to-morrow night you could relieve her for an hour or two?’

“‘Yes, I can easily do that. My work does not take me out very early in the morning. I shall be glad to do what I can.’

“‘It is unfortunate that your wife has to be so much alone. There is no doubt that her loneliness and the lack of any occupation has conduced to her unfortunate failing.’

“‘I can’t help myself,’ he answered, briefly. ‘I am obliged to be out all day at my journalistic work. I am engaged on one of the evening papers, and then the theatre every night. The pay is so beggarly, it takes it all.’

“‘I looked at him straightly, and the words

were out of my mouth before I could stop them. 'You don't look like a man to do such back work.'

"He smiled drearily.

"'You think not? Circumstances are too strong for us sometimes. I am the victim of circumstances, and of a folly colossal enough to reach the heavens. Must you go now? Perhaps you will let me talk to you another time: it is so long since I talked with a lady.'

"There was a good deal of pathos in these words, and I felt somewhat drawn to Mr. Thurston Gale, but at the same time I had pity for the poor misguided creature in the next room, and I did not think he treated her with particular consideration or fairness. In the course of a few days, however, I changed my mind. She continued very ill, and in spite of the vigilance of the nurse, managed to procure drink somehow. Whenever her back was turned she was up and out of bed. Once when she had been left for five minutes she got out upon the balcony at the sitting-room window, and it was snowing at the time, and you know what the temperature was in Christmas week. In these circumstances, of course, her illness was likely to be

protracted, and, unless she could be constantly guarded, would probably have a fatal issue.

“On this account we had to fall back on the occasional services of Mrs. Summers, and I was positively certain that she supplied her with drink. Poor Mrs. Gale, I learned, had also been in the habit of taking morphia in considerable quantities, and I learned afterwards that this was also a failing of her friend Mrs. Summers. I never happened to see Mr. Gale again until the day before Christmas. I called about six o'clock in the evening, and, as there was no performance at his theatre that night, he was sitting, if I may so put it, at his own fireside. I bade him good evening, and went straight to his wife's room. She was very weak, but not visibly worse than she had been in the morning.

“‘She's been up again to-day, doctor,’ said the nurse, in a troubled voice; ‘and look at this.’

“She held up two bottles, a small phial containing morphia and an ordinary whisky bottle.

“‘I think as long as she's so bad I must try and do with the sleep I can get while Mr. Gale sits in the night.’

“‘We had better get a night nurse as well,’ I replied. ‘I'll speak to Mr. Gale.’

"When I went back to the sitting-room he rose and gave me a chair.

"Your wife has been neglected again to-day, Mr. Gale,' I said, rather sharply, for I was much annoyed. 'Have you any objection to another nurse to take night duty?'

"No; get her at once, by all means, if you think it necessary. Do you find her worse to-night?'

"How can she mend if she gets up and walks about the house? She went down to the dining-room to-day, I hear, when the boarders were at lunch. I suppose Mrs. Summers had gone down to get hers. And where did she get that morphia?'

"She's been taking it off and on for the last five years, as well as the whisky,' he said, bitterly. 'I have had a nice time of it, I can tell you, humiliated, year in and year out, to the very dust.'

"Was she like that when you married her?' I ventured to ask.

"I was not aware of it,' he replied, briefly. 'It is a long story; I can't trouble you with it to-night. It was a marriage of gratitude on my part. She

helped me out of a hole once in my college days, and I made what return I could.'

"'It was the worst return you could have made,' I said. 'She was evidently unsuited to you in every way.'

"'God knows that's true enough, yet I did what I could to make her happy. My marriage cut me off from all my relatives. You may possibly have heard of my father, Canon Thurston. I took another name to hide my degradation, and I have had no communication with them for years. I'm the black sheep of the family. I've never done anything terribly bad; only wasted, if you know what that means. I'm one of those unlucky wretches that can do a lot of things, none of them well. Everything I touch seems to be cursed. I sometimes wish I were dead.'

"I could think of nothing to say. The misery and hopelessness of the thing oppressed me vaguely.

"'It's long since all semblance of peace between my wife and me has been destroyed. I tried what I could at first to make her happy, but she was never satisfied from the beginning. She was disappointed because my people did not receive her,

and when I said I could not take her to my home, she went herself to claim their recognition as one of the family.'

"His face became rather pale as he said this, and his clear-cut nostrils dilated. I saw what it cost his pride to tell me all this, and yet he seemed to find in it a certain relief.

"'She went the worse for drink, and made a scene with my mother and sisters. My father wrote me a letter. Heavens! the sting of it is with me yet. I found it hard to forgive her, though I honestly tried to make no difference.'

"'It is a sad story; but, Mr. Gale, could your means not permit you to have a home of your own, however small? It is possible that in the interests of such a home Mrs. Gale might be happier and better in every way.'

"'I have tried it twice,' he said: 'do you suppose I enjoy this sort of life? It is her choice. She finds, so she says, some enjoyment in the society of the people in the house. If they please her, God forbid that I should grudge her such poor solace! I suffer it myself on that account.'

"I got up to depart, saddened and depressed still more. Oh, what shipwreck people make of

their lives! I wished I could say something to comfort him, but my lips could frame nothing. I only shook hands with him silently and went away.

“Next morning as I was sitting at breakfast, the Christmas bells making merry music in the heavy air, a messenger came in hot haste from Burton Crescent. I had given my coachman a holiday, but a hansom took me in a few minutes to the house. I arrived to find Mrs. Gale dead. I was inexpressibly shocked, and surprised as well.

“‘What’s the meaning of this?’ I said, sharply, to the nurse, who, white-faced and wretched-looking, was putting the room straight. Mr. Gale was nowhere to be seen.

“She took up the morphia phial and shook her head.

“‘God help us, doctor, there’s no doubt the poor thing took her own life, unbeknown to herself.’

“‘How did it happen, and when? How was she left in the night when I expressly forbade it?’

“‘She wasn’t left. Mr. Gale was sitting with her. I went to bed at half-past two, and I under-

stood him to say he fell asleep in his chair. When I left her she was sleeping, and I suppose he thought he might have a doze himself. There is no doubt she got up in the night and helped herself to the morphia. She had the bottle under her pillow; at least, I've taken it out of there lots of times.'

"What could I say? The thing was done. I was thinking of the certificate as I went downstairs. In the hall I met Mr. Gale. He looked haggard and worn, the picture of despair. Without a word I turned and went back to the sitting-room, he following.

"'This is a dreadful business,' I said, looking at him keenly. A horrible suspicion had seized on me, but there was nothing in his look to encourage or confirm it.

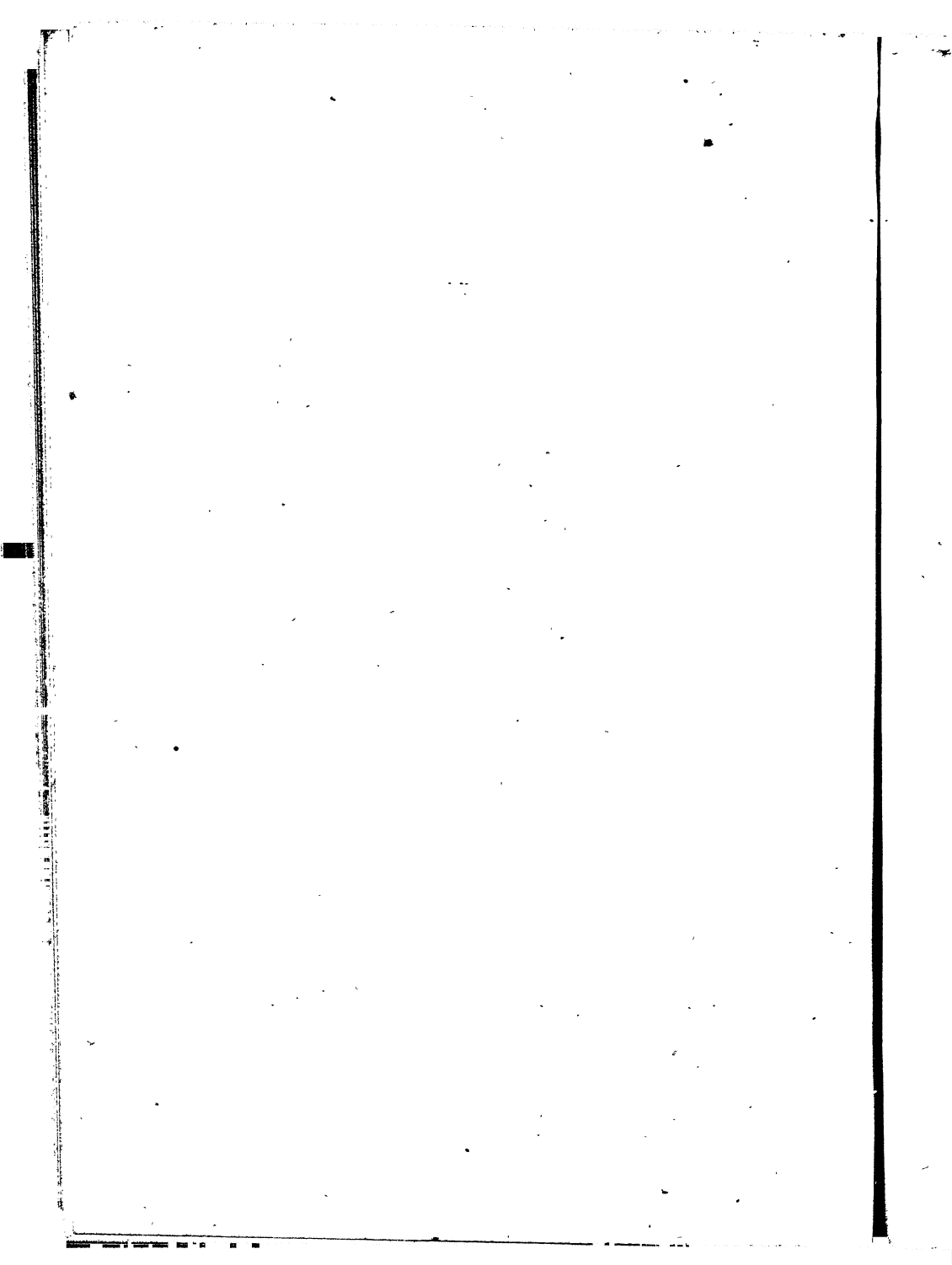
"'I suppose you can't certify an ordinary cause?' he said, quickly. 'Even for the sake of the people in the house?'

"'It is quite impossible,' I said, rather coldly. 'There must be an inquest. There is no doubt there has been culpable carelessness somewhere.'

"I said no more; and I could not see that my words made much impression on him.



"SHE GOT UP IN THE NIGHT AND HELPED HERSELF TO THE MORPHIA."
p. 66



“The inquest was duly held, and the usual verdict returned—‘Death from an overdose of morphia, but how administered there was no evidence to show.’

“Mr. Gale was examined, and he seemed to have stood the examination well, and made a favourable impression, because no blame or censure was passed on him.

“I was just thinking of going to bed on New Year’s Eve, after your Scotch dinner party, when Margaret came to see if I would speak to Mr. Gale. I was very tired; it was almost twelve, I was just waiting to see the New Year in, but I said I would see him. I happened to look at the clock as he came in, and noticed that it was a quarter to twelve. I had on my evening frock still, but I put on a wrap before Margaret showed him in.

“‘I am sorry to disturb you so late,’ he said, with that winning grace of speech and manner which characterised him. ‘I will not keep you many minutes. What I have to say can be said in a very few words. I have come to make a confession to you. I was not entirely innocent of my wife’s death. I was awake when she got up, and

I saw her get out the phial. I could have prevented it if I had wished. Did you suspect as much? I thought you did.'

"The suspicion certainly occurred to me, but only for a second. What tempted you to such a crime, Mr. Gale?—for it was nothing less.'

"Who tempts men to every wicked deed?' he asked, passionately. 'Why was I ever born to be a curse to myself and everything I touch? I was to have left England to-morrow for Australia, but accidentally to-day I saw my father advertised to preach a New Year's sermon in St. Christopher's. An awful longing to see the old man again came over me, and I went to the service, to my own undoing. He was thinking of me, I know, as he preached, of his own prodigal who had wrung his old heart to breaking, and his words went home. I went forth from the place convicted of my sin, and I no longer wish to escapé its consequences. Tell me what to do.'

"Sit down,' I said hurriedly. 'I must think for a moment. Sit down.'

"He sank heavily into a chair, and I paced up and down the room, praying passionately that God would guide me aright. I looked at the bowed figure

of the man with a great pity. I thought of his broken and wasted life, of his old white-haired father, of his fair sisters, to whom the exposure would bring such shame. And what, after all, would it avail to rake up that dead and bitter past, which could not be undone? Suddenly, clear as noontide, I saw my path before me.

“‘Thurston Gale,’ I said, and I laid my hand on his shoulder, ‘you have trusted me, and asked me what you are to do. God has given me His message to you. To-morrow is the first day of the New Year. Go forth to meet it a new man. Let your life atone for the past.’

“He sprang up, and drew himself to his full height.

“‘You say this to me honestly? You think I dare go forth among my fellow men without expiating my sin?’

“‘Nay,’ I said sadly, ‘God will claim your expiation; but consider how many hearts the public scandal would rend and break. It can do no good to the dead, and only harm to the living. The thing is past; let it lie. God go with you, Thurston Gale, and give you strength to serve Him yet!’

"He put his hands over his eyes, and two great tears fell from them.

"You are a Christian woman, I believe, and I take the message you have given me. Some day perhaps you may see its fruit."

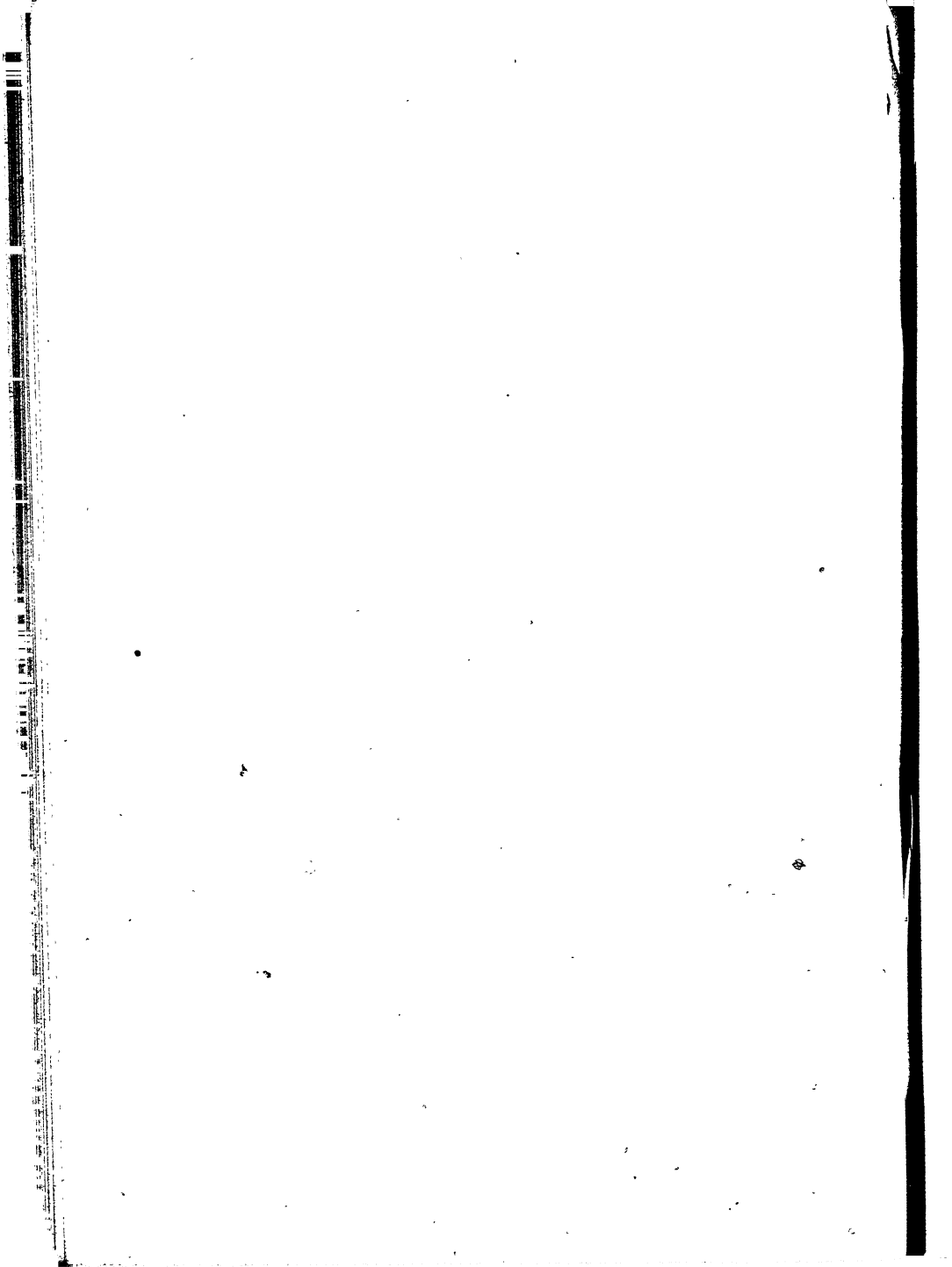
"I went with him to the door and bade him God-speed, pointing upward to the stars.

"I heard from him long after, and in a paper received some months ago I found him being honoured as a successful and public-spirited citizen in a colonial town, and the evidence of that report convinced me that he was a power for good in the locality where he had cast his lot. He wrote at the same time, and told me he was expecting a visit from his aged father and his two sisters, and that letter made me weep, though it filled me with joy too. The man takes his happiness humbly and with trembling, memory being swift and keen as a two-edged sword. Do you think I did right, dear, or wrong?"

"Right," I replied rather huskily, for the story had gone to my heart. "Don't you think so, Keith? Was it not a more Christian act to give a worthy citizen to the new world than to add another to the melancholy band in one of our convict prisons?"

“What does my wife say?” he asked, as he laid his hand on her head. She drew it down, and laid her cheek against it.

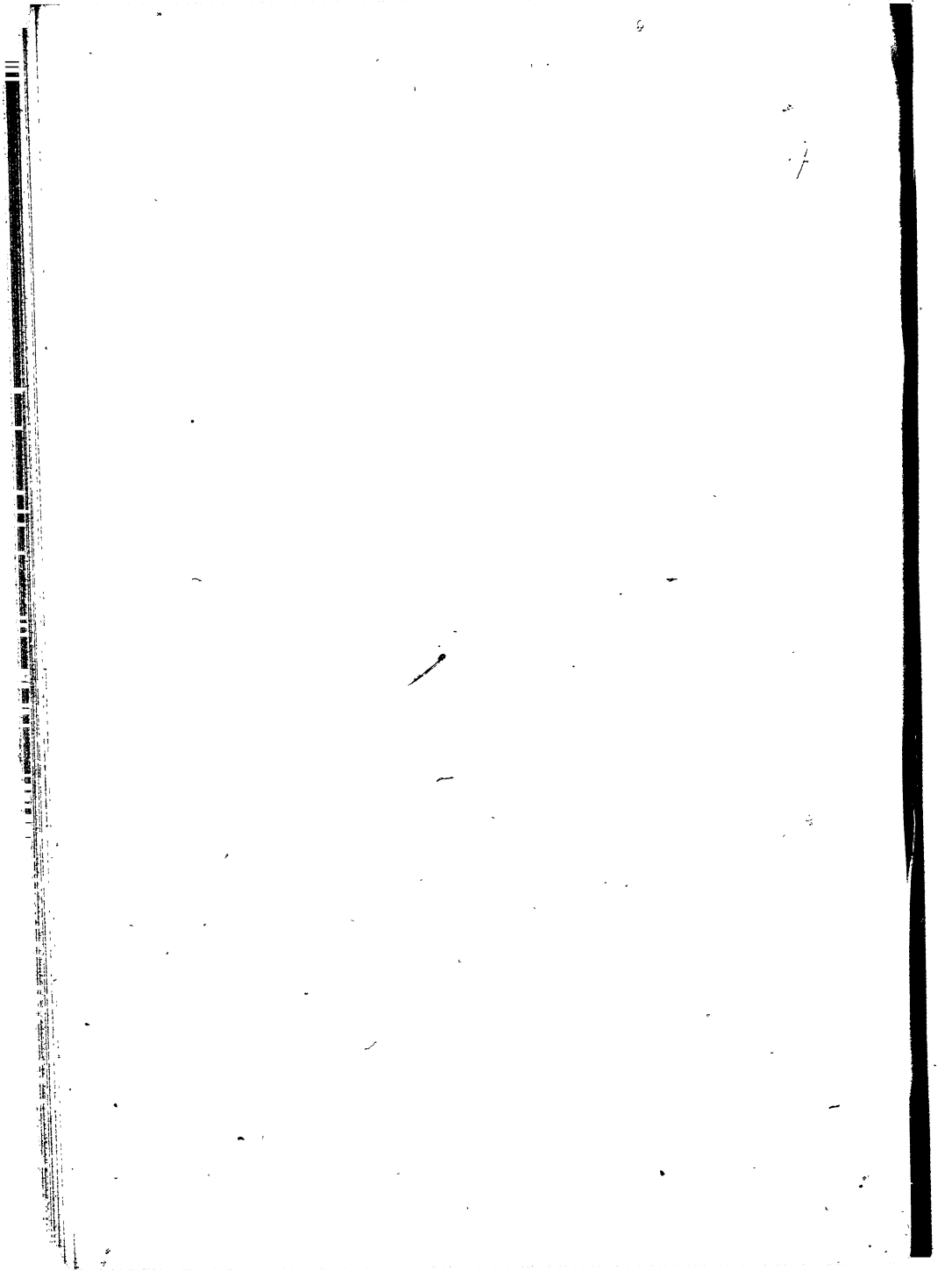
“I had a text for my consolation,” she said dreamily. “You remember in old Isaiah, ‘A bruised reed he shall not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench.’”



IV.

IDA FALCONER'S WEDDING.

7



IV.

IDA FALCONER'S WEDDING.

"I HAVE got a new plan in my head," said Elizabeth to me one day when we had met again in London. "I am really lost for want of something to do."

"Dear me, Elizabeth," I replied, with a smile, "most people would think your time very fully occupied; indeed, you were only telling me the other day what an appalling number of social engagements you had."

"Yes, but I want to cut them down," said Elizabeth, with a dismal little smile; "they seem to me to be such a waste of time. It is occupation I want. Besides, I am afraid of getting into the habit of going into society without my husband. I fear that is how it would end, because, you see, Keith is so much engaged at the House. He did not come home this morning till twenty minutes to

three. I could not help telling him that I wished I had been at his elbow to expedite the business."

"Is Mrs. Keith Hamilton about to develop into a New Woman?" I asked, with a smile.

"Not exactly," Elizabeth replied; "but you know it is every day's news that our legislators do waste a good deal of time."

"Well, and what about the new scheme?" I asked. For Elizabeth's schemes were always interesting, even when not feasible. She threw her own private personality into everything she thought and did, and I, who had known and loved her so long, had an absolute faith in her sincerity always.

May was nearing to its close, one of the loveliest Mays we had had in London for many years. It would be impossible for me to describe the glory of the early summer in the parks and gardens, the rich hues of the laburnums and lilacs, the beauty of the sun-gleams through the fresh young leaves, the feeling of joy and happiness and hope in every air that blew. Elizabeth had been in town for three weeks, but I had seen less of her than I wished. Her position as Keith Hamilton's wife, and the mistress of a Belgravian mansion, was very

different from mine ; the calls upon her time and thoughts almost as varied and unceasing as in the old days, when she and I used to discuss the issues of life in the cosy consulting-room in Rayburn Place.

"Well, my new scheme," said Elizabeth. "I want a hospital of my own."

"That is rather a large order, Elizabeth," I said. "And what special branch of your profession would you propose it to represent?"

"It must be a women's hospital, of course," she replied, promptly, "for the treatment of all kinds of suffering and disease. But I should like to run it on my own lines."

"And what are they?" I ventured to ask.

"Oh, well, I could not enter into them here; but do you think that it would be possible for me to carry on such a work, spending as little time as I do in London now?"

"That would altogether depend upon those associated with you in it. But I do not think, if you will excuse my being so frank, that there is any necessity for a hospital run on new and special lines."

Elizabeth looked at me in rather a startled way.

It was very seldom that she and I were at variance on any point we discussed, and I even imagined she looked a little hurt.

"Do you think, then, that there is sufficient provision in this city for all the suffering and sorrow in it?" she asked, quickly.

"Well, it may not be quite adequate to the need; but of this we are certain, because we prove it every day, that the great hospitals, provided out of the pockets of the benevolent for the needs and uses of the poor, are taken advantage of shamelessly on every hand by those who are quite able to pay the fees of a private physician or surgeon."

"That is quite true," Elizabeth assented. "But the fact remains that there is still room for more work to be done."

"But why not take an interest in one or other of the existing institutions?" I ventured to inquire. "Your influence and help would go a long way towards increasing the usefulness of any cause to which you might give your attention."

"Yes, perhaps so, but I am afraid I have too many fads, dear," she replied. "I should be constantly at variance with the managing committees, because I have my own peculiar ideas regarding

the conduct of hospitals. And I do think that there is room for great improvement."

"Well, of course," I replied, "if you feel disposed, with Mr. Hamilton's assistance, to spend a large fortune in this special direction, you can do so, Elizabeth. But I think you can be better employed."

"How so?" she asked, eagerly. "When you are so candid in your objections, you must give reasons."

"I am quite willing to do so. I really think that you do a great deal of work at home, and that when you come to London now, you ought to content yourself, first, by having a very pleasant time, and secondly, by allowing your influence to shed its benign light on all with whom you come in contact. While in your sphere as a fashionable lady——"

"I am not a fashionable lady," put in Elizabeth, rather shortly, and pushed her fingers through her bright hair with one of the old characteristic gestures, which warmed my heart.

"Well, a woman of position in the fashionable world, if you like that better," I said. "You know, as well as I do, that society in its present state sadly

lacks such pure-minded, single-hearted women as yourself, and I think it is your positive duty not to pass by the opportunities given you in the sphere to which you are called."

We were interrupted at that moment, and nothing more was said on the subject. I did not see Elizabeth again for some weeks, being myself out of town. And when we did meet again, we had a great deal to say to each other of a private and personal nature. I was lunching with her at her own house in Belgrave Square. We were quite alone; and after lunch, in Elizabeth's boudoir, where surely she had gathered everything that could please the eye and satisfy the heart, I referred to the subject of the hospital.

"Have you thought anything more about what we were talking of the last time we met?" I asked.

"No," she replied; "that conversation put an end to it, at once and for ever."

"Dear me!" I said, a little surprised. "Time was when you were not so easily turned aside from anything upon which you had set your mind."

"Ah, but I am learning, day by day as I go," she replied. "After I went home that night, I had a long talk with Keith, and he being entirely on your

side, I saw that it was useless for me to hold my own opinion against the wisdom of the two I loved best on earth."

Tears rose in my eyes. This unexpected tribute was very sweet to me, for there were times when I almost feared that I had lost my friend—not lost her altogether, only the nearness and closeness of the old days seemed to have gone, never to come again.

"What have you been doing with yourself, then, to fill up the hours which you found hung rather heavily on your hands?" I asked.

"I have been studying the men and women around me," she replied. "And I really sent for you to-day for two things—to have the joy of seeing you, and also to tell you a story upon which I want your comment."

"There is nothing I should like better than to hear some of your new experiences. It will take me back to the old days when no one had come between you and me."

"After such a speech," said Elizabeth, with one of her old flashing glances, "you do not deserve that I should speak another civil word to you to-day. But I am so anxious to hear what you have to say on this special subject that I must exercise a for-

giving spirit. You know, of course, that in the circle of society in which we move, one meets all sorts and conditions. I have often heard thoughtful and earnest-minded people deploring the state of society, and I used to think, judging from my own slender experience, that their pessimism was quite exaggerated, even uncalled for. But this is my second season, and I keep my eyes wide open to all that goes on around me. I am compelled to admit that there is too much truth in their gloomy forebodings. It seems to me that nobility of character and personal merit are entirely lost sight of, and that the world is given up to the worship of mammon, and all the accessories which wealth can buy. We see, daily, youth and beauty and loving hearts ruthlessly sacrificed on this altar, and the tale I am going to tell you is only one of several which have come under my notice.

“You have heard me speak of the Falconers of Falconhurst. ~~You~~ know Mr. Falconer is the Member for —shire, and has always had the reputation of being a very honourable and right-minded man. His wife belongs to an impoverished but well-born family in the North of England; they are frightfully poor, and she, unfortunately, is a slave to that ambition

which always appears to me to be the very poorest sort, the ambition to rise in the social scale, and to rank, if possible, with the highest. They have two daughters, lovely creatures, in whom are represented all the hopes of their ambitious mother. I do not think their father troubles his head very much about them. He is a politician born and bred, and has but little interest out of the House; and yet, although he has done much for his party, they do not appear to have recognised or rewarded him in any special way.

"I met the two daughters, Ida and Winifred, at a luncheon party with their mother, about two months ago, at Lady Clifden's. I conceived at once a strong antipathy, which I have never overcome, towards Mrs. Falconer. But the girls struck me as lively, pleasant, and wholesome characters. To the elder of the two I felt specially drawn. She had such a sweet, earnest face, lit by large, questioning grey eyes, and her manners were unaffected and sincere. She drew to me also, I could see; and in order that I might cultivate her acquaintance, I made an engagement with Mrs. Falconer, which would ensure us an early meeting.

"I was not disappointed in my estimate of Ida

Falconer. Out of that chance meeting a warm friendship sprang up between us, and I soon discovered that beneath that gay, bright exterior there was an aching heart.

“One afternoon, when I came in from my drive, I found her waiting for me in the drawing-room. I saw at once that she was in some distress, and had even been in tears.

“‘My dear child,’ I exclaimed, ‘what has happened to you? Tell me, and if I can do anything to help or comfort you, I shall only be too willing.’

“‘Oh, Mrs. Hamilton,’ cried the girl—and I shall never forget the look of wistful entreaty she cast upon me—‘there is no one in the wide world can help me, but only you. I know how happy you are, and what a high and sacred idea of married life you hold, and have come to you in great trouble, because mamma wishes to force me into a marriage with a man I cannot respect, much less love.’

“I sat down in front of her, prepared to hear her story, interested beyond measure, although it was a story I had heard and seen repeated so often that I had begun to grow a little weary of it.

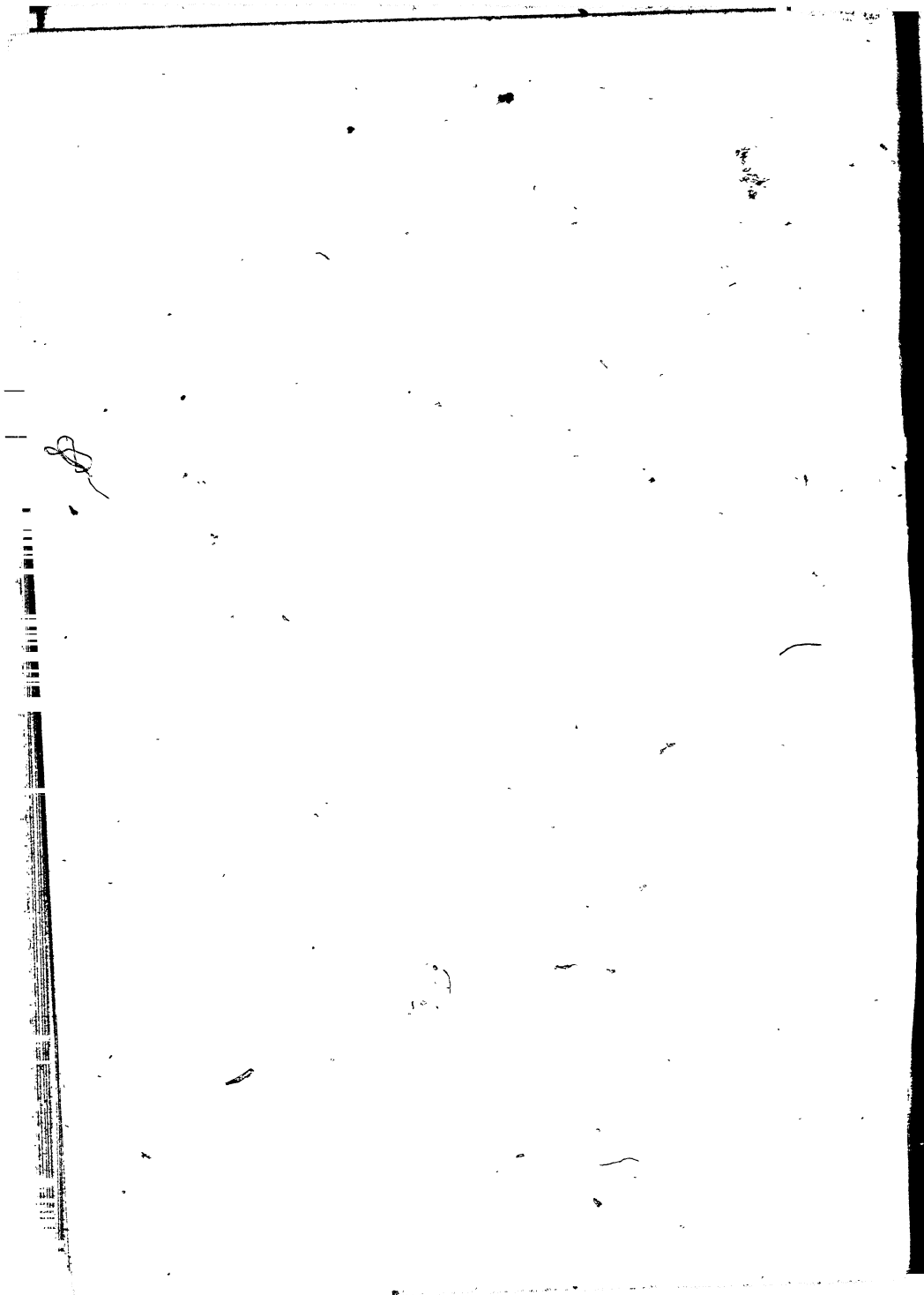
“‘Who is the man?’ I asked, rather abruptly; ‘do I know him?’



BEDELL & CO.

"MY DEAR CHILD," I EXCLAIMED, "WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOU?"

CP. 84.



“I don't know. I think you must have seen him: it is Lord Heron.”

“Lord Heron!” I almost gasped; ‘why, child, he is old enough to be your father, almost your grandfather.’

“Yes, I know, and if even he were a good man— But, oh, I feel sure he is not that, and I feel desperate. Oh, it is impossible. I can never be his wife.’

“But surely your father will interfere to prevent this sacrifice?” I said quickly. ‘If he loves you, and you appeal to him, he will never allow you to be made so wretched for life?’

“She shook her head rather sadly.

“You know, Mrs. Hamilton, we are frightfully poor. We are as poor almost for our position as those who can scarcely get bread enough to eat. We live in constant dread of a dishonourable crisis overtaking us; it is a wretched life. I often envy the women who wait upon us in the house, because they, at least, have a comfortable home, an easy conscience, and no anxiety.’

“I did not, for the moment, know what to say. I knew that their mode of life was too common to excite much comment, and that the hollowness and

mockery of the place they called home could find a parallel in almost every West-end square.

“‘Mamma has quite settled it all, and even fixed the date of the wedding. It is to be on the third of July. My trousseau is ordered, and I feel exactly like a prisoner hemmed in on every side, without the remotest hope of escape.’

“‘But have you told Lord Heron, dear Ida, the state of your feelings towards him? Surely he will withdraw from a marriage which offers such very poor prospects of happiness.’

“‘You do not understand,’ she said, feverishly. ‘Mamma is just like a general, keeping her troops incessantly under her own eye. She never, by any chance, allows us to have a word together; she has spoken for me, and persuaded Lord Heron that I am quite willing to marry him, and that my manner towards him, which I must say might have daunted a much more courageous man, is the outcome of shyness and girlish reticence. Mamma constantly dins into my ears all that he is doing and will do for us. She says he will take all these dreadful mortgages off Falconhurst, and relieve papa and her from the frightful incubus which has lain upon them for so many years. Also that Winnie, under

my wing, will very probably make one of the matches of next season. She gives me no peace, and I feel so stupefied and dazed that sometimes I imagine myself a character in a play which has no reality in it.'

"'On the third of July,' I repeated: 'why, child, that is only three weeks from now.'

"A little shudder passed through the girl's frame, and the delicate colour faded from her cheek.

"'I shall never live to see it, Mrs. Hamilton. I shall do something desperate before then. Oh, could you, would you, go to mamma, and explain the true state of my feelings? I am afraid to do so; I have tried, but she will not listen. She affects to misunderstand me, and tries to turn the subject by directing my thoughts to the glory of my future position, showing me the innumerable and costly gifts which Lord Heron is constantly sending to me. I hate them all, and I will never willingly set my eyes upon them.'

"I hesitated for a moment, divided between unspeakable compassion for this new victim at the altar of worldly ambition, and with reluctance to take upon myself so delicate a mission. One seldom, as you and I well know, gets any thanks in this

world for meddling with other people's business, and the little I had seen of Mrs. Falconer convinced me that she was a woman who would quickly resent any interference with her family affairs, especially when that interference was likely to clash with her ambitious desires. Still, I could not look upon that worn and lovely face, picturing to myself the future which stretched before her, without making one effort, even if it should prove futile, to save her for a happier fate.

“‘It is a very hard task you ask me to perform, my dear child,’ I said, kindly, ‘and I do not know that it will be of the least avail, but if you like, for your sake, because in the short time I have known you I have learnt to love you, I will see your mother, and make an appeal on your behalf.’

“‘And when will you come? Come soon, the sooner the better,’ she said, with the same feverish eagerness. ‘They are drawing up settlements now, and soon, perhaps, it will be too late. Could you not come this very day?’

“‘No, I cannot come to-day, but to-morrow I will make a point of seeing your mother. At what hour is she most likely to be found at home?’

“We have some people coming to lunch to-morrow, and I am quite sure that you would find her at home about three o'clock in the afternoon.”

“Very well; I shall be there at three o'clock.”

“I shall be out; may I come and wait for you here, dear Mrs. Hamilton? Oh, I pray God that you may be successful, because I shall never live to go through this dreadful ordeal.”

“Of course, I replied at once that she was very welcome to come and wait for me, and on that understanding we parted. But I must say I did not contemplate my experience of the morrow with any great elation. When I told Keith about it, on his return from the House, he seemed extremely reluctant for me to have anything to do with it. He knew Mrs. Falconer a great deal better than I did, and he assured me I was likely to meet with a very cool reception. But when I impressed upon him the awful anguish of mind from which the poor girl was evidently suffering, he allowed me to have my own way in it.”

“As he does in most other things,” I put in. But Elizabeth was too serious to smile.

“Next afternoon, at half-past two, I drove to the

house of the Falconers in Hans Place. Mrs. Falconer was at home, and appeared delighted to see me. I felt very guilty as I sat in her drawing-room, compelled to join in the general conversation so long as there were other people in the room. Watching her keenly, and listening to her talk, I could see that she was highly elated, and had no doubt it was in contemplation of the brilliant alliance her daughter was going to make. After waiting about twenty minutes, and the younger daughter being in the room, I ventured to say to Mrs. Falconer that I should be much obliged if she would give me a few minutes' private conversation. She looked surprised, but instantly assented, and conducted me into a small room which she appeared to use as a private sitting-room. I am not at all a nervous woman, as you know, and I have faced many strange and trying situations, but I never felt so much of a coward as at that moment, when facing this heartless woman of the world, knowing the nature of the appeal I was about to make.

“I have to apologise, Mrs. Falconer; for what I am about to say,” I began, briefly. “I have absolutely no excuse to offer for it, not even the plea of old friendship or long acquaintance; but I trust that

you will at least give me the credit for a single-minded motive, and believe that I would not interfere in so private and delicate a matter out of mere curiosity or a desire to pry into the concerns of others.'

"She inclined her head courteously, but at the same time kept her eyes keenly fixed on my face, and I saw them even flashing a little.

"'I suppose you have not the slightest idea of what I am about to say?' I remarked.

"'My dear Mrs. Hamilton, how could I possibly have any idea? But, believe me, I am honoured that you should even be interested in a slight degree in me and mine.'

"'I have come to speak to you, then,' I continued, bravely, 'about your daughter Ida and her marriage with Lord Heron.'

"She drew herself up, and I saw that she was prepared to be on the defensive at once.

"'Well?' she said, with a stiffness and hauteur which sat very well upon her, but, at the same time, made me feel more acutely the difficulty of my task.

"'I scarcely need to tell you that she is unhappy. You, her mother, must know it. She came to me

yesterday in acute distress, and told me that her whole heart and soul shrank from the thought of this unsuitable alliance.'

"'It is an alliance of which any girl and any family might be proud,' she said, and though her manner and voice were quiet, I was not deceived. I saw that her anger was rising, and I felt that instead of helping the situation, my well-meant interference might make it even harder for poor Ida.

"'It may be a great alliance from one point of view, Mrs. Falconer,' I said quickly. 'But consider that Lord Heron is an old man, at least ten years older than your own husband. You know, as well as I, that the character he bears is not of the highest—nay, that he has been mixed up with more disreputable stories than any man in London. Ida is a mere child; to tie her for life, or even for a term of years, supposing Lord Heron's life should not be prolonged, is not only cruel, but wicked. There is not for her, in such an ill-sorted marriage, even the remotest ray of hope; it is impossible that they can be happy—their age, and tastes, and habits absolutely forbid it. Think for a moment before you break the child's heart and ruin her life.'

"I know I spoke passionately, for I felt it greatly. I thought of nothing but the anguished white face of Ida Falconer and the imploring tones of her voice when she prayed me to save her. But at the same time I knew perfectly well that my action was unwarrantable, that I had intruded, without the slightest ground except that of common humanity, on a private family affair, and I saw that Mrs. Falconer took this view of it. She looked at me with eyes in which scorn and bitter resentment were mingled.

"'I must absolutely decline,' she said, icily, 'to have any conversation whatever with you upon this question. You have truly said that you have not even the right of an old acquaintance to speak to me upon this subject. I have often heard you spoken of as eccentric, but were I asked for my opinion, I should certainly say that you were not only eccentric, but dangerous.'

"So saying, she moved towards the door.

"'Mrs. Falconer,' I said, quietly, though my cheeks were aflame at her insulting words, 'in the course of my professional work, before my marriage, it was my sad privilege to see much behind the scenes of family life, and this I could set down,

that of all the forms of misery and wretchedness which abound in this sad world, there is none more hopeless, more degrading, and more heartbreaking than that of a loveless and unsuitable marriage. I can only implore you once more, because you are a mother, to hesitate before you sacrifice your child to such a life.'

"She swept majestically out by the door, and returned to the drawing-room, leaving me standing on the landing without even having the courtesy to ring for a servant to attend me to the door. I drove back to my own home, feeling that I had indeed only made matters worse. I found poor Ida waiting for me, and although I spared her the full recital of her mother's indignation and heartless words, I told her as gently as I could that my interference had done absolutely no good. I was too unstrung myself to comfort her as I might have done in a calmer mood, and I longed for Keith to come home in order that I might unburden my heart to him. That was the last time I saw Ida Falconer. I heard next day that they had gone out of town, and then I saw it stated about a fortnight later that they had again returned to Haas Place in time for the wedding, which was to

take place at St. Peter's on the third of July. Everything was in readiness for it, but it never came off. You have not forgotten that startling paragraph which appeared in a morning paper a few weeks ago, telling how the body of a beautiful and well-dressed young lady was found in the Serpentine, and was identified as that of Miss Ida Falconer. She had gone out for a walk with her dogs, and as one of them was also found drowned, it was supposed that she had lost her life in trying to save him. Of course the usual condoling paragraph appeared, the case being all the sadder as she was to have been married the following day. As I read their fulsome paragraphs expressing so much regret and sympathy, both for her parents and for the bridegroom thus ruthlessly bereaved, I could not help thinking what a mockery it all was, for I knew very well, and so, I felt sure, did Mrs. Falconer, that Ida's sad end was not the result of an accident, but a deliberately premeditated act, and I do not blame her. I feel sure that she will be judged very tenderly where she has gone. No, I have not seen Mrs. Falconer since, nor do I wish to. I do not think I could bear to look upon her face, nor to hear her speak. I should have no

hesitation in saying that Ida Falconer was murdered, so hemmed in by the stress on her life that she became distracted, and saw no other way of escape. Yes, it has saddened me very much. I often say to Keith that I wish we had not come up to this great Babylon, with its whirl of pleasure-seeking and its hollow mockery of all that makes life worth living. I shall be glad when the time comes when we can turn our backs upon it, and go back to our own lovely and quiet home among the hills which seem to reach to heaven."

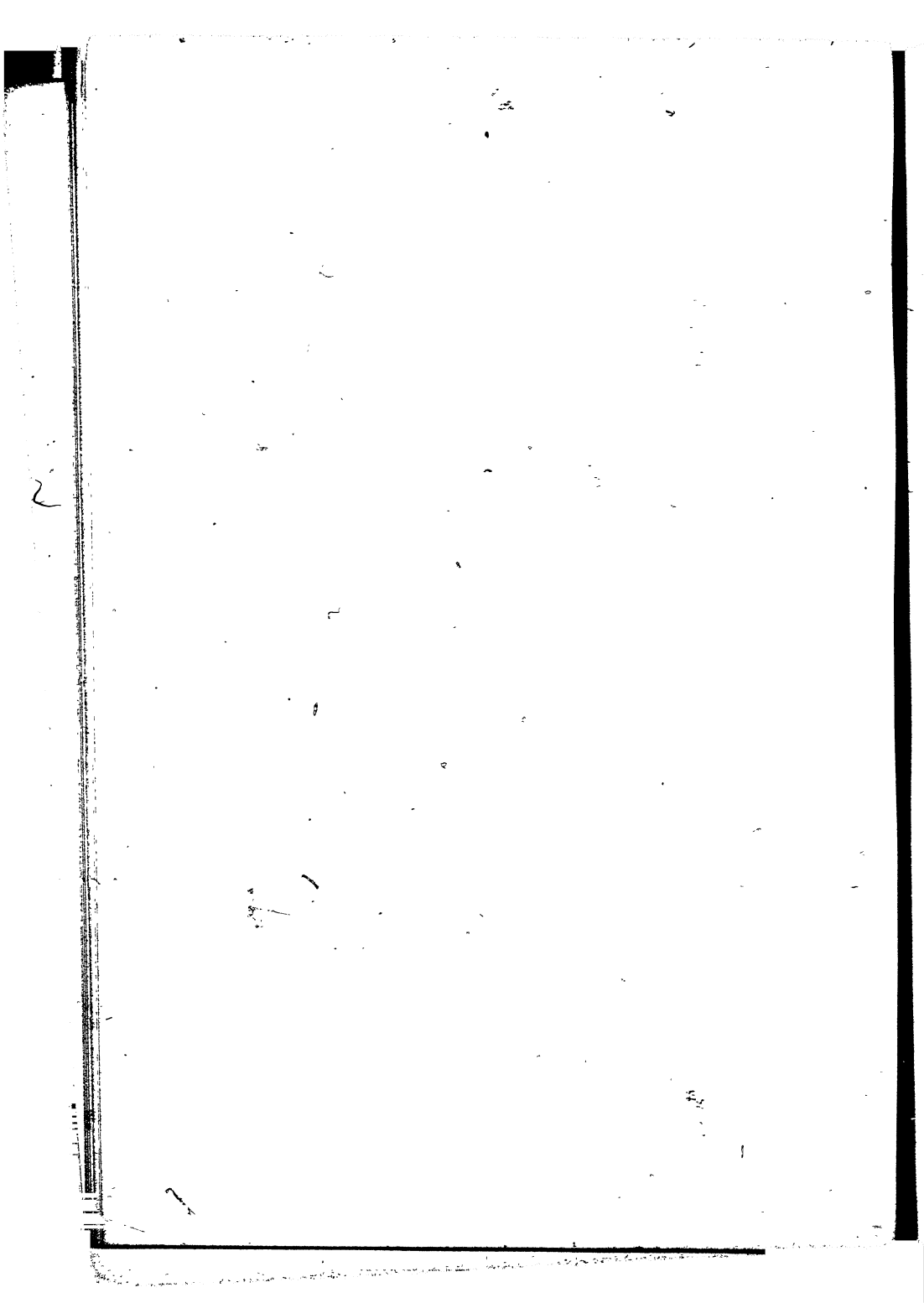
I was silent for a moment when Elizabeth ceased, inexpressibly saddened by the story to which I had listened, and at a loss to think of anything that could comfort her.

"You have at least done something already, dearest," I said at length. "By setting a high ideal of married life before poor Ida Falconer, you made it impossible for her to accept anything lower."

"Yes; but what good did it do? Look at the end of it all. I am very much tempted to think that in some respects women of Mrs. Falconer's type have the best of it in this world."

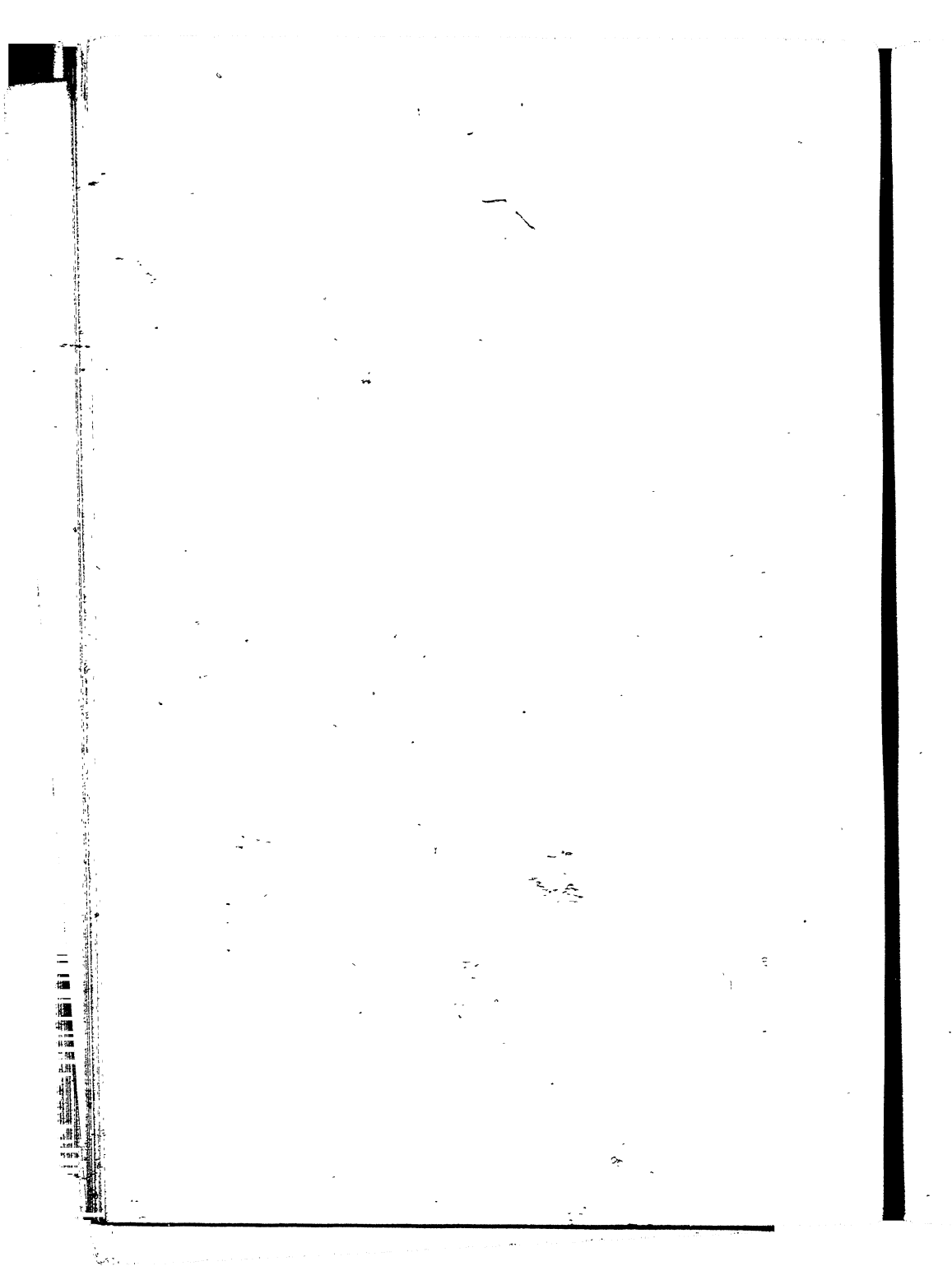
But Elizabeth's look belied her words, and

I prayed as I went home that she might be long spared to continue in her new sphere the wholesome, womanly, and Christian work begun in the little home where I learned to love her first.



V.

ON THE BRINK.



V.

ON THE BRINK.

WHEN I saw Elizabeth again, she was overflowing with enthusiasm over a new project. It was very interesting to me to study my friend in these days, and oftentimes her intense desire to find some useful and satisfying outlet for her energies rebuked me. She was so much in earnest always, and so single-minded in everything she undertook, that I sometimes envied her perennial hopefulness which neither failure nor discouragement could quench. To talk with her, or rather to listen to her, for half an hour was like inhaling a draught of mountain air, which acted like a stimulant. We were on a shopping expedition one morning, and after we left one of the great establishments Elizabeth said to me, quite suddenly, "Don't you think, dear, that shop girls have a very hard time of it?"

"Some of them no doubt have," I answered

"If everybody were as considerate and thoughtful as you, shopping would soon reach the ideal height."

"Oh, that is not what I am thinking of. No doubt they have their worries and difficulties in their working hours, but in that respect they are no worse off than every one else. I am thinking rather of their lives outside working hours. What can they have to make the time pass pleasantly and profitably?"

"Many of them live at home, Elizabeth, and then they have the usual advantages of family life," I observed.

"I grant that ; but what of the thousands who don't live at home, who have come up to this Babylon entertaining probably foolish dreams of making a fortune by the easiest and quickest route? They have small salaries, and find it difficult to make ends meet. They can only afford a poor lodging, and where do they get that recreation and diversion which is necessary to all workers if they would keep themselves fit?"

"I suppose they do have diversion of some kind," I answered, vaguely ; "and they are always friendly with each other."

"I have been talking with a good many lately," said Elizabeth, soberly. "And the monotony of their lives is simply appalling. I wish I could do something to help. I do want to help so dreadfully."

"Didn't you find that they rather resented being talked to?" I asked, with interest. "I think they do as a rule; and I am quite sure I admire them for it. After all, what right have you, or I, or anybody to assume a patronising air to any body of workers, and ask prying questions about their concerns?"

I said these words deliberately because, as it happened, they had been written to me by one of the magazine readers, and the rugged if slightly unpalatable truth of them had struck home. Elizabeth turned round in the carriage, and looked at me in a distinctly pained way.

"I cannot think what has come over you lately," she said, in a troubled voice. "You are so lukewarm in any good work, and so anxious to throw cold water about everywhere. What can you mean by it?"

"I suppose it is the outcome of experience. I am older than you, Elizabeth, and I have seen more,

in a way, than you have. When I came first to London I felt a great deal like you. I was crammed with all sorts of enthusiasms, and overflowing with schemes for helping everybody. These enthusiasms have gradually cooled down."

"But why? It cannot be that you have found the need diminish. It seems to grow upon me every day."

"No," I replied, with a sigh. "But I have found that most people want to be let alone. It is not an unnatural desire after all, Elizabeth. How would you like it if anybody came poking into your business, wanting to know whether your income were sufficient for your needs, and what you did with your leisure? Wouldn't you feel much inclined to show them the door?"

"I don't know; but I hope I don't poke. Has it ever occurred to you that I poke, dear—offensively, I mean?"

She looked at me as wistfully as a child, and I could not help laughing.

"My dear child, you couldn't be offensive, even if you tried your hardest. But I am perfectly serious in what I am saying, and I have come to the conclusion that it is easier and more satis-

factory to help individual cases than to go forth armed with great schemes for the benefit of the public at large. If everybody was conscientious and generous in this matter of individual responsibility, the need, I promise you, would very quickly diminish."

"Individual responsibility," repeated Elizabeth, musingly. "I wish you'd define it—as you see it, I mean."

"That's easy enough. I can give you a case in point. Once upon a time, before I had the happiness of knowing you, we were at a very low ebb financially; and everything, my husband's career and mine, depended on the funds not failing altogether. At that time, but for the timely aid of some true, tried friends, who gave us money, and never asked for interest or return, we—well, Heaven knows where we should have been—certainly not where we are to-day. We have never forgotten that experience, and God forbid that we should ever feel less grateful than we did then! It has made us understandingly sympathetic towards others, and we have proved again and again how richly blessed are those who can give a helping hand like that to people who are trying to help themselves. Many

a good man and woman have been lost to the world through the lack of some such timely assistance."

"Yes ; but——"

"But what? Out with your great scheme, Elizabeth. I see it is consuming you."

"Well, it is. I'd like to found a—what shall I call it?"

"Settlement?" I suggested.

"Yes, that's the word—a woman's settlement, a place where working women of all classes can find a suitable home within their means. There would be no charity, you understand ; the thing must be self-supporting or cease to exist. But if it succeeded, don't you see how satisfactory it would be? Those who lived in it would not be under any restraint."

"But you would need some rules for the conduct of the place, Elizabeth, or what would become of law and order?"

"Please let me finish," said Elizabeth, with dignity. "There would be certain general rules, of course; but in the talks I have had with girls I have learned that their chief objection to the many homes and boarding-houses that exist is their interference with personal liberty."

"Then you would allow the latch-key?"

"I should."

"And you would be prepared for the consequences. Some would abuse that liberty."

"I know that; then they would leave. Of course there must be some committee of reference."

"Then I fail to see any difference between your scheme and the many which have failed to supply the want which undoubtedly exists. It comes to this always—the orderly and the sober-minded will never find irksome the light restraints generally imposed; the others will not brook them."

"But don't you think it might be possible to show the flightiest among them the beauty and wisdom of self-restraint, and to interest them in home occupations and in womanly things?"

"It might," I admitted; but my tone was not hopeful. I saw that Elizabeth was sad and disappointed, but I could not hide my own opinions and convictions from her.

"You would begin on a small scale at first?" I said, inquiringly.

"Necessarily. I should take a house in the West End preferably—that is not far from the great

centres of business—furnish it prettily, and having decided on the terms and conditions of its home life, let its existence be known.”

“I have no doubt it would be a boon to some. I believe it is worth the trial, Elizabeth,” I said, cheerily, for the plan on such a small scale seemed feasible enough.

“I’m glad to hear you say that; then, of course, if any measure of success attended the experiment, it could easily be enlarged.”

“Very easily. What does Mr. Hamilton say?”

“Oh, he is quite willing, but he does not help me much. Of course a man doesn’t understand things, and never can fathom the intense longing a woman has for home and all that makes it dear.”

“There is one thing you must be sure of, Elizabeth, if you do start your new scheme,” I said. “And that is, that you make the house attractive. I mean, as regards its furnishing, table arrangements, and things of that sort. I went to see a new venture lately, and I just thought as I came away that so long as I could pay for a bright room outside, and buy a china cup and

saucer, a decent glass, and a spoon it was possible to polish, I should steer clear of it."

"Were the things so awful?"

"They were. The crockery was about a quarter of an inch thick, and I don't know of what metal the spoons were composed. And you know there is really no excuse for it, because everything can be got so moderately nowadays; and though a thing happens to be cheap, it need not necessarily be nasty."

"No; I'll remember what you say," observed Elizabeth, thoughtfully; "and I am filled with becoming gratitude that you condescend to approve of this project of mine. You have thrown cold water on a good many lately. Do you know what I said to Keith the other day, and I hope you'll forgive me for it, and for telling you? I said I thought that since your baby came you were less inclined to take interest in the larger work for humanity outside."

"God forbid that a joy should have such a blighting effect, Elizabeth!" I exclaimed. "I hope, and I think, you are mistaken."

"Perhaps I am," said Elizabeth, with a scarcely perceptible sigh. "And anyhow, you have less

time than most for outside things. It is only the unemployed, such as I, who can turn their attention to them."

We said no more on the subject, but Elizabeth's words, of necessity, caused me a good deal of anxious thought. I had sometimes formerly deprecated and blamed the selfishness of family life, which may have a tendency to be too exclusive and narrow in its aims and interests. That little dig of hers did me good.

I saw a good deal of her during the next fortnight, and we were indefatigable in trying to find a house suitable for the first home of her new experiment. At last we succeeded in finding a large, roomy, convenient house in a central street, though the rent, which ran into three substantial figures, rather appalled me. We had not ourselves got beyond that stage of prosperity which necessitates frequent committees on ways and means, and I was sometimes tempted to forget that Mrs. Keith Hamilton's means were practically limitless. Her father's death had given her a very substantial fortune, and her husband was one of the richest landowners in the North. So if she elected to spend freely in this way, rather than in foolish and extravagant enter-

tainments given for the purpose of gaining notoriety, nobody could blame her. It must not be thought, however, that she shunned social duties or performed them in any niggardly fashion, but the reverse. The dinners and receptions at the Hamilton mansion in Belgrave Square were among the most select and *recherché* of the season, and invitations to them were seldom refused and much coveted. I have heard it said more than once that in Elizabeth's hands lay the power to found one of the most brilliant salons in London, but as yet her ambition did not appear to have awakened in that particular direction.

The first thing Elizabeth did after the lease was signed was to put a whole army of workmen in possession to make it a house beautiful within and without. This, of course, meant a considerable delay, and she did not expect it to be ready for occupation until the beginning of winter. Meanwhile she was not losing any time, but doing her utmost to interest in her plan those she hoped to benefit and make happier by it.

One afternoon she drove up to my door unexpectedly, and the moment I saw her I knew she was troubled about something.

"Can you listen to a story?" she said, abruptly. "I think I know how to act, but it is just as well to take counsel, and you are generally pretty safe, if you are a trifle over-cautious at times for my taste."

"Really, Elizabeth, you are what you yourself would call brutally frank to me in these days," I said, laughing. "But what is your story? Something that troubles you a good deal, if your face is still the mirror it used to be."

"Yes, I am fearfully troubled, because there is a good deal at stake. You know I have been seeing a good deal of business girls lately, trying to cultivate their acquaintance with a view to the future; and oh, how right you were about them! They mostly *do* want to be let alone."

"But they will feel differently, and act differently too, after they know you, dear," I said quickly, for I saw that my friend's heart was a little sore.

"Yes, yes; I'm not complaining, and I have made some very good, staunch friends among them. A dozen at least have promised to come into my House Beautiful whenever it is ready for them. It is about one of them I want to speak to you—Lucy Freeman. She is engaged at a very fashionable

business house, in the showroom. I only wish you could see her. She is simply lovely—face, figure, manner, everything perfect. Perhaps it would be better for her were she less attractive.

“She is a very nice girl,” she continued, after a brief hesitation, “but extravagant in her ideas and too fond of dress. What she spends on it would simply appal you. She has a very good salary, for of course she is worth it; but though she can buy her things at first cost, she spends it nearly all in that way.”

“She would not probably care to be an inmate of the House Beautiful, I fear.”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“No; and I don't think I should wish it. She is generally far better dressed, and certainly looks much more imposing than I do. Her example would be very bad for those who could not afford to imitate her. She came to tea with me on Sunday, wearing a sealskin coat that was never bought at fifty guineas, and I am sure Dawson thought she was somebody very special by the way he ushered her in. You know Dawson's degrees of manner; they serve as a kind of social thermometer.”

I laughed at this apt summing up of the Keith

Hamilton retainer, whose idiosyncrasies had long been a secret amusement to me.

“Love of dress is a perfect passion with her—she is enslaved by it; and she becomes so exquisitely everything she wears, it is impossible to be very angry with her.”

“Has she any people?” I asked, with interest.

“A father and mother in the country; he is head gardener to a Gloucestershire squire. Lucy lives in a very plain lodging off Edgware Road, and stints herself in everything but dress. I believe it is that foolish passion, and nothing else, that has got her into the sad scrape she is in now.”

“She is in a scrape, then?”

“Yes; but I think I can get her out of it. She has told me about it, and that is half the battle. When a thing is confessed, it is at least half repented of; you may be sure of that.”

“Yes; pray go on, Elizabeth: you always make your introductions so interesting, one has hardly patience to wait for the story. I only wonder you have not cut the ground from under my feet long ago.”

But Elizabeth seemed too troubled even to smile at this feeble and well-worn joke.

"I thought when she came on Sunday that she did not seem quite herself, and as we were talking she quite suddenly burst into tears.

"'I'm very miserable, Mrs. Hamilton,' she said, in a low broken voice. 'And I must tell you about it, at any cost, and ask your advice, for I am afraid to go on without it.'

"I did the best I could to give her courage and confidence, and soon she told me the whole sad story, which gave me a greater shock than anything I have heard for a long time."

"Is it a sadder story than poor Ida Falconer's?"

"Yes, I think it is. Of course you know that a girl so beautiful as Lucy Freeman would be sure to attract a good deal of attention; but she always struck me as being a very sensible and prudent girl, who knew how to take care of herself. I confess I was a good deal surprised when I heard what lengths she had allowed herself to go with gentlemen. One of the things she told me was that she had been at Richmond with Lord Heron, the very Sunday before poor Ida died."

"Then she can't be a good girl," I said, promptly.

"Oh, I think she is only foolish; in fact, now I am sure of it. She has allowed herself, however,

to get entangled in a love affair with a man I know very well, and who is going to be married in a few weeks' time to one of the proudest girls in London, as well as one of the richest. He is a very idle young fellow, and loafs round with his *fiancée* at her shopping—that is how he first saw Lucy Freeman. I don't know, of course, by what means such extraordinary love affairs are begun and carried on, but it seems to have developed very rapidly between these two. The bride-elect I speak of has a very disagreeable manner towards those she considers her inferiors, and Lucy gave me several instances of her absolute rudeness and unkindness to her which amazed me very much. Indeed, I could hardly imagine a woman with any pretensions to gentleness behaving in such a manner.

“Lucy herself confessed that it was out of revenge she first encouraged the attentions of the lady's lover. Well, it soon came to evening walks and drives, Sundays out of town, and so on; and, to make a long story short, Lucy came to tell me she had agreed to elope with Lord Egham tomorrow night.”

“Lord Egham, who is to marry Miss Clayton-Darrell?” I exclaimed in amazement.

"The same," nodded Elizabeth. "I don't like either of them much, though I feel sorry for Maud Darrell; but of course the thing can't go on."

"It won't, I suppose, now Lucy has confessed?"

"I don't know. I shall have to be very wary, and I want your advice. Of course Lucy thinks he will marry her, and is dazzled by the idea of becoming Lady Egham. I have tried to disabuse her mind of that idea, and I think we shall be able to save her."

"We must," I said, fervently.

"Well, we've got to prove to Lucy that he has no idea of marriage in his head. She will only believe it if she hears it from his own lips."

"And how are you going to manage that?"

"Well, I have thought of a plan. Mind, I would rather have nothing to do with the affair. It is unsavoury, and I shall get no thanks; but I want to save Lucy, and, if possible, to give her a lesson. This is what I propose to do. Write to Lord Egham asking him to call on me at a certain time tomorrow. I will word it so that curiosity will bring him. Then I shall speak to him straight out about Lucy Freeman, taking care that she will be within earshot. It is rather a risky experiment,

but nothing else will convince her. I think I know my man, and that he will behave exactly as I expect him to do."

"You will make an enemy of him for life, Elizabeth."

She shrugged her shoulders, and a fine scorn played about her brave, sweet mouth.

"That will not concern me in the least. In fact, I shall owe it to myself to drop his acquaintance after to-morrow. I only hope that Lucy will be cured, and that she will never forget the wholesome lesson of to-morrow to the last day of her life. Do you think my plan feasible?"

"Quite, though risky, as you say. What a woman you are, Elizabeth! But what is the opinion of Mr. Hamilton?"

"You have forgotten he is at Flisk, and there is no time to write. Keith must take me on trust this time, as he has had to do lots of times before. If he disapproves he will only shake his head. Well, shall I do it?"

"Yes; it sounds like a scene from a melodrama. When shall I hear the result?"

"You can come over if you like, and remain upstairs. Your presence in the house will be a moral

support to me. If you don't hear anything further from me, I'll expect you to dine to-morrow night at seven. You see I must make the appointment for the evening, because Lucy is engaged all day. I shall ask Lord Egham to come at nine."

It was with considerable impatience I waited for the *dénouement* of Elizabeth's plot. We dined alone together; but the meal was something of a pretence, for we were both in a state of nervous excitement. After dinner I saw Lucy Freeman for a moment in the drawing-room. Elizabeth had by no means exaggerated her beauty, which was of the superb and queenly order. Indeed, I have never seen any one more perfectly planned. I went up to Elizabeth's boudoir before Lord Egham came, and when I heard the hall bell punctually at nine, my heart beat as quickly as if I had had to face the ordeal. After the echoes of the great bell died away, stillness reigned in the house. I tried to read, but could not concentrate my attention on anything but the clock. It was quite half-past nine before any further sound fell on my ears, and then I distinctly heard the shutting of the hall door. But I was left alone for another half-hour. Then Elizabeth came to me, and I saw by her face that she had been weeping.

Tears did not come to her readily, as a rule, and these signs told me how great had been the strain upon her.

"Well, it is over ; it was very cruel, but the girl is saved, and more, safeguarded for life," she said at length.

"How did he take it?" I asked, breathlessly.

"Precisely as I expected. He was very high-handed at first, resenting my interference most bitterly ; but I think in the end he was rather ashamed of himself, especially as I was obliged to threaten him with an exposure to Miss Clayton-Darrell."

"Did you bring him to the point you wished? Did Lucy hear him say he had no thought of marriage in his head?"

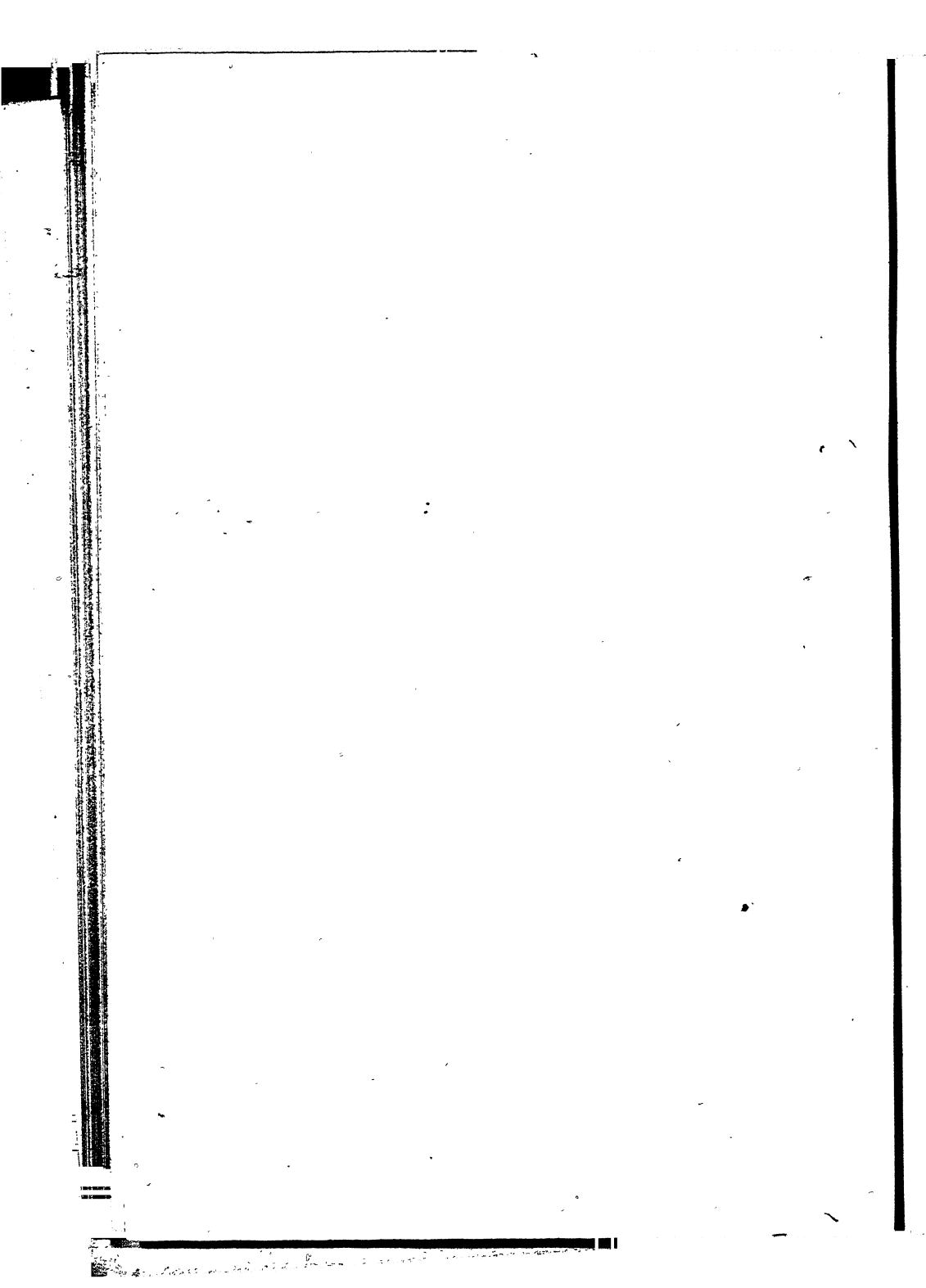
"She did : that was the whole object of the plot. I began by assuming that he intended to jilt Miss Darrell for the sake of the pretty shop girl, and he said a good many things which could not be very pleasant hearing for Lucy, and which in a girl of her nature could have but one effect."

"And what was the end of it all?"

"The end was that Lord Egham departed feeling a little small, and that the trip he proposed will not



"HE SAID A GOOD MANY THINGS WHICH COULD NOT BE VERY PLEASANT
HEARING FOR LUCY." [p. 120.]



come off. I gave him my promise to say nothing about it to Miss Clayton-Darrell, and I think he also has got a wholesome lesson."

"And Lucy?"

"She feels very bad, poor child; she will stay here all night, and I think it would be better for her to leave London, for a time at least. She is filled with shame, and her gratitude is most touching. Oh, my dear, the whole thing has depressed me inexpressibly. I shall be glad when Keith comes home. He at least is a man, not a poor tricked-out sham like Egham, whose moral sense is blunted and whose ideal of life and its purpose lies down in the dust. I could pity Maud Darrell with all my heart, but her own moral vision appears to me to be perverted too. I heard her at Mrs. Maynard's the other day giving forth some opinions on the marriage question which rather startled me, so perhaps Egham will be able to make her tolerably happy. This is the third week in July. If Keith won't take me home, I'll go to Flisk myself on the first of August, if Parliament should sit for ever."

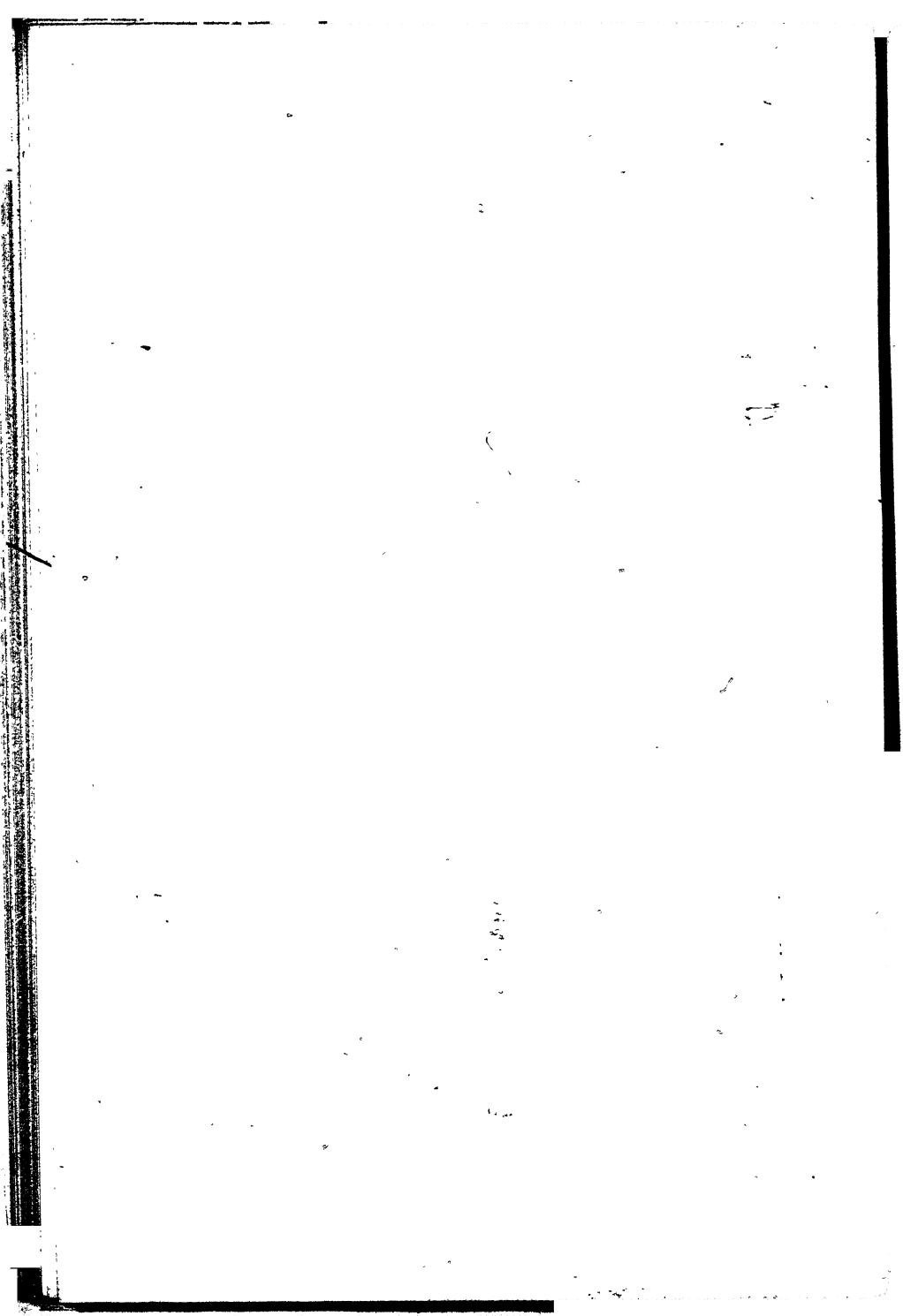
I understood her well. Her pure, true nature was sick—sick of the shams and sins and sorrows of the world in which she moved, and like a bird she beat

her wings against her cage bars, longing for the freedom and freshness and purity of her country home, where, as she often said, "one had room to breathe, and a chance to be good."

Yet was I fain to remind her, as I often did, that it is in the very centres and strongholds of Satan the battle has to be waged between right and wrong, and that the true soldier of Christ Jesus must not make too much haste to lay down his arms.

VI.

A HOME HEROINE.



VI.

A HOME HEROINE.

It is an easy matter putting workmen in, not so easy to get them out. In spite of promises solemnly made, Elizabeth had to go back to Scotland for Christmas, leaving her House Beautiful unfinished. I was commissioned to superintend in her absence, and to expedite matters, as much as possible. It was February before the Keith Hamiltons returned to Belgrave Square, and then the house was no more than ready. Elizabeth was delighted with it, and she had brought Marget with her to act as house-keeper, at least until she should find some one else. The years had wrought but little change in the faithful soul, who had followed the fortunes of her mistress through many vicissitudes, and whose overflowing contentment over her final settlement in life was beautiful to see. I suppose it was this absolute freedom from care or anxiety regarding the being

she so devotedly worshipped that had made her look years younger. I went out to Belgrave Square on the evening of the day they arrived in town, and saw Marget a few minutes before Elizabeth left the dining-room.

"Why, Marget," I exclaimed, as we shook hands, she not less pleased to see me than I to see her again, "you look years younger. I thought you were never coming back to London again."

"So did I, but a body has whiles to change their mind," she observed, discreetly. "What do you think o' this new ploy o' the mistress's?"

"It is only another proof of her kindness of heart, Marget," I replied. "And I think it will do some good. There are a great many lonely girls in London who would prize your kind sympathy and care."

"Weel, if you approve I'm no sae blate," said Marget; and I was secretly highly gratified by this unusual and unexpected tribute to my wisdom, which I sometimes doubted myself. "She canna rest, but maun aye be at wark for ithers. Eh, if only there was a bairn to heir Flisk and Glenspeed," she added, with an earnestness which brought a lump in my throat. "They come when they're no wantit, 'an'

where they dinna get their dues, pair lammies ; but there, if it be the Lord's wull——”

“There is plenty of time yet, Marget,” I said, cheerfully ; and at that moment Elizabeth entered the room, looking lovelier than ever in a yellow tea-gown with a red rose at her throat.

“Time for what ?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said I, laughing, as I kissed her. “Ask nae questions, an’ you’ll be telt nae lees.”

“I believe you two are plotting mischief,” she said, rather suspiciously. “Well, how do you think Marget is looking ?”

“Splendidly. I have just been telling her she is renewing her youth.”

“We think so too. Well, come down to the smoking-room to Keith, and let us hear all about the house,” she said, and carried me away.

Next day we made a tour of inspection of the new premises, and Elizabeth was pleased to approve of everything I had done, even to the putting in of the crockery, regarding which I had had *carte blanche*. It was a beautiful house, tastefully decorated and cosily furnished, with a comfortable home-like look about it, all which was specially pleasing to me, who hated gimcrackery of every sort. I could not

help saying that I thought the girl who could not be happy in such a home must be very difficult to please. We had a good deal of discussion about the tariff, which of course had to be fixed according to some rule ; but in the end everything was settled. Marget in a neat black silk gown and apron started as housekeeper, the guests arrived and Elizabeth's experiment began.

The guests in the House Beautiful numbered six at first, but the number soon increased until it reached twenty, which was the limit we could accommodate without inconvenience. It was simply carried on like a boarding-house, with the exception that an allowance was made for meals not partaken of, provided due notice was given. No sort of restraint or supervision was exercised, except as to the time at which the house was closed. Elizabeth wanted the girls to feel as much at home as possible, and to have no sense of being superintended or kept in order. She trusted a good deal to Marget's kind, motherly way to win the girls' confidence, and she was not mistaken. From the first, however, I felt inclined to trust more to Elizabeth's own personality and influence, which were very strong.

She went a good deal in the evenings at first,

and often asked me to accompany her, but I was very sparing of my attentions, from my fear of seeming to pry or to be exercising any supervision over the inmates of the House Beautiful. I must say that on the few occasions when I did go I was struck by the pleased and happy look of the young ladies, and by their evident appreciation of the efforts Mrs. Hamilton had made to give them at very modest cost a very fair equivalent for a home. Few of them seemed inclined in the cold winter evenings to leave the spacious, cosy drawing-room, where they could either mix with their fellows at games or music or needlework, or sit quietly in a corner with their own thoughts. Among these twenty girls there was of necessity considerable diversity of character, and I sometimes envied Marget her opportunities of studying the same. Her interest in the experiment, the way she threw herself heart and soul into the very spirit of the work, was a lesson to all half-hearted and halting workers. If the thing failed it would be through no fault of hers.

Elizabeth was on the whole satisfied with her experiment, though it was on a scale much too small to be sufficient outlet for her energies, which were perennially active and insatiable.

Of all the girls in the House Beautiful, which was the name by which the unpretending establishment was always called between Elizabeth and me, the one that interested me most, perhaps, was Winifred Pole, who was engaged in a well-known lingerie warehouse, patronised by the highest in the land. She was a very bright, clever little thing, and as she had a very good salary, ought to have been particularly well off. But she did not appear to be so. When out of business she dressed very shabbily, and never had a penny to spare. Of her home and people we knew nothing, but suspected that there was a constant drain upon her somewhere. We often spoke of it to each other, but did not put a single question to Winifred. So long as she paid her board regularly we had no business to pry into her private affairs. But Elizabeth, who was also greatly interested in her, was often anxious, and would have liked very much to have gained her full confidence. But the girl was very reticent regarding herself, and as respect for such personal reticence was one of the grounds upon which Elizabeth hoped for success, she did not care to ask a single question. At the Easter recess, when the Keith Hamiltons had gone to pay two or three

country visits, I made a point of going at least twice a week to the House Beautiful, chiefly on Marget's account, who did not like to be left too long to her own resources. One evening I ran along after dinner, and was taken to Marget's room, as usual. I did not always go in among the girls. I rather think both Elizabeth and I carried our dread of seeming to supervise almost to a morbid point. But I think still it was the safer side on which to err.

Marget was not in her room, but she came to me shortly, looking graver than usual.

"I've got one on the sick list, ma'am," she said, with great concern in her voice,—“Miss Pole, and she's gey bad. Ye dinna happen to ken exactly what day the mistress will be hame?”

“Not before the end of next week, I fear. How long has she been ill?”

“Only since yesterday mornin'. Maybe ye'll ask the doctor to come along the morn?”

“He can come to-night if it is necessary,” I replied. “Do you think I had better see Miss Pole?”

“I wish ye would. It gies me the nerves when

there's any o' them ill, especially when the mistress is awa'."

"And what do you think is the matter, Marget?"

I asked.

"'Deed, hoo can I tell? She's very feverish, an' she canna eat a bite, but wad drink, drink for ever. She has a very ill cough, too, and compleens o' a pain in her chest."

"That sounds rather bad, doesn't it, Marget?"

I asked, gravely.

"Ay, an' she looks bad, too, ye'll think when ye see her."

"Has she got herself very wet any of these days?"

I asked then, for it was the rainiest Easter we had had for years.

"Ay, the nicht afore last she was oot till the last meenit. In fact, it was five meenits past eleven when she cam' in, an' I opened the door to her mysel'. She was dreepin' to the skin, an' she hadna a waterproof. In fact, she hasna got ane. I took her things frae her an' dried them, but she has evidently gotten a suttin doon cauld, puir thing; she hasna much strength to fa' back on."

"Are her spirits down?"

"They're never very faur up, if ye ask me," she

said, shrewdly. "She's got something on her mind. I've aye thocht that she's gotten a trouble o' some kind outside, an' she's worryin' ower't the noo. Ye can see it in her face."

"A love affair, do you mean, Marget?" I asked; but Marget shook her head.

"No, I dinna think it's that, but I wush ye wad gang up an' see her. Maybe she micht tell you, bein' different frae the like o' me."

I shook my head.

"I am quite willing to go up and see her, if she'll let me, Marget; but it's Mrs. Hamilton we want here to minister to both mind and body."

"Ye're no sae bad at it yoursel' as ye wad mak' oot," observed Marget, with one of her kindest smiles, as she led the way up to the sick-room.

Each of the inmates of the House Beautiful had a bedroom to herself; some of them were not large, because we had had to run a partition through some of the larger rooms to obtain the requisite number, but we were gratified to find how greatly this consideration for personal privacy had been appreciated. They were all painted and papered in light colours,

and furnished simply, but as prettily as possible. The room in which Winifred Pole lay had a blue paper on the walls, Indian matting on the floor, and a pretty rug before the plain brass and iron bedstead; the furniture was only maple, but highly polished, and as clean and sweet as it could be. The whole furnishing of the room had only cost a few pounds, but the result was, I am sure, the best that could be obtained. A bedspread of blue cretonne, with a big design of impossible chrysanthemums on it, seemed to accentuate the paleness of the sick girl's face. It flushed a little, however, at my entrance, but she did not look averse to seeing me.

"I am very sorry Mrs. Hamilton is not here to see you, my dear," I said, gently. "I should not intrude, only I see the housekeeper is extremely anxious about you."

"Oh, I like very much to see you," she replied, with a ready smile. "Won't you sit down?—that is, if you are not afraid I may have a fever. I have never had one, but I feel just as I imagine people must when they have a fever."

"My dear, I am a doctor's wife, and such fears are unknown to me," I replied, as I sat down by

the bed. "But I don't think you have a fever—a feverish cold is more like it. I hear you were out during that terrible rain the other night, and that you came home very wet. Surely that was foolish: you know you are not very strong."

Her face flushed suddenly and hotly, and her fingers began to play nervously with the counterpane.

"I could not help it," she said, in a low, troubled voice. "I had to go."

"That alters the case," I replied, quickly, and without appearing to notice her confusion. "Well, what you have got to do now is to lie still till you get well. The doctor will come and see you to-morrow morning."

"Oh, but I think I must get up to-morrow and go back to business. They are rather hard at our place, and don't keep open a place long."

"Oh, but I think they would make an exception in your favour. You have been there a good while, haven't you?"

"Four years nearly; but if we are longer than a week away, and other help is required, it is deducted from ~~our~~ wages, and I need every penny of mine," she said, in evident distress.

"If you like I can go to your place of business to-morrow and tell them how ill you are," I suggested. "It is impossible you can go back to business to-morrow. I am sure it would be as much as your life is worth."

She leaned her head back among her pillows and closed her eyes.

"But for one thing, I shouldn't much mind. I am so tired," she said, wearily, and I saw that her face aged in a moment, and all the girlishness and youth died out of it.

"You ought not to say that at your age, my dear," I said, quickly. "Is there no way in which I can help you to a brighter view of life? I am a good deal older than you, and there are times when the experience of another can help us."

She opened her eyes then, and flashed them with a very straight, steady, inquiring look on my face, seeming to ask how far I might be trusted, and whether she should accept me at my own valuation.

"I think I could tell you, and it would be a relief," she said, unexpectedly. "But perhaps you would not care to hear."

"Indeed I should," I replied, as earnestly and convincingly as I could.

"Well, I must begin at the beginning, and tell you that I was born in the East End of London, away down Stratford way, where my father was a clergyman."

"He is dead, I suppose?" I said, when she hesitated a moment to go on.

She shook her head. "No, not yet. My mother was always delicate; she died of consumption, and so did my only brother, when he was seventeen."

"You have seen a lot of trouble, my dear," I said.

"Death is the easiest of all troubles," she replied, quickly. "My mother died of consumption, but her death was hastened by a broken heart. For many years my father—I hate to say it, but when I have begun I must go on—was given to drink. He had to leave his charge, of course, and we gradually sank down. My mother had to work with her needle on her death-bed to try and support us. I was fifteen when she died, and had just begun to go to business. She was anxious that I should get a good training, so as to get into a first-class house. My brother also earned a little, but he was so very often ill, it did not

amount to very much. At last he died in hospital, and father and I were left alone."

"And did all these sad bereavements not awaken him to a sense of his own sin and responsibility?" I asked; but Winifred only again shook her head.

"Drink is such a fearful thing; it destroys everything," she said, hopelessly. "He cared for nothing but how to get his craving satisfied. My mother was devoted to him to the last, and I never heard her once blame him, or speak a hard word about him. When she died she left him to me."

"And he is alive still?" I said, beginning to understand the many little mysteries which had seemed to surround the poor girl. The shabby dress, the poverty of means, the absolute reticence regarding herself and her affairs—all were explained now. A vast pity welled in my heart, and I suppose it was written on my face, for she stretched out her hand and touched mine, answering my question with a grave nod.

"I am afraid I shall never be able to make you understand about papa," she said presently. "Although he has fallen so low, it is possible to love him, and I do love him yet, beyond anything on earth."

I was too deeply moved to speak, and she continued after a moment :

"I tell you this first before I try to explain other things to you. When mamma died, I tried to live in the same lodgings to be near him, but—but it was impossible. When he had drink, and did not know what he was doing, he made it so hard for me that I could not stay. He followed me to my work sometimes and made a disturbance. They told me that if it occurred any more I must leave. In the end I had to seek a new place, and go into lodgings alone. He did not find out my place of business, but he always managed to trace me to my lodgings, and I had to keep on changing constantly. This is the only place he has not found out, and I hope he won't—that is, if he gets well. He is very ill just now, and that is how I had to go in the rain the other night and stay so late."

"Then you have to keep him entirely?"

"Yes. At first he used to earn a little by copying and secretarial work. We have a good many relations who are well off; but they got tired out, and now they do not wish to know us."

"Your name is a good one."

"Yes: Sir Eustace Pole, the member of Parliament who lives in Pont Street, is my father's cousin."

"My dear," I said, tenderly, "you have had a terrible life. We must help you somehow. If we could get your father to go into a home of some kind, that would be the best thing."

"He won't go," she said, with a shake of the head. "We tried it even in my mother's time. There is nothing to do but go on as long as it is possible."

I looked at the sweet young face under the ripple of sunny hair, and, thinking of all this child had had to suffer and endure, my heart ached intolerably. She was not much over twenty, but into her short life had been crowded enough of anxiety, sorrow and privation to last half a century."

"Where is he living now?"

"In a little street off Soho Square. It is the same place; mother died there. The house belongs to an old servant of ours who is married to a car-driver. They are very decent people, and but for them I don't know what I should have done—I don't indeed."

"She exercises some sort of care over him, then?"

“Yes, but of course she is very poor, and has to work hard. Papa has only one room on the top floor, and I pay her regularly for that. But I can never pay her for other things she has done. I am quite sure that but for the thought that Susan was in the same house with him I should have died.”

“She knows you live here, I suppose?”

Winifred shook her head.

“No, I have not told her. There is not a better woman on this earth than Susan (Mrs. Ellison is her married name), but somehow she cannot keep always to herself just the things she ought. Papa always managed to find out from her where I lodged. He has a kind of authoritative way with him, and of course Susan cannot quite forget even yet that he was once her master. She was always very sorry for it after, when I got into trouble about it; and when I came here I kept the address from her, for of course I knew that Mrs. Hamilton would not like anything of that kind to occur here.”

“She would never blame you for it, dear child, or make you suffer for it,” I said, fervently, thinking how this pathetic story would melt Elizabeth’s tender heart.

"It was better not. Papa was really very ill when I saw him on Tuesday, and Susan's doctor says he has very bad inflammation of the lungs; so you see it will be necessary for me to get up to-morrow to go and see him, in case he wants anything, or should be worse. You see it is not as if Susan knew where to send; she does not even know my business address."

I hesitated a moment, fearing to seek to pierce the veil of this sad but necessary reserve.

"Would you like me to go and see him? I am quite sure you will not be able to get up to-morrow. My husband will certainly forbid it."

Her face flushed.

"It will hurt me very much to have you go, and yet, if you would be so kind, oh, I should be so relieved! He might even, you see, have died since Tuesday. Susan's doctor thought him very bad."

I took out my watch. It was not yet nine o'clock. A hansom would take me to Soho Square and back in half an hour; and I did not expect my husband to call for me at the House Beautiful much before ten.

"I shall go now, my dear; you will sleep all the

sounder if you have heard how your poor father is," I said as I rose. "Good-bye just now, and you may rely upon me: I can keep a secret, child. I have had many entrusted to me, some sadder than yours, though I have never heard one which moved me more."

I stooped and kissed her before I left the room, and I saw her eyes fill with tears. But her face seemed to me to wear a less harassed look, as if she had tasted the blessed relief of a burden shared.

Within a quarter of an hour I had found the house of Susan Ellison, in a somewhat questionable-looking street opening off Soho Square. I knew the neighbourhood as one of evil reputation, on account of the large foreign element in it, but nobody molested or troubled me. My experience of London life has convinced me that if you are peaceably inclined, and show by your demeanour and bearing in the streets that you have business of your own to attend to, which does not at all concern other people, you will be let alone.

Mrs. Ellison, a middle-aged woman with a faded, grimy-looking, but not unkindly face, opened the door to me herself, regarding me with distinct

suspicion until I mentioned the name of Winifred Pole.

Then she opened wide the door.

"I was just at my wits' end, ma'am. The old master's not been dead above an hour, an' me not knowin' where to send or what to do. What's happened Miss Winnie?"

"She is ill herself, and will not be able to leave her bed for a day or two. Dead, is he? You may speak freely to me, Mrs. Ellison. Miss Pole has told me the whole circumstances of the case."

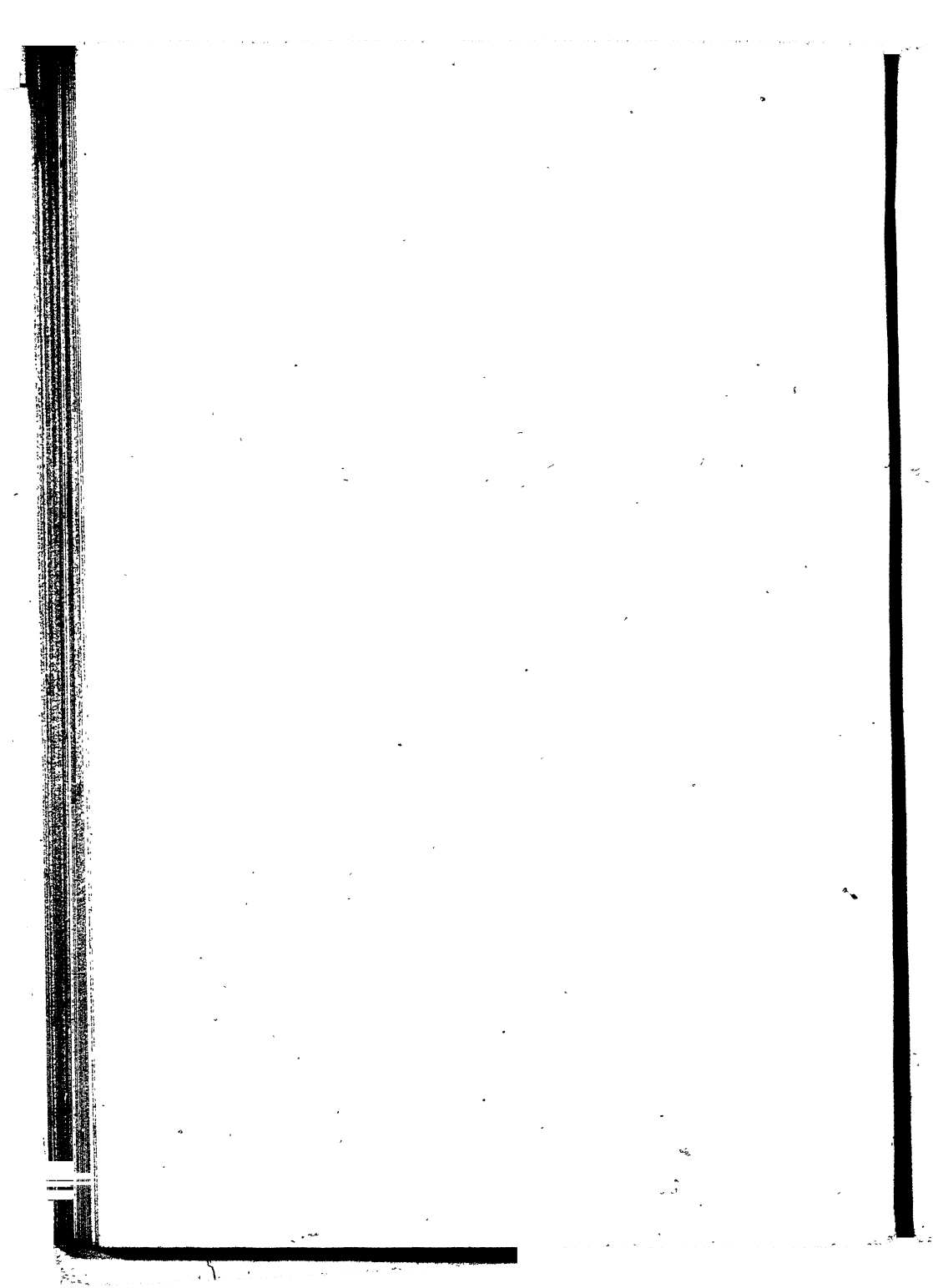
"Come in, come in," she said, hurriedly; and I followed her into a very grimy little sitting-room, which reeked of fried onions and stale tobacco smoke. "I'm all alone in the house. Ellison don't get off his 'bus till midnight—as well be a widder at once, I say. Yes, the old master snuffed out this very night at ten minutes to eight, and a good riddance to poor Miss Winnie, I say; and yet, dear, dear, he was a fine man once. Eh, ma'am, it's a bad thing the drink when it gets too much hold."

The good soul, sincerely moved, wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron, and presently spoke again.

"Perhaps you'd like to see him, ma'am; me



"I WISH HIS DAUGHTER COULD SEE HIM NOW," I SAID." [p. 145]



an' a neighbour hev just fixed him up as best we can, an' he do look beautiful: ay. ay, he was a fine man once, an' it oughter be a lesson to us all."

"I should like to see him," I said, and she asked me to walk upstairs.

The poor little death-chamber in the attic, shall I ever forget it, or the calm, still figure on the low bed, impressed with the singular and solemn majesty of death?

When Mrs. Ellison folded back the sheet from the face, I was surprised at the classic cut of the features; the poor drunkard who had brought desolation and woe to so many hearts looked almost like a hero or a king. No trace of his wasted and misspent life remained; it was as if Death had taken pity and restored to him at the last the dignity of the manhood he had so degraded and trampled upon.

"I wish his daughter could see him now," I said, as I covered him again. "I am sure it would be a comfort to her."

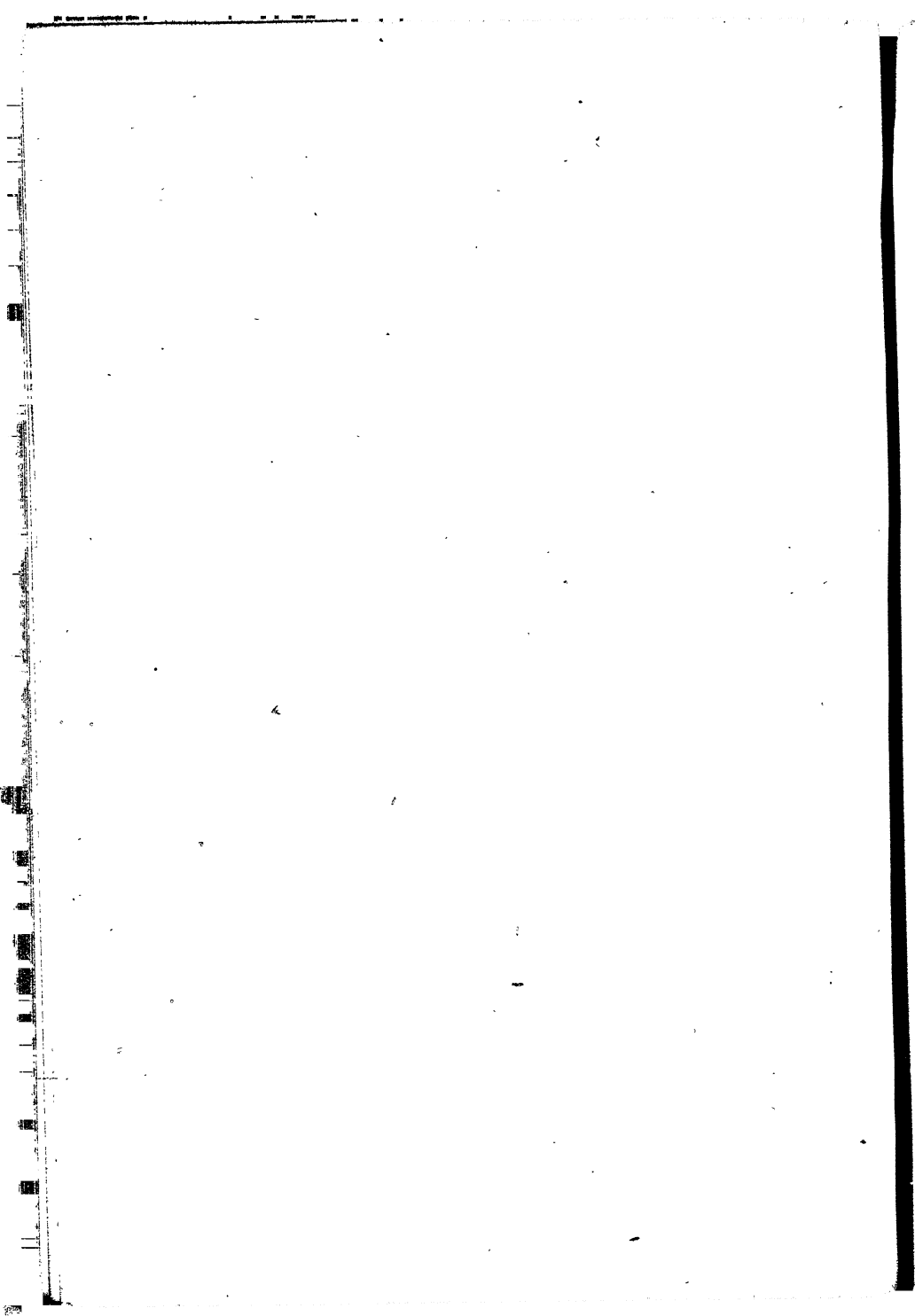
"Poor dear heart, she's 'ad her own to do and to bear wi' him, an' she's one o' the sweetest creturs in God's earth, she is."

When we went downstairs she told me some further particulars about the Poles, which made things even clearer to me. I returned to the House Beautiful feeling that among all those whom the world delighted to honour Winifred Pole ought to have had a place, by reason of her brave acceptance of an ofttime bitter duty, her simple and quiet heroism in circumstances the most trying.

I broke the news to her gently, and though she did not appear much surprised, she was genuinely and deeply grieved, and reproached herself for not having been able to minister to him at the last. Her illness turned out more seriously than even we expected, and she was a full month in bed. I did not need to expatiate much to enlist Elizabeth's sympathies; it was just the sort of thing to appeal to her high and sometimes strained sense of duty. Blaming herself for sundry suspicions of Winifred Pole in the past, she straightway fell down and worshipped her, till I had to intervene and protest that she would be spoiled. When convalescent, she was sent up to Flisk to recruit, and she never came back again. Elizabeth found all sorts of things for her to do—among others secretarial work in connection

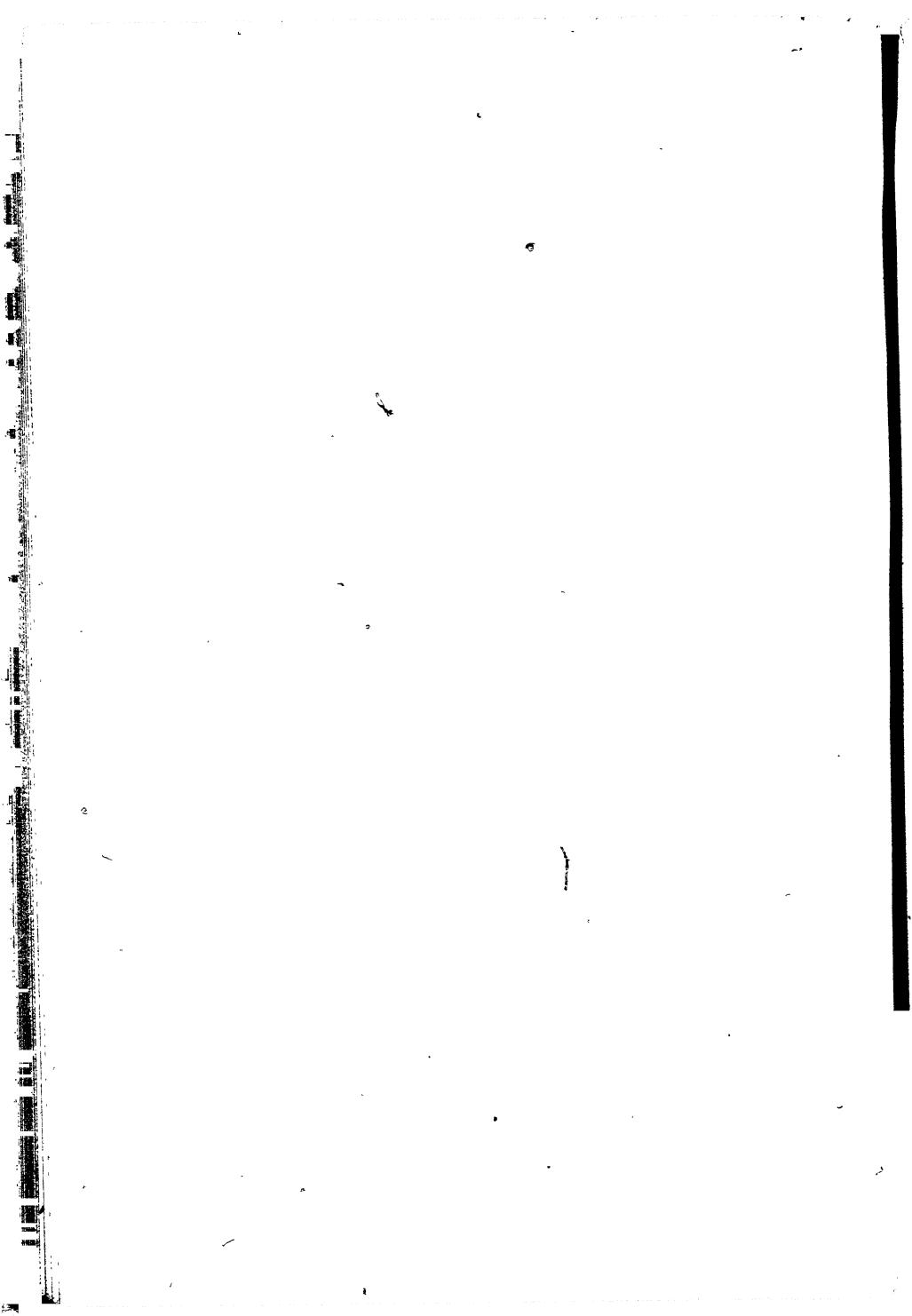
with the hospital at Port Ellon, which had grown in dimensions and in usefulness far beyond the dreams of its foundress.

Last time I was at Flisk Mrs. Hamilton and I paid a marriage call at the doctor's house in Port Ellon, a pretty villa standing on a headland facing the sea. And the young wife who came to us in the drawing-room, her face aglow with smiles, though her eyes were suspiciously dim, was Winifred Pole.



VII.

A WOMAN OF CHARACTER.



VII.

A WOMAN OF CHARACTER.

PARLIAMENT sat late that year, and the Keith Hamiltons did not get out of town until the third week of August. As we were not bound in any way by Parliamentary vagaries, we had sought the solitude of the country a full month before that, and as it happened, Elizabeth and I did not meet for a considerable time. The first visit I paid, on my return to London at the end of September, was to the House Beautiful. I quite expected to find Marget dull and homesick, pining for the fresh winds and the purple hillsides of Flisk. But, on the contrary, she seemed in the best of health and spirits. The work of supervising the House Beautiful was after her own heart, and, as I said before, she had thrown herself into it with all the energy and pains of which she was capable. She had become sincerely attached to several of the inmates, and

I am sure that never had girls a truer friend nor a more motherly and wise counsellor. We had a good deal to say of a private nature, Marget taking the liveliest possible interest in my own family affairs; but at length I managed to satisfy all her inquiries and to turn the conversation into other channels.

“Oh, yes, we’re getting on fine,” she said, in answer to my question as to how matters were in the House Beautiful. “We’ve been very slack, of course, so many of them away for their holidays, but we are beginning to fill up now, and I have got a new young lady in Miss Pole’s place.”

“Oh,” I said, with interest, “then the number is complete again. Did you take her on your own responsibility?”

“Of course,” said Marget, proudly. “The mistress left me full powers, and there is something about the new inmate that is very interesting to me, and I have just been wearing for you and the mistress to see her.”

“Does she come from the country?” I inquired.

“Faith, I didna speir; she’s no’ one that encourages mony questions. I think mysel’ that she’s a lady. She is very gentle spoken, an’ has a proud way

with her, and the very way she speaks to me lets me ken that she's been brocht up wi' servants to do her biddin'."

"This sounds very interesting, Marget," I said; "and what is her name?"

"Miss March—Miss Evelyn March, I should say; and she's engaged somewhere in Wigmore Street, I think, at some art place, but I couldna be quite sure. But will ye no go in and see them?"

"Does Miss March sit in the drawing-room usually?" I inquired.

"Ycs," replied Marget; "she is very friendly wi' a' the rest, and a great favourite. She gies hersel' nae airs, and that is what makes me think mair than onything that she's a real lady. Besides, she can play and sing on the piany just like an angel."

"I think I will look into the drawing-room as I have been away so long, Marget," I said, and presently went down to the spacious and pleasant apartment, where some ten or twelve girls were gathered. Most of them I knew, and after I had exchanged greetings with them, Marget introduced me to the new inmate, Miss Evelyn March.

I was not very favourably impressed by her appearance at first. Some might have called her handsome, but her face was very sallow and the features too strongly marked to be strictly beautiful. Her figure was certainly all that could be desired in proportion and grace, and I was not at all surprised at Marget for coming to the conclusion that she was a real lady. She was very civil to me, but no more ; and, I being perhaps ultra-sensitive on the point of even seeming to intrude myself upon those whom Elizabeth had persuaded to take advantage of the House Beautiful, did not find very much to say. One question, however, I ventured upon, and she took it courteously.

“ I hope that you find yourself pretty comfortable here, Miss March ? ” I said. “ Mrs. Hamilton would like to know that you are quite satisfied. May I tell her so when I write ? ”

“ Oh, certainly, ” she replied. “ I am more than satisfied. I am extremely grateful, you may say, to have found a place like this, which is comfortable and within my means. ”

She smiled slightly as she uttered these words, and that smile made a wonderful difference to her face, relieving its somewhat sombre look, and lighting

up her dark eyes with a very pleasant and winning gleam.

“I had often heard of Mrs. Keith Hamilton before I came to London,” she said when I made no reply, “and I knew of this place. I thought, since it was necessary for me to earn my own bread and to live somewhere, that this might be preferable to lodgings. I have found it so, and I am grateful.”

All this was said in the most matter-of-fact way, yet with a singular and pleasant courtesy which impressed me very much. I very much wanted to ask her whether this earning her bread, as she termed it, was an entirely new experience for her, but I felt that perhaps I had ventured far enough at a first meeting. I thought of her a good deal as I went home, and took occasion to write to Elizabeth the same night, telling her of Winifred Pole's successor, and not forgetting to add the remark made by Miss March, which I knew would be most gratifying and encouraging to Elizabeth, who was apt sometimes to take a gloomy view of things unless the needful amount of encouragement was forthcoming.

During the next few weeks I paid an occasional visit to the House Beautiful, and had a good deal

of talk one way and another with Miss March. I found her very pleasant and agreeable, and even communicative up to a certain point; but beyond that it was impossible to get, and I came to the conclusion at last that she was a very clever woman, and that she had no intention whatever of letting me, or probably any one else, know any more about her than we knew at present. This, of course, I could not and did not resent; at the same time I felt drawn to her by a kind of warm personal interest and regard which rather astonished me, as I was not given to making sudden friendships.

Early in December Elizabeth ran up for a week, to do her Christmas shopping, as she said, but in reality, I knew, to satisfy her mind as to how her new experiment was progressing. To my surprise, she did not at all take to Miss March, and the first time she came back to me after having seen and talked with her, seemed to be inclined to harbour a suspicion against a fellow-creature. This was so unlike Elizabeth that I was a good deal puzzled by it, and wondered whether my own judgment and Marget's likewise, since she entirely agreed with my opinion of Miss March, could be utterly at fault.

"My dear, I am confident she is a fraud," said

Elizabeth, flatly. "Yes, I grant that she is a lady, well born to her finger tips, and what I want to know is what she is doing here. There is something at the back of it, and I don't believe that I shall rest till I have discovered it."

"But, Elizabeth," I reminded her, "don't you remember that before you opened the House Beautiful at all we agreed that we were not to have the slightest inquisitiveness concerning the private affairs of those who might accept its shelter? Whatever confidence the inmates may be disposed to give Marget or you, or even me failing any one else, would be a different matter. I cannot allow you to express, much less to carry out, a curiosity so unworthy of you."

"Dear me!" said Elizabeth, stiffly, "you are going to keep me to the letter of my word, and no mistake. What I want particularly to impress upon you is that the place was not originally intended for people like Miss March."

"But why?" I asked, my eyes opening in surprise. "She is as needful as any of the others, and I am sure that she appreciates everything; indeed, she has told me so again and again. What is your objection to her, Elizabeth?"

"Well, I really could not say," she replied, in a convicted tone. "Perhaps I am unreasonable, but I thought her very stand-offish indeed when I talked with her to-night, and I am very much afraid—you know I am—that any undesirable element should find its way into my House Beautiful."

"Well, but, Elizabeth, I am sure you may set your mind entirely at rest so far as Miss March is concerned. She is not only a lady, as you have yourself admitted, but she is singularly amiable, and sociable too, with all the others; they adore her. Marget will tell you so herself. Has she not told you so already, that she is giving that little Milly Waring music lessons in the evening?"

"No, I did not hear that. I am afraid I am developing a very suspicious nature, my dear," said Elizabeth, quite meekly for her; "but, oh, I should like to find out the mystery of Evelyn March's life."

This bit of true womanliness about Elizabeth was more delightful to me than it was possible for me to say. I had sometimes in the old days been impressed by her superiority over the most feminine weaknesses, and was delighted to find that she had a few in the hidden recesses of her nature,

We did not talk any more about Miss March that night, and at the end of a week Elizabeth returned to Flisk for Christmas, apparently highly delighted with the flourishing state of affairs in the House Beautiful. They came to Belgrave Square when Parliament opened in the second week of February, but for a time Mrs. Hamilton was so absorbed by her many social duties that I saw very little of her. Occasionally we met by appointment, and she was always bemoaning her lack of leisure and the very scant amount of attention she had been able to bestow upon the House Beautiful.

“If I were not so absolutely sure of Marget, my dear, I should be in despair,” she confided to me, “and perhaps if she were less conscientious and reliable, I might be obliged to make the time to go.”

“But you don’t need to go, Elizabeth,” I said: “the thing is sailing on peacefully, and everybody seems pleased and happy.”

There was a lull in the tide of gaiety just before Easter, and then I knew from Marget that Elizabeth spent a good deal of her time at the House Beautiful.

As it happened, my summer was very full and busy, and I did not pay many visits, and I seemed

to see less of Elizabeth than usual, and to hear very few details about her experiment. One evening she came to my house without announcement or warning, and when I saw her I knew at once that something had happened to excite her.

“Can you give me half an hour, or if you cannot comfortably, will you come to-morrow morning? I have got something of the utmost importance and interest to tell you. But I will try and keep it until to-morrow, although it will be rather a hard task.”

“Oh, I can listen now,” I said, smiling at her impetuosity. “I do not think it is a very unpleasant tale, if I may judge from your expression.”

“It is more extraordinary than unpleasant, and as it is likely to have a happy ending, the story will certainly please you.”

“What is it all about?” I asked, as I took my friend’s lace wrap from her shoulders and set her down on the couch.

“Why, of course it is about Evelyn March. Who else could it possibly be about?” she asked, in a surprised voice, as if I evinced stupidity in not at once jumping to the conclusion.

“Well, it might have had something to do with

you," I suggested, mildly; "and considering how extremely little I have seen of you during the last six weeks or so, anything might have happened."

"Oh, well, you know I have been busy: life is such a whirl; and all this came upon me just like a thunder-clap, and although I wanted very badly several times to ask your advice, I never could manage it somehow, and now I feel rather proud to think that I have steered my bark out of perilous waters into a safe harbour."

"That is very poetically put, my dear," I said, feeling particularly inclined to tease Elizabeth, as I invariably did when she appeared so dreadfully in earnest.

"Don't you remember long ago—well, it is not so long ago when I come to think of it, because of course it was only last December—but you will remember how quite suspicious I was of Evelyn March, and how I even said that I was sure that she was living in the House Beautiful under false pretences."

"If they were false pretences," I said severely, "we had nothing to do with them so long as she conformed to your mild regulations, and was not objected to by any one else."

"Yes, yes, I know that you are right up to a certain point," said Elizabeth impatiently, "but all the same I was right in theory. What do you think I have found out?"

"I am sure I could not say," I replied, but in a sufficiently interested voice to satisfy Elizabeth.

"Well, that Evelyn March is a married woman."

"Oh," I said, "surely that cannot be: she does not look in the least like it."

"No, but she is all the same. I see by your face that you are simply dying to hear all about it, but you must allow me to tell the story in my own way, and do not interrupt me any more than you can possibly help."

Thus reproved and admonished, I sat back meekly, indicating by my silence that I was ready to hear everything Elizabeth had to say.

"Well, you know, just about Easter I went a good deal to the House Beautiful, and after what you had said, I felt inclined to take a great deal of interest in Evelyn March. The more I saw of her, the more convinced I was that she was a perfect lady, and had been brought up probably in greater luxury than I; little things betrayed this—things I could scarcely specify, and yet which always carried

convincing proof with them ; and Marget, who I do not need to tell you is very discerning, was quite of the same opinion. That is one of the secrets, I believe, of her influence over so many of the girls ; and I had not gone many times with my eyes open before I saw that they were all entirely devoted to her. She fought shy of me for a good while, and was always so stand-offish that sometimes I felt inclined to be a little offended. I think she knew that I was watching her and wondering about her in my mind, and the very fact that she should resent this proved still more undeniably to me that she was not what she seemed ; but in all my thoughts about her a single doubt or suspicion of her goodness and honesty never crossed my mind. The victim of circumstances, or even of some foolish step of her own, she might be ; but of this I felt assured, that nothing dishonourable, or mean, or unwomanly, could ever be laid to the charge of Evelyn March."

"I am glad you took that view of her, Elizabeth," I put in, "because it exactly coincides with my own. She struck me from the first as being a very high-souled as well as proud-spirited woman."

"You know I have always been in the habit of inviting one or two of the girls to tea with me on

Sunday, and I was particularly anxious that Evelyn should come, because I wanted Keith to see her; but she refused for a long time, making all sorts of excuses which a baby might have seen through. I did not press her too much, of course, because I have no doubt she had her own reasons for her refusal. But one day, when I had repeated the invitation, and said there would be no one else, she certainly promised to come.

“‘Then it has been your fear of meeting people, Miss March, which has made you refuse me so often before?’ I said inquiringly.

“‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘I do not care for strangers; but if you are to be alone, I shall dearly like to come.’

“By this time she had become familiar enough with me to talk without the slightest restraint, and always as if her social position was quite as good as my own. There was none of that timidity or hesitation which some of the girls have evinced when brought into closer quarters. That was one of the things which helped me to judge pretty correctly of her origin and upbringing. Well, then, she came, a fortnight past on Sunday, at the usual time. You know that I never encourage ordinary callers on Sunday, and that both Keith and I have

absolutely set our faces against Sunday parties of every kind, although it is a real pleasure always to us both to see an old friend drop in in the afternoon, or to welcome our new friends from the House Beautiful.

“Keith was in the drawing-room when Miss March was announced; and I saw that he noted as well as I her carriage and bearing as she entered the room, so unmistakably those of one accustomed to rooms as lofty and magnificent as my own; and when I saw him slightly elevate his brows, I knew what he meant. She was dressed with extreme plainness—in fact with a Quaker-like simplicity, which I thought carried perhaps to excess; but it was as impossible to disguise herself as it is to make a fine lady out of gorgeous clothing. She was most perfectly at her ease, and talked to Keith as if she had known him all her life. As I listened to them, and heard her remarks upon the current topics of the day, of which she might be supposed in her capacity as assistant in an art emporium to know very little, a greater desire than ever to penetrate the mystery surrounding her filled my soul. I was just thinking whether I might, if a favourable opportunity should occur, venture on a few plain questions, when the

bell rang, and Dawson announced the Hon. Mrs. Roden. I was never so surprised in all my life, for I am not on visiting terms with that particularly objectionable old lady, and why she should favour me with a call upon Sunday afternoon, of all days in the week, was an incomprehensible mystery. Almost before Dawson had pompously announced her and retired in that discreet and noiseless manner peculiar to him, I saw at once that something extraordinary had happened, or was about to happen. It was quite evident that Mrs. Roden—I don't know if you happen to know her, dear, or not, but I should think she is positively the very ugliest woman that ever lived—was very much excited; her face was about ten degrees redder than usual, and her general appearance is that of an apple-woman, only less comely. But before she uttered a word of explanation, I glanced at Miss March, and saw that she had risen to her feet, and that a mutual recognition had taken place, and that something was going to happen.

“‘So you are here, you ungrateful creature,’ said the old lady in an irate voice, and not taking the slightest notice of Keith or of me. ‘My dear Mrs. Hamilton, if you knew as much about this young

woman as I do, you would not have her in your house.'

"I did not know what to say, but glanced from one to the other inquiringly. As for Keith, he looked decidedly and tremendously uncomfortable. You know his innate hatred and dread of scenes.

"I was at Lady Colwin's reception, and happening to be near the window, I saw you pass up the Square about half an hour ago,' said Mrs. Roden, still glaring upon my unfortunate guest in the same menacing manner. 'It took me a long time to get through the crush to the street, and then I was fortunate in finding that both Barrett and James had noticed you, and could tell me where you had gone, and I have come to see you. How have you got yourself wormed in here, for everybody knows that this is one of the most exclusive houses in London?'

"I think, dear,' said Keith to me presently, 'we had better retire, and leave these ladies to their interview.'

"He began to move with most amazing haste towards the door, and I prepared to follow; but Evelyn March came to my side and laid an imploring hand upon my arm.

“Pray stay, Mrs. Hamilton,” she said, in a proud, clear voice; “it is imperative that you hear the story now. Would you prefer to hear it from me or from my mother-in-law?”

“Your mother-in-law!” I gasped. “Do you mean to say that you are married?”

“Yes, she is, the minx!” cried Mrs. Roden; and though she seemed to be in a really dreadful state, the thing struck Keith and me in the same ludicrous light, and I saw that he had a very broad smile on his face as he quickly let himself out by the door.

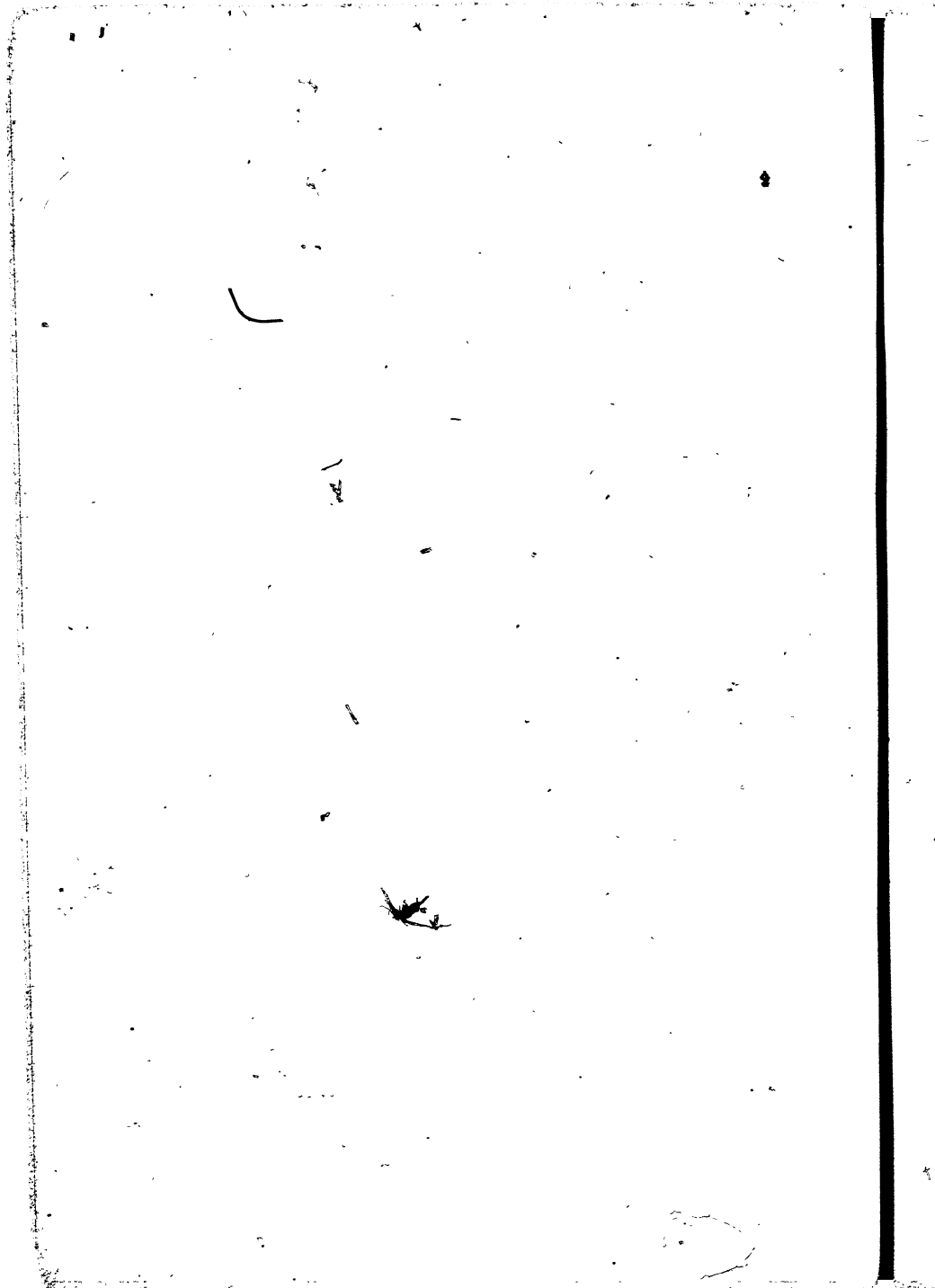
“She is my son’s wife,” continued Mrs. Roden, with the same angry note in her voice. “Married to him only a year ago, and left him five months after—left him out of pure spite and ill will, I believe—and what she has been doing with herself since then, that is what I want to know.”

“Mrs. Hamilton will be able to tell you,” put in Evelyn; and there was upon her face a very fine contempt, which indicated in what esteem she held her mother-in-law.

“Left him,” repeated Mrs. Roden, vehemently, “without the slightest warning, and the poor boy nearly broken-hearted ever since, to say nothing of



"SHE IS MY SON'S WIFE," CONTINUED MRS. RODEN." [p. 168.]



the humiliation it has been to me and to my daughters. I hope you will be able to convince her of her dreadful folly and wickedness, for I see from her face that her heart is just as it was before, and that she will not own her offences to me.'

"'Indeed, and I shall not,' repeated Evelyn, with a fervour there was no mistaking.

"I looked from one to the other again, perplexed how to act, and yet it was evident that they expected me to say or do something.

"'Perhaps you will tell me, my dear,' I said, looking at her with eyes which I think she could read, for a faint, sweet smile dawned upon her lips, and she drew a breath of relief—'perhaps you will tell me yourself, since we have gone so far, why you left your husband, and whether there is any truth in Mrs. Roden's accusations.'

"'Oh, they are all true,' she replied, without the least hesitation. 'I left him because I could not suffer his relatives. You must understand, Mrs. Hamilton, that I was married to Mr. Roden against my will, although I will say for him that he was a kind, indulgent, and loving husband to me. But I was never consulted as to my home or my surroundings, but was taken to make one of his family,

which consisted of his mother and his four sisters. I endured them as long as I could, and then I ran away.'

"There was not much ambiguity about this statement, and I could scarcely repress a little smile.

"'Hear her!' replied Mrs. Roden, almost tragically: 'a girl without a penny, who had no prospects and was absolutely dependent upon her aunt for the very bread she ate. To say that she endured us as long as she could! I really have no more to say.'

"Mrs. Roden appeared speechless for the time being, but that time did not last long.

"'What I want to know is, if you are coming back to put an end to this abominable, scandal which has so humiliated us, or what you are going to do. Meeting you here, I can safely believe that you are still fit to be received back into your home.'

"At this Evelyn curled her lip, and I saw a bitter, hunted look leap into her eyes.

"'You can go back to your son, madam,' she said quietly, and yet with a terrible pride and strength; 'and tell him that I have no fault to find with him, nor have I any objection to share his home. It was not from him I ran away, but

he knows very well what is my mind on this question ; and you can tell him that as soon as he can see his way to offer me a home which shall be mine alone, and of which I am absolute mistress, Mrs. Keith Hamilton will kindly tell him where I am to be found.'

"Then she turned to me with a whole world of entreaty in her face.

"'Will you allow me to leave, Mrs. Hamilton, or to go into another room?'

"I saw that the girl was upset, and did not wish to break down before her very fierce and unamiable relative. I opened the door of the inner drawing-room hurriedly.

"'Go in there, my dear, and out by the second door, and you will come to my boudoir. Stay there until I join you.'

"Mrs. Roden looked as if she would have liked to have detained her, but Evelyn paid not the slightest heed, and immediately disappeared. The old lady remained a few minutes longer, expatiating upon her daughter-in-law's frightful ingratitude and wickedness, but I gave her so little encouragement that she speedily withdrew. I was extremely careful also, although she questioned me quite flatly, not

to tell her where Evelyn was to be found. When she left, I sought Evelyn in the boudoir, and found her crying bitterly. She soon put me in possession of the whole story, with which, however, I need not trouble you. You must have gathered it pretty correctly from my account of that extraordinary invasion by the Hon. Mrs. Roden. I was not surprised next day to have a visit from Evelyn's husband. I may say I was rather agreeably disappointed with him. He was young, a very gentlemanly and amiable-looking lad, with a singularly open, frank and pleasant face, although perhaps it lacked a little in strength of character. He was the youngest of his mother's family, and had been ruled all his life by her and his four sisters, who were all unmarried, and I was uncharitable enough to think that if they at all resembled their mother the chances were that they would remain unmarried for a considerable time to come.

"We had a very long talk, and, on the whole, a satisfactory one; and what do you think has been the upshot of the whole affair?"

"I could not possibly say," I said, in an intensely interested voice, "although I may be able to guess pretty correctly."

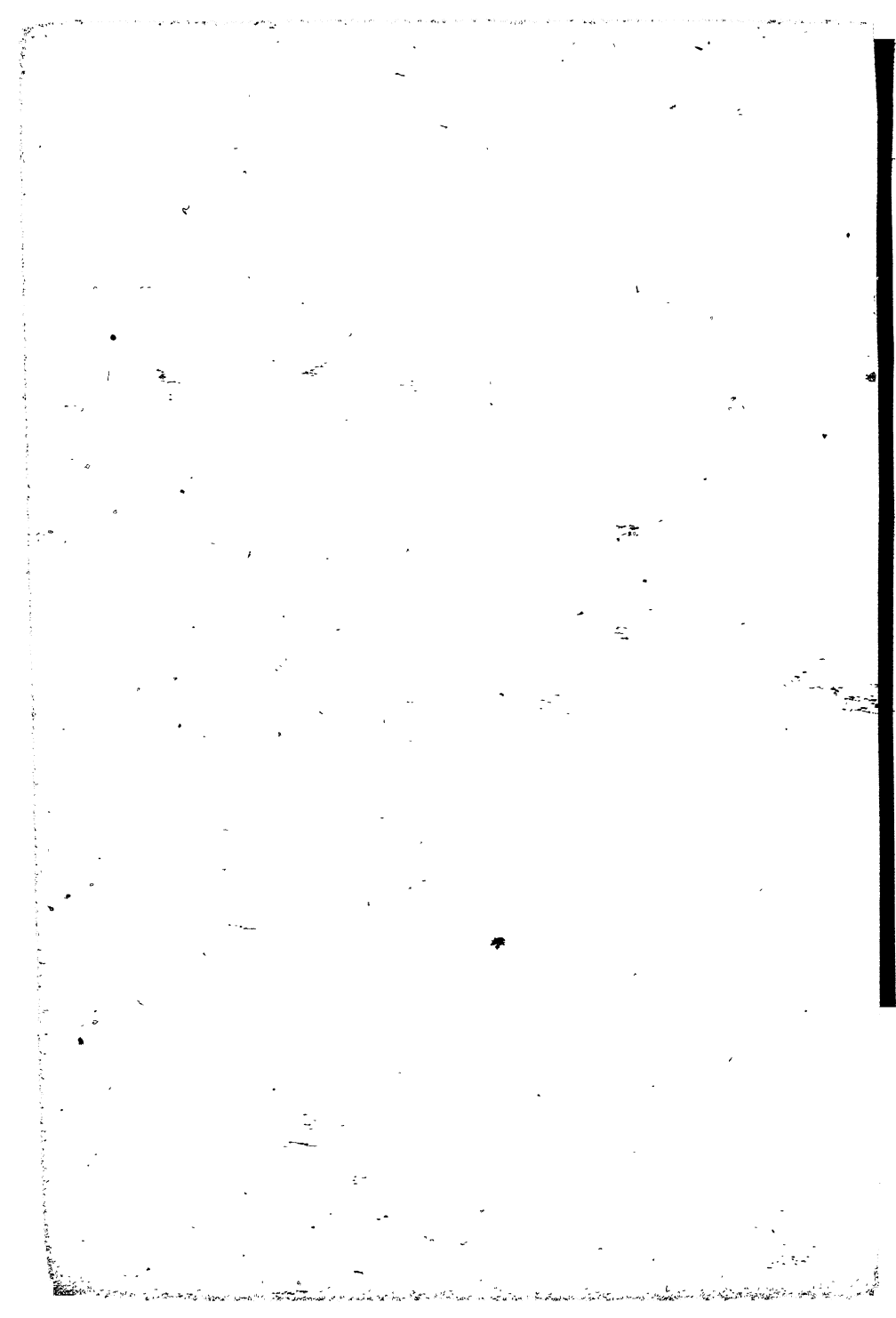
“Well, Evelyn has agreed to go back with him upon her own conditions—which are, of course, that she has her own home of which she is absolute mistress. He is really, very fond of her; and though Evelyn married him, as she says, against her will, I think she is very kindly inclined to him, and that, if they are left alone, their relations to each other would right themselves.”

“And when does this new condition of things come into operation?”

“Next week; meanwhile Evelyn has left the House Beautiful, and is living with us, and I think she would very much like to see you before she leaves. When will you come?”

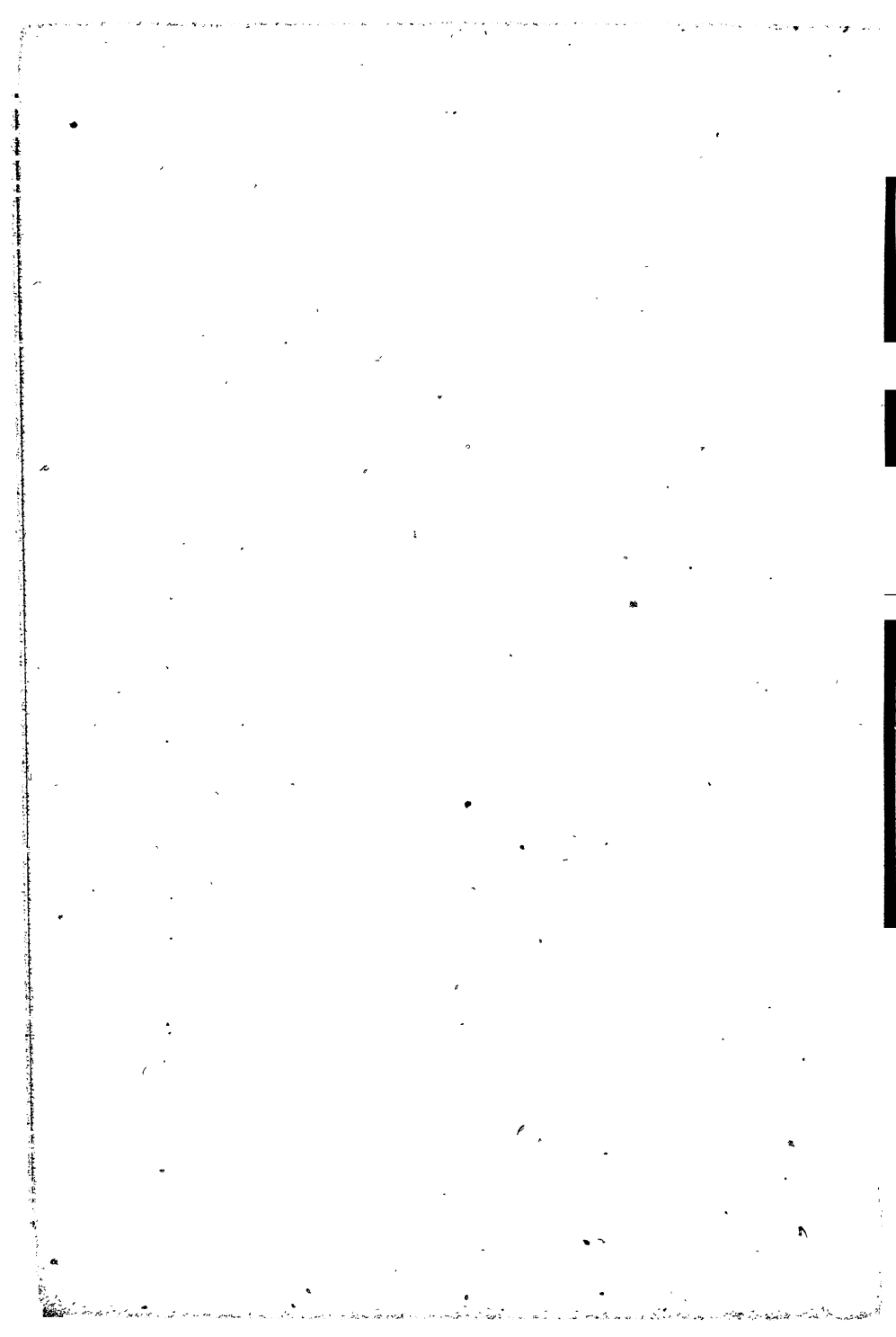
“Oh, to-morrow,” I replied, promptly. “It shows a good deal of courage, don’t you think, to map out her life for herself in the way she has done? I never saw anybody who accepted the limitations of her entirely new life in such an admirable spirit.”

“She is a woman of character, my dear,” Elizabeth replied, “and if she is allowed a fair chance, she will be the making of Wilfred Roden.”



VIII.

THE LOST BRACELET.



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THE LOST BRACELET.

AFTER the episode of Evelyn March, otherwise Mrs. Roden, there was a period of peaceable monotony in the House Beautiful. That the experiment was entirely successful was proved by the fact that every available room was occupied, and that many applications which could not be entertained were constantly being made, both to the housekeeper and to Mrs. Hamilton. Nor did I wonder at it, because it was a pleasant home, and the charges more moderate than many of the inferior lodgings where the guests had formerly found shelter. It was entirely self-supporting, which was a source of the greatest possible gratification, of course, to Elizabeth, and justified her intention of extending the scheme so as to accommodate a larger number of guests.

One afternoon, about twelve months after the episode related in our last chapter, Mrs. Hamilton

came to me considerably worried about something which had happened, not exactly in the House Beautiful, but still in connection with one of the inmates.

"You know little Polly Hartley, don't you?" she began, without the slightest greeting or preamble of any kind.

"Yes, of course I do," I replied, promptly; for Polly, who was one of the brightest, cheeriest little mortals it was possible to imagine, had been an inmate of the house since its commencement. "What can have happened to Polly?"

"Rather a serious thing for her, poor child!" said Elizabeth, with a slight contraction of her brows. "A diamond watch bracelet has unfortunately gone a-missing in the showroom where she is engaged, and it seems in some extraordinary way suspicion has been allowed to fasten on Polly."

"On Polly!" I cried, in amazement. "Why, all they have got to do is to look at the child's face, and they will have their suspicions blown to the four winds of heaven."

"I quite agree with you," replied Elizabeth; "but, unfortunately, the majority of people do not take the trouble to look for the mute testimony of faces, but are too ready to jump at conclusions,

Anyhow, Polly has been suspended until inquiries are made."

"I wish you would tell me how it happened," I said, with interest; "and does Miriam Wynne know anything about it?"

"She knows nothing more than I have told you," replied Elizabeth; "but I should just as soon have suspected her as Polly."

"A great deal sooner," I answered, promptly, as I contrasted in my mind the bold, dark, handsome face of Miriam Wynne with Polly's round, ingenuous, innocent one. "But I am still waiting to hear how it happened."

"Well, it was on Friday, I understand," replied Elizabeth. "They had been very busy, it seems, all the morning, showing a new stock of Paris teagowns. They had a good many customers in—some of their very best, and the bracelet belonged to a lady whom I know slightly. I am just going to see her when I have talked it over with you."

"And did Polly attend upon her?" I inquired.

"Yes, she did. The lady took off the bracelet with her gloves, and laid it down on the settee. Why people will be so abominably careless with such valuable things, and why they wear them in

the street or to go shopping in at all, I do not know," said Elizabeth, very indignantly.

"Was it a very valuable article, then?" I asked.

"Yes, very: one of those new-fangled enamelled watches, set round with brilliants. But I believe the chief value of it in her eyes is that it was given to her by some one of whom she is very fond. Anyhow, she is making a frightful fuss about it, and threatens all sorts of legal proceedings."

"She is quite sure, then, she had it on?"

"Oh, positive. Polly herself admits having seen and admired it, and even once reminded her that it was lying rather carelessly. You know that in a large shop like that, where they are perpetually so busy, professional thieves are constantly coming and going. It is quite possible that one of them may have lifted the pretty bauble."

"Well, but how did the suspicion come to be fastened on Polly? That is what I want to get at."

"Oh, that was simple enough. I believe that Miriam was the first to suggest it. You know there has been a coolness between them for some time: Miriam is very jealous of Polly, because, being such a favourite, she has got on rather faster than Miriam herself; and she has been exceedingly

disagreeable to her, Marget tells me, even in the house, for some considerable time. She did not exactly direct suspicion, of course, to Polly—that would have been too risky—but she did say that she saw the thing lying on the settee, and absolutely asserts that not a creature was near that corner of the room except Polly and the lady she was waiting on.”

“But surely that is very circumstantial evidence,” I replied, lightly. “What else have they done besides suspend the poor girl?”

“Well, they sent on Saturday to search her room and her boxes. Of course nothing was found, as they might very well have known, because even the most transparent and inexperienced of thieves would take good care that the evidence of their guilt could not be so easily found. Poor Polly is in terrible distress; and I have just learnt something to-day which has perplexed me a good deal.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“Well, you know that she has a mother and a poor little cripple brother down at Plaistow, not very far from the place where Winifred Pole’s home used to be. It was Miriam who told me this just at the dinner-hour, and they have gone down

to Margate for a month, she says. Now, to my certain knowledge Polly had not a penny to bless herself with no later than last week. You know she gives everything she can spare to her mother; but, let her be as economical as she likes, what she is able to give can only purchase necessaries: such luxuries as weeks at the seaside are altogether out of the question."

"Didn't you ask her about that?" I inquired.

"Well, no, I did not," replied Elizabeth, a trifle shamefacedly. "The fact is, I could not look in the child's face and ask her where she had got that money. I am afraid, don't you understand—afraid lest by any chance she should be guilty. It would be such a dreadful thing for her; and I am quite sure that Mrs. Vincent will show her no mercy, because she valued the lost article very much,—and besides, she is not what one would call a woman of feeling."

"Did you say you were going to her now?" I inquired.

"Yes; she lives in Connaught Place. I shall just drive there now."

"And where is Polly?"

"Well, she was in the house when I left at the

luncheon hour; but Marget says she has eaten nothing for two days, and she looks the picture of misery."

"If you wait a moment I will drive back with you as far as the house. I have a fancy I should like to have a few words with Polly on the subject myself."

"All right," said Elizabeth, with alacrity, as if she felt rather glad to have some little part of the responsibility shifted from her shoulders.

"I am very much annoyed about it," she confided to me as we drove along the pleasant road through Regent's Park, "because, you see, even if nothing is proved against the girl, it sets a kind of stigma on our establishment, and the other girls do not like it; I can see that quite well."

"Oh, but they must have a little more sympathy and forbearance," I said, quickly, "and you must not exaggerate things in this way. I am sure that Polly will come out of this ordeal without a blemish on her character. One knows these things intuitively."

"Well, I am sure I hope so," replied Elizabeth, the gloom clearing somewhat from her face. And then she began to tell me of the great speech that

Keith was expected to make on the following night on one of the burning questions of the hour. By the time that we had discussed this a little, and arranged to meet at the Ladies' Gallery in order to hear it, we arrived at the House Beautiful, where I was put down.

At that hour of the afternoon, of course, none of the inmates were supposed to be at home. Polly, therefore, occupied the drawing-room alone, and Elizabeth had by no means exaggerated her appearance, for she certainly looked a very woe-begone little creature, as she glanced at me with some shrinking, as if not quite sure how I was going to treat her. She was a little mite of a thing, quite young, but so smart and active, and such a general favourite, that she had got on in business much faster than Miriam Wynne, who prided herself upon her face and figure, and thought herself generally irresistible. Polly was not a lady: her father had been a small shopkeeper in Plaistow, and having had a long period of ill-health before his death, had left his wife and two children in very poor circumstances. The boy, who was three years younger than Polly, had been a helpless invalid all his life, and was, of course, a heavy drain upon such slender resources as they

possessed. She had not applied for residence in the House Beautiful in the ordinary way; but Elizabeth, who was behind the scenes in so many homes, had heard of the case from a clergyman at Plaistow, and being touched by the story of their poverty, and of Polly's great struggle and self-denying efforts, had thereupon made it her business to find out the girl, and had insisted upon her sharing all the advantages of the House Beautiful at a merely nominal charge. This, of course, was a matter entirely private between Elizabeth and the girl herself; indeed, I only heard of it from Polly a long time after she had been an inmate of the house.

"I have just seen Mrs. Hamilton, Polly," I said frankly, and I shook hands with her with perhaps more warmth than usual. "She has been telling me of this sad trouble you are in, and I thought I would just like to come and tell you that I don't believe a word of it."

"Oh, don't you?" she cried, and the tears welled up in her bright, dark eyes. "I was just feeling dreadfully low when I saw the carriage drive up. It is such an awful thing; I am sure it will kill poor mother when she hears of it;

and I am afraid that, even if they can't find any proof against me, they will refuse to take me back."

I sat down in front of her, and hesitated a moment. It did not occur to me to put the question straightly to her whether she had taken the thing or not, because I was entirely convinced in my own mind that she had not; but what was troubling me was the month's sojourn at Margate for her mother and brother. Where had the funds come from for that little expedition?

"You have not seen your mother for some little time, have you?" I began diplomatically, although I inwardly felt a trifle guilty. "Mrs. Hamilton tells me that she is at Margate at present."

To my surprise, and considerably to my dismay, I saw a bright red flush overspread Polly's face.

"Yes, they are at Margate; they went last week, and I am sure it will do Arthur a great deal of good."

"I am sure it will," I replied. "But it costs a good deal of money to go down there, especially at this season of the year, when seaside lodgings are at their highest. Have you been saving up a little nest egg for this, Polly?"

So guileless was the child that she did not perceive the drift of my questions in the least.

"No, I have not saved up at all. It is dreadfully hard to save," she said, pathetically. "You see fifteen shillings a week is not a great deal when one has to dress as we are obliged to dress."

"No, it is not a princely sum, Polly," I replied. "Have you, then, some kind friend who has come to the rescue, by taking your brother out of the smoky dulness of Plaistow for a month?"

To my inward distress and concern, her confusion seemed momentarily to increase.

"Yes, and no," she answered, all in a flutter. "I hope you will excuse me, but I don't think that I can tell you anything about it—at least, not yet."

"I am sorry for that, Polly," I replied gravely, "because—and I think I may speak very plainly to you now—don't you see that under the circumstances the fact that your mother and brother have been able to go to the seaside, and especially if you refuse to tell where the means came from for them to go, makes your position rather serious? You are under suspicion, of course, as you know; and unless you can satisfactorily explain this

unusual influx of money into your little circle, I am afraid things may go rather hard with you."

She grew a little white, and pressed her lips together rather firmly.

"I am afraid I cannot tell," she replied, and though her voice was very low, it was quite resolute; "because, you see, I promised not to."

"Does Miriam happen to know anything about it?" I asked then, and at my question the colour leapt into her face again.

"I don't know how much or how little she knows. I do not consider that Miriam has treated me very well; she is not a true friend, and I almost feel that she would be quite glad if anything could be proved against me."

"Oh, I hope you are mistaken, my dear," I said, gently. "But I really wish that you would reconsider your decision about not telling where this money came from, because I do assure you that it may turn out rather seriously for you."

"I suppose they could only put me in the gaol!" she said bravely, but I saw her lips blanch.

"Of course you would have to be convicted first," I replied, "and we do not want things to go as far as that. We do not want even a prosecution if it

can be avoided. Mrs. Hamilton has gone round now to have an interview with the lady who lost the bracelet, and it is just possible that she may call here on her way back."

I waited a little longer to see whether Polly would develop any inclination to trust me further concerning this mysterious Margate trip, but she did not allude to it again, and somehow neither could I; and though I left her with a very dissatisfied feeling in my mind, yet I could not possibly believe that she had actually stolen the thing, because if ever innocence and guilelessness were written upon any human face, they were written upon hers. Before I left, I obtained from her, by a casual question, the address of the lodgings at Margate to which her mother and brother had gone, and as I happened to have a reliable and not too inquisitive friend living at Westgate that month, I wrote to her, and without entering into full particulars, asked her to make a little call upon the widow and see whether she could, without seeming to question too closely, discover who had provided the wherewithal for the month at the seaside. It may be imagined that I waited with considerable impatience for a reply to this letter, though it came very promptly on the

evening of the second day. It was satisfactory, and yet it seemed to confirm the suspicion which I had been so anxious to have dispelled. My friend said that, in accordance with my request, she called upon Mrs. Hartley, and had found her a very quiet, refined, and interesting woman. Hearing that her visitor had some acquaintance with me, and also with Mrs. Hamilton, she talked very freely to her, and in the course of conversation told her what a good, hard-working, and self-denying daughter she had in London, who never spared or considered herself, but gave almost everything she possessed to those she loved. She also mentioned casually that the money to pay for the seaside trip had been a little present made to Polly by her employers. This letter filled me with the utmost dismay, because I knew perfectly well that Polly's employers were not at all the sort of people to make gratuitous presents to their saleswomen, and further, she had never even hinted at such a thing in her conversation with me. I took the letter along to Elizabeth, and we talked over it together rather mournfully, feeling ourselves obliged to come to the conclusion that things looked rather black for Polly.

Elizabeth, who hated deceit and double-dealing

of every kind, was inclined to be rather more severe than I expected, and I had to use all my powers of persuasion to prevent her from swooping down upon the unfortunate Polly there and then. She did go to see her, however, that very day, and came along to me afterwards. We were both intensely interested in this little story, and I felt that I would give a good deal to have Polly's innocence proved.

"I can't make anything of her, my dear," was Elizabeth's greeting. "I have been talking very seriously to her, but I can't get her to admit anything. She became a little indignant at the end, and said, since we all believed it possible for her to be guilty of such a thing, that she was quite willing to leave the house. I then explained to her that, so long as she was under suspicion, she could not possibly leave."

"But what are they going to do?" I inquired, anxiously. "Has Mrs. Vincent said anything further about the prosecution?"

"No, but Polly's employers have intimated to her that they have no further need of her services."

We waited with patience during the next fortnight for some further development of affairs, but none came, and at the end of that time Polly suddenly

left the House Beautiful without saying good-bye to anybody except Marget, who was sincerely attached to her, and determined to uphold her innocence before the whole world. She did not say where she was going, but I discovered that she had gone down to Margate to join her mother and brother, and I rather wished that I had heard of her seeking for another situation, and the mystery of the funds seemed to become greater than ever.

Elizabeth was a good deal concerned about Polly, although she rather resented the way in which the girl had withheld her confidence. However, it was impossible for her to bear malice or harbour resentment for any length of time, and I was not surprised to hear from her some little time afterwards that she had got Polly another situation as assistant in a small fancy goods business, where there would be no chance of diamond watch-bracelets lying about.

We did not hear anything about Polly for a considerable time, although we sometimes spoke of the affair, and wondered if it would ever be cleared up. Although Elizabeth did not tell me, I had a guess that she had made good the value of the bracelet to Mrs. Vincent after she had persuaded her to abstain from the prosecution; and yet there were

times when I secretly wondered whether after all it might not have been fairer to Polly, and the best course in the end to pursue, if the fullest inquiry had been invited.

Miriam Wynne, of course, remained still in the House Beautiful, and seemed to be very successful in her business life, being promoted with most unusual rapidity. She had been elected to fill Polly's place, when she left, and appeared to give the utmost satisfaction therein. She was no particular favourite of mine, and I had never paid much attention to her at all ; but Marget said to me one day that she did not think the girl was well—that she looked as if she had something on her mind. I expressed my concern rather mildly perhaps, having no strong personal interest in her, and I was therefore very much surprised one evening when I was told that Miriam Wynne had come to my house, and was extremely anxious to have a few words of conversation with me. It did not occur to me, although I was somewhat surprised by the announcement, to connect the visit in any way with the past episode which had ended in Polly Hartley leaving the House Beautiful. When I went into the drawing-room and saw the girl standing,

I was distressed to see her looking so ill, and said so as kindly as I could.

"I am in great trouble," she said, brokenly, "and I am so miserable in my mind that I must talk to somebody. I am afraid to tell Mrs. Hamilton, although she will have to know, so I thought I would come to you first."

"Sit down," I said gently, "and tell me what I can do for you. What kind of trouble are you in?"

"Oh, all sorts," she replied, dismally. "It began more than a year ago, a good while before the trouble came to Polly Hartley."

"It has nothing to do with that, I hope," I said, quickly.

"Well, it has and it has not; but if you can listen, I would like to tell you all about it from the beginning. I was very happy, both in my work and everything else, till two years ago, when I took up with the man I expected to marry. I met him at a Christmas dance at a friend's house, and he seemed as much taken with me as I was with him. I could not make out very well what he was, but my friends seemed to think him a fine gentleman; and certainly he dressed well, and of course looked like a gentleman. We became very friendly, and

after a short time we were engaged. I was very anxious to find out how he got his living, and I could not altogether make it out, because sometimes he seemed to have any amount of money, and at others to be quite hard up. At last I found out that he was connected with the turf. I was very sorry when I found out this, because I was brought up very strictly, and my father and mother had the greatest horror of anything connected with gambling. But still I was very fond of him, and I thought perhaps I might be able to break him off that connection; but it is easier thinking such a thing than doing it, and I found, instead of having influence over him, he had a much stronger influence over me. He had such a grand way of talking: he used to tell me that we should have a fine house at Newmarket or Epsom when we were married, and entertain all the swells, and that I would look so well, just like a duchess, he used to say, if I was dressed as I ought to be. I took it all in, because you see I was very fond of him, and I believed everything he told me. So the thing went on for twelve months. Sometimes, when he was very hard up, and low in the spirits, I used to lend him a sovereign if I had it, and so gradually

he began to look to me for it, and though I was very proud and glad to be able to help him, still I had a kind of secret feeling in my mind that all was not right, and that a man who could borrow money from a girl like me, who had to work so hard to earn it, could not be all he ought. Just at the time that Mrs. Vincent's bracelet was lost, he was dreadfully hard up and in despair. He talked about shooting himself, and all sorts of things, and said he had a debt of honour to meet, only a small one, but they were pressing him so hard that he had no way of escape, and he had nowhere to turn to get the money. Just the night before the bracelet was lost we went for a walk in Hyde Park together, and I felt so sorry for him. He said that if only he could get out of this scrape, which would only cost him about £20 if he had it, he would turn over a new leaf, and be all I should desire. Perhaps you will wonder at me, but he was so handsome and so winning in his speech, that I just felt I could make any sacrifice to help him and to get him out of his difficulty. Therefore, the very next day, when we were showing these Paris gowns, and when Mrs. Vincent came to be fitted, I was carrying them to and fro from a wardrobe quite close to where



"IT WAS AS EASY AS ANYTHING TO SLIP IT IN MY POCKET."
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Polly was occupied with her, and one of the times I passed I saw the jewels flashing on the settee. There was a great pile of mantles lying close by, from which I had to make a selection, so it was as easy as anything to slip it in my pocket, and I just did."

"You took it, Miriam?" I interrupted, surprised and dismayed, "and allowed poor Polly to be blamed for it all along?"

"Yes," she said, in a kind of dull voice. "You see, after it was done I had to cover it up. I gave it to Charlie next night, and explained it all to him, and he got it disposed of, but I made him promise that he would get it back again for me as soon as he could. I have never ceased to go on at him about it ever since, because I have been so miserable, and at last I have managed to get him to restore it to me. He had put it away with a friend of his who keeps a large pawnbroker's establishment, and he advanced the money on it without saying anything about it. Here it is."

She took a little tissue paper packet from her pocket, and unfolding it, exhibited to my astonished gaze Mrs. Vincent's flashing jewels in the most matter-of-fact and commonplace way, as if nothing

out of the ordinary had happened. I was too much astonished and too indignant to speak for a few moments, but I made considerable haste to take possession of the innocent cause of so much anxiety and trouble. I looked at the girl keenly as I did so, wondering in how far her repentance was sincere, and whether she realised in the least the magnitude of her sin. She had a pretty and attractive face, but there was not much character or depth of soul about her, and I could readily understand how quickly and easily she became the prey of an unprincipled man.

We had a long talk over it all, and I let her go at length, able to promise nothing until I should have consulted with Mrs. Hamilton. The first thing was to restore the bracelet to Mrs. Vincent, who had shown a good deal of forbearance over the loss of the treasure she really prized, and then to acquaint Polly with the happy manner in which her innocence had been proved. I was not surprised that the story made Elizabeth very angry: she felt much inclined to hand over the precious pair to the authorities at once without further parley, but I asked her to wait until she should have spoken to Miriam Wynne, which she did the next

day. Then she came round to my house, so that we might drive together out to see Polly.

"She has taken the wind out of my sails entirely," was Elizabeth's greeting, as I stepped into the carriage. "She has got married this morning to her precious lover, and they are going off to America, Marget tells me, this afternoon. In these circumstances, and seeing that the jewel is restored, and we have the chance to make some reparation to Polly for our suspicions, what is there to be done?"

"Nothing," I admitted, "and I hope this will be a wholesome lesson to poor Miriam, and that she will endeavour to keep her husband in the straight path as well as to remain in it herself. The fact that she owned up at the last moment shows that she has some conscience left."

We found Polly apparently very happy and contented in her narrow sphere, and she was genuinely pleased, if surprised, to behold us. Without waiting to make the slightest explanation, Elizabeth took out the bracelet, and held it up before the girl's astonished eyes. Her face flushed all over, and she burst into tears.

"Oh, where did it come from, and where has it been all this time?" she cried, clasping her hands

together. "I always prayed that it would turn up, and hoped it would."

Elizabeth told her in a few words the history of the stolen bracelet, and was not slow to make a very handsome apology for her own doubts of Polly's sincerity. This the girl accepted somewhat painfully, and looked as if she would rather we said nothing at all about it.

We found out a considerable time after that the extra money which had allowed the poor tired mother and the ailing brother to enjoy the luxury of a month at the seaside had been partly supplied by Polly, who had made it by working overtime at fine needlework in her own room, and partly by her sweetheart, who was an engineer in one of the great shipbuilding yards, and who had cheerfully given of his hard-earned savings to help the relatives of the girl he loved.

It gave Elizabeth very genuine pleasure to make substantial amends to Polly for her unjust suspicion, and she has been a happy wife now for several years.

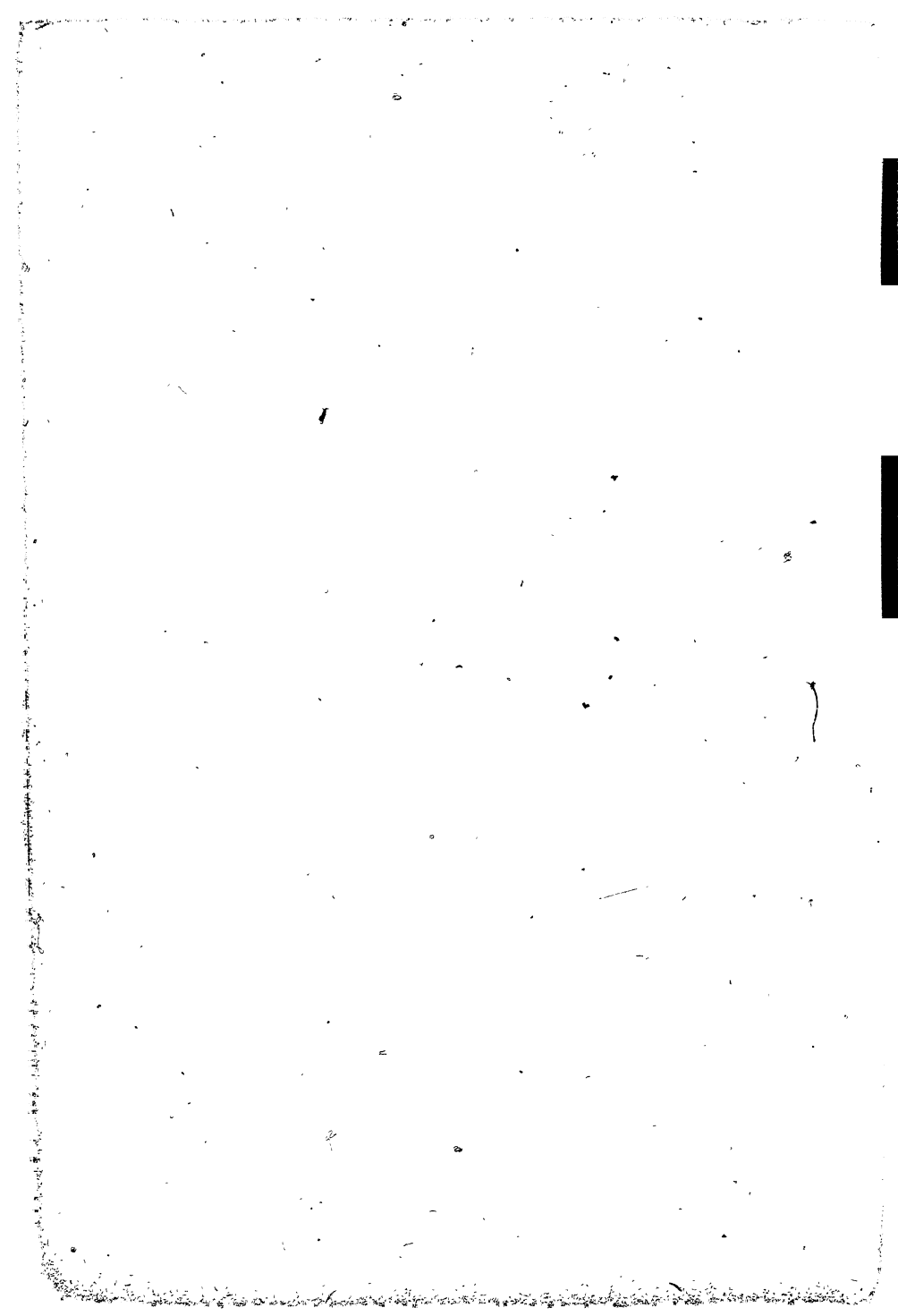
"I don't feel," said Elizabeth, rather dubiously, as we drove home that day, "as if our experiment at the House Beautiful were quite a success. We hear

so much about environment nowadays that I have looked for better results. Has it not struck you that we have had a good many little deceptions of one kind and another practised upon us by our inmates?"

"Oh, not more than you will find in any other place where a few are gathered together. Environment, no doubt, is a good deal, and after all, there are always the ordinary weaknesses and temptations of human nature to contend with. You must not get discouraged, Elizabeth."

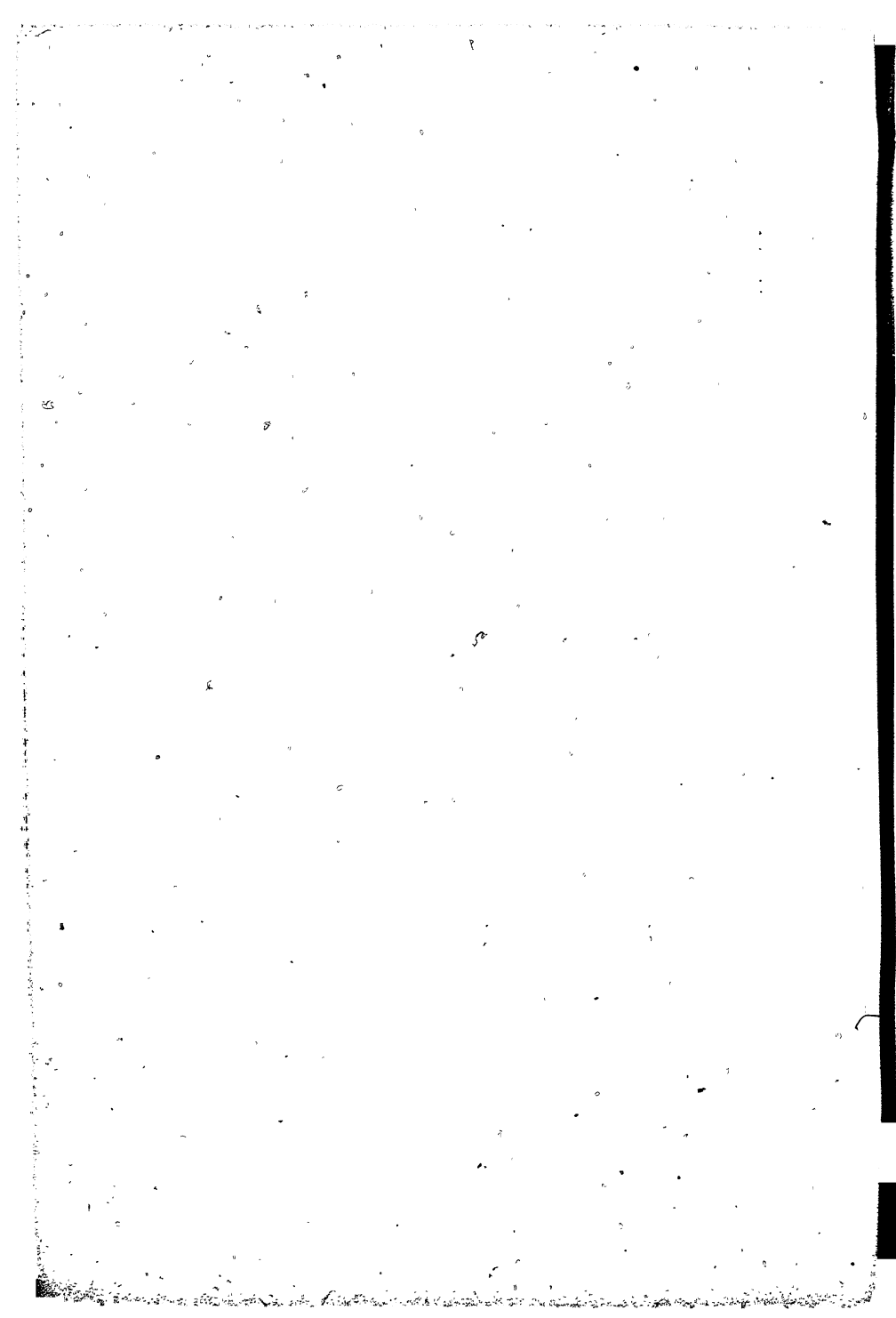
"No, I suppose not," she replied, with a little sigh, "and yet I wish it could be different. Oh, I should like every one to have an ideal, and to live up to it!"

"You and I will never live to see that day, Elizabeth," I replied, soberly, "because by that time the millennium will have arrived, and we shall have gone to our account elsewhere."



IX.

LADY BETTY.



IX.

LADY BETTY.

I HAD often wondered why Elizabeth did not more rapidly develop an interest in politics. Her husband was coming steadily to the front as a man of high political principle, and sound, if not brilliant ability. He was one of those who do much towards raising the tone of public life, and it is not too much to say that he was one of the most popular members in the House. He was not one of those ready to speak upon the spur of every moment, but when he did speak he had something to say, and never appeared before his colleagues with any slipshod or poverty-stricken speech. Thus it was that his utterances were always accorded attention, and carried a certain weight with them as being those of a man who thought before he spoke.

I did not go very much into the brilliant society which, as Keith Hamilton's wife, Elizabeth gathered

about her in the beautiful old house in Belgrave Square. There she moved in the world wherein I had little place, although sometimes, yielding to her constant entreaties and reproaches, we would accept one of her invitations, and when we did so we never failed to enjoy it, nor to come away impressed by the versatility of her character, and satisfied that she was a very wholesome leaven in the circle in which she moved. Although she had very few relatives of her own, she was now connected by marriage with many of the best families, and she was a favourite with most of her husband's connections, although some of them thought her eccentric in the extreme, and did not altogether approve of the hobbies which she rode with such earnestness.

Among Elizabeth's intimate connections whom we met occasionally at her house, there was one to whom she was deeply attached, though that any attachment between two so different should be possible was always a puzzle to me. This was Lady Betty Vane, one of her husband's cousins, married to a Yorkshire squire, a man of immense wealth, considerably older than herself, and not at all the sort of person one would have thought the gay Lady Betty would have elected to marry. She was quite

young, not more than five-and-twenty, a beautiful, clever, and vivacious creature, an incorrigible flirt, and to outward seeming one of those butterflies who are content to flutter gaily through life, evading all its serious issues and shirking its responsibilities. What fascination this brilliant creature exercised over my sober Elizabeth I could not tell, but it is certain that they really and truly loved each other, and were more like sisters than mere connections by marriage.

Geoffrey Vane was in Parliament also, where, however, he did not shine, although he could always be reckoned upon to vote straight with his party. When the General Election put the country into a fever in August, Geoffrey Vane had to make a fight for his seat, and as Mr. Hamilton's own seat was safe and uncontested, he went into Yorkshire to help his cousin's husband. Elizabeth, of course, accompanied him, and I heard from her from time to time about the lively proceedings taking place in the constituency. It was a new experience for Elizabeth, this electioneering campaign, and I could gather from her occasional letters that she was enjoying it very much, and had thrown herself into it heart and soul. There was a large party staying

at the Court, which was the name of the Vanes' Yorkshire estate, and they appeared to be having a very lively month of it. The Keith Hamiltons remained in Yorkshire all the time we were in Scotland, and I was home in my own house for the autumn before they proceeded northwards. Some little business matters brought them to London for a day or two before they went on to Flisk, and as it was the dead season in town, and there was very little to distract Elizabeth's attention, I saw a great deal of her.

We were sitting together alone one evening after she had dined with us, her husband having been obliged to entertain some friends at his club. I saw a kind of thoughtful look come on Elizabeth's face as she sipped her coffee meditatively.

"I have been wondering all day," she said, suddenly, "whether I ought to tell you. It would make a fine story for your magazine, although it hardly comes within the province of my experiences; besides, I am not quite sure whether Betty would like it."

"You might as well tell it to me, anyhow," I suggested, "and as two heads are better than one, we could then decide whether it could go into

the magazine or not. I rather think that it might be interesting to give some of your electioneering experiences."

"Oh, but it has nothing to do with the election,—at least, not much. It is something about Betty and her husband, something which has interested me more than I can tell, although it came very near being a tragedy."

"You will tell me anyhow, Elizabeth," I said pleadingly, for she had whetted my curiosity, and I was sufficiently interested in the lovely Lady Betty to want to hear anything especially concerning her.

"Oh yes, I shall tell you. I might as well tell you sooner as later, because I am sure I could not keep it from you always, and I do not think Betty would mind very much your knowing. You have met them a good many times at our house: did it ever strike you that there was anything strained in the relations between her and Geoffrey?"

"I do not know that I ever noticed anything particularly strained, but I have certainly often thought that they were not a particularly well-matched pair. Mr. Vane, I know, is a very estimable

man, but he is hardly—well, hardly a mate for Lady Betty.”

“That is the world’s opinion generally, but I don’t like to hear it from your lips,” said Elizabeth, quite gravely, “because it is all at sea. I am very fond of Betty, and always have been, but at the same time, now I know them both, I have no hesitation in saying that, with all her grace and beauty and wit, she is not fit to hold a candle to her husband—honest, true-hearted Geoffrey Vane.”

“You never can tell what is beneath the surface, of course,” I said gravely, vaguely apologetic. “One can only judge from outward appearances.”

“You ought to have more discretion by now,” said Elizabeth, severe without intention; “but there, I believe I made the same mistake myself at first, for I remember saying to Keith long ago, when I met them first, that I did not know how anybody, least of all a lovely creature like his cousin, could marry Geoffrey Vane.”

“What made her do it?” I ventured to ask. “Was it the usual case of money gilding a pill?”

“No, that is the odd bit of it; Betty has quite

a considerable income of her own, and it would not have mattered suppose she had never married anybody. She married the man with her eyes open. Of course, he was madly and ridiculously in love with her, but so were many others."

"How long have they been married?" I asked.

"Four years only. Keith told me that she had a lot of lovers when she was a girl, and that there was one whom she was supposed to favour a good deal, although her father highly disapproved of him, because he was only a captain in the army with nothing but his pay—no prospects whatever, although he came of a fairly good family. His name was Raymond Brand; he was in India at the time of her marriage, and I believe they had not met since. In the interval, through the unexpected death of a distant relative, he has come into a large fortune and a fine estate in Yorkshire, within driving distance of the Court. I had heard that Mr. Vane's opponent was Captain Brand, but it was not until we went down that Keith told me the circumstances, and that he was Betty's old lover, who had made a good deal of dispeace in the family years before. This, of course, gave an additional interest to the fray, and I looked

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forward with a good deal of anticipation to its development.

“The first morning we were there Betty drove me in her own cart into Market Leighton to open the campaign, as she said, merrily. She was looking her loveliest, I thought. You know how well she dresses; I thought that day she had surpassed herself, and that they would be very hard-hearted and unappreciative electors indeed who could resist her.

“‘Has Keith told you anything about Geoffrey’s opponent, Elizabeth?’ she asked me as we drove through the gates.

“I suppose I must have looked a little guilty for before I could reply she continued:

“‘Ah, I see he has, and you know that Captain Brand was an old lover of mine, and that I had not met him for years. I felt rather queer when I heard first who was going to contest the seat, but now I think I am rather pleased than otherwise. It certainly gives zest to the whole proceedings.’

“‘Have you met him since you came down?’ I asked.

“‘No, I have not seen him since we parted sweethearts five years ago,’ she replied, frankly;

'but I want to see him awfully. He was without exception the handsomest fellow I ever saw.'

" 'Well, the probability is that you will see plenty of him,' I said quietly. 'Probably you may come across him this morning. I should think it likely.'

" 'That is what I am going to Market Leighton for,' replied Betty, with the utmost frankness.

" I looked at her with some amusement, and I saw from the light in her eyes, and the way she handled her whip and reins, that the spirit of mischief was in her, and that she was in one of her most reckless moods. It was no business of mine, however, to say anything to her just then. I own I felt myself a good deal interested in the situation, and eager to see Captain Brand. We drove straight to Mr. Vane's committee rooms, where Keith and he had been busy since after breakfast; and after we had lunched together, a very merry party, in the county hotel, Betty and I set out to do a little personal canvassing, into which she seemed disposed to throw herself heart and soul. I may mention that neither of our gentlemen had yet seen the opposing candidate, who was either in no haste to appear on the field of battle, or felt so sure of his ground that he was taking it very easily.

"I must not stop to tell you anything about our house-to-house visitations; we had some very amusing experiences, and the way Betty wheedled and coaxed and won the hearts of the householders was a lesson to me in the art of feminine diplomacy. We had agreed to meet again at the hotel at half-past four for tea, and were proceeding down the wide, picturesque High Street towards our destination, when we saw two gentlemen coming towards us. Betty's colour heightened a little.

"'Oh, Elizabeth,' she whispered, 'here is Captain Brand. Are not we in luck?'

"They were upon us before I could reply. The taller of the two, who by his general appearance and military bearing was easily distinguished, appeared undecided what to do; but Betty solved the problem by standing still in the middle of the street, and extending her hand with a bewildering smile.

"'How do you do, Captain Brand?' she said, sweetly. 'Although we are on the war path politically, it need make no difference to us privately. Don't you feel this to be a very interesting occasion?'

"'Indeed I do, Lady Betty,' he replied, with a

good deal of significance in his tone. And while they exchanged their bantering words, I had a full opportunity of taking in Captain Raymond Brand, in so far as one can do it at a first meeting. He was certainly very handsome, with a tall, finely proportioned figure, a dark sunburnt face, and a pair of particularly keen dark eyes. It did flash across my mind as we stood there that Betty and he made a good-looking pair, and I wished that nature had been more lavish in her gifts to Geoffrey Vane. But somehow, even at that first meeting, I took an unaccountable dislike to the man: there was something in the shifting glance of his eye, and in the slightly mocking smile which played about his mouth, which repelled me, and though his voice was very musical and well modulated, I imagined that I detected in it a false ring. Oh yes, I believe I was prejudiced against him, and that my sincere regard for Geoffrey made me impatient and unjust towards the man who had once been his rival. I had never seen Betty more animated, nor looking lovelier, and I was astonished that she did not resent the very candid compliments paid to her by her old admirer; indeed, there was altogether too much familiarity in his manner to please me, and

I said so promptly to Betty the moment that we had parted.

“Well, you see,” she said, a little apologetically, “we were so intimate in the old days—sweethearts, Elizabeth; from the time we were so high. It is not easy to be stiff and prim and conventional to a man you have known all your days. Now, confess, isn’t he divinely handsome?”

“Oh, his looks are well enough,” I replied, discontentedly; and as we approached the door of the hotel, we saw our respective husbands standing on the steps waiting for us. I thought I had never seen Geoffrey Vane look to less advantage. Perhaps his close proximity to my tall good-man made his figure seem even more squat and ungainly than usual, but nothing could ever mar the honest kindness of his face, and the true, tender gleam of his grey eyes. I was vexed to see from Betty’s face that she also was drawing an inward contrast, and somehow a kind of chill fear fell upon my heart. You know how Geoffrey regards his wife; I often say to Keith that it is not love, but blind idolatry, and I should dearly like to tell him that if he were less slavishly devoted to her, she would probably think a good deal more of him.

“ Now that the campaign had started in earnest, we were bound to see a good deal of Captain Brand ; in fact, we were always meeting him, a great deal oftener than I liked, or than I thought was good for Betty, and I made a point of sticking to her at all hours and seasons, never allowing her to have any opportunity of talking alone to her old lover. Sometimes I rebuked myself for taking such extraordinary precautions, which of course indicated a certain distrust of Betty ; but I do think, dear, that one has intuition about these sort of things, and that I was quite right in what I did. The more I saw him, the less I liked him, and it vexed me very much that Betty did not resent the familiarity of his manner when we met. She is very fond of me, as you know, and allows me to talk very plainly to her ; but the first time I hinted at my disapproval of the very many meetings and conversations, we seemed to be having with Captain Brand, she turned upon me a little freezing glance which indicated that I might go so far and no farther. All the time, however, she was working her hardest for Geoffrey. You must not imagine for a moment her interest in the conflict flagged, or that she had basely gone over to the other side.

I watched her very closely, and there was a good deal in her behaviour which troubled me. There was no doubt whatever that she was keenly interested in Captain Brand, that she looked conscious in his presence, and I feared once or twice that the spell of long ago was exercising rather a stronger influence over her than even I or any one who loved her could possibly like to see. Geoffrey, who as you know is the kindest and most generous of souls, was very friendly with his opponent, and there were none of those bitter and personal passages between them which so often give an unpleasant flavour to electioneering campaigns. But I often thought that he was unnecessarily civil to Captain Brand, and when it came to inviting him to dinner at the Court during the last week of the fight, I said to Keith that really I could not approve of it, and that I thought it would have been much better for all concerned if they had been content to preserve an attitude of dignified courtesy towards each other outside. I did not hint to him anything at all about my suspicions of Betty; somehow I dare not be so disloyal to her; and besides, the idea was too painful to myself to be allowed to find voice.

“There was a considerable party at the Court

that night, and, of course, the fact that we were entertaining the rival candidate gave a piquancy to the gathering which nothing else could have done. I thought Betty surpassed herself in every possible way. I had never seen her looking more radiant, nor talking more brilliantly. Captain Brand had the seat of honour beside her, and their war of wit—I can describe it by no other words—monopolised the attention of the whole table. Geoffrey seemed a little dull and out of sorts, and I saw a peculiar look in his eyes once or twice, which indicated, I thought, a vague envy of his rival's undeniably superior personal charms and ability to make himself so brilliantly agreeable.

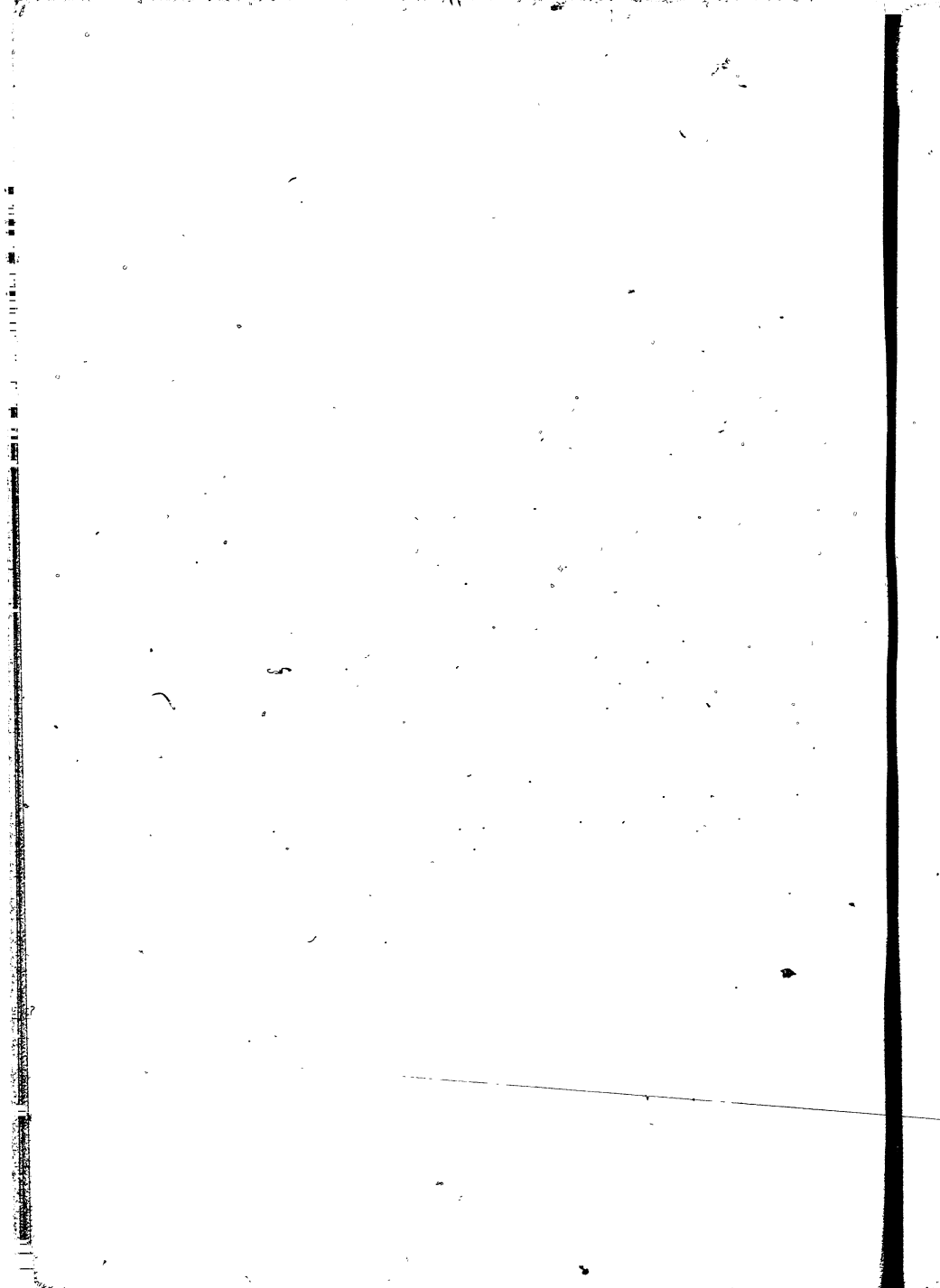
“It was a lovely, warm evening, and the gentlemen, instead of remaining at the table, smoked their cigars on the terrace, to which the French windows of the dining-room gave easy access. We were in one of the ground-floor drawing-rooms, whose windows opened out similarly, so that it became a kind of informal garden party in the dark, if I may so put it. I thought it was extremely bad taste of Captain Brand to single out Betty for such very marked attention, because most of those dining with us were county people in the neighbourhood, who remembered

perfectly well the love passages that had been between them before her marriage with Geoffrey Vane, and I was so angry with Betty that I could scarcely make myself agreeable to the people to whom I was obliged to talk. I determined not to be deterred by anything she might say from letting her know before we slept exactly what I thought of her, and to warn her against a continuance of the conduct which only made people talk, and which was certainly very wounding to her husband.

“Captain Brand and one or two gentlemen lingered after the rest of the company had departed, and I am sure I am not exaggerating when I say that he and Betty walked up and down that terrace alone together for quite half an hour while the other gentlemen were engaged talking in the smoking-room. I was sitting quite alone in the drawing-room; and feeling at last that I really could not endure it any longer, though I knew that my intrusion would be far from welcome, I went to the hall to get a wrap, so that I could join the couple on the terrace. Just as I was taking it from the wardrobe, Captain Brand came somewhat hastily into the hall alone, and without looking at me, or making the slightest observation



"HE AND BETTY WALKED UP AND DOWN." [p. 220.]



or apology, he took his hat and coat from their places and walked out. I followed him to the door, but could see nothing, only heard his footsteps crunching the gravel under foot as he walked rapidly down the drive. Considerably puzzled by this hasty departure, I laid down the wrap and returned to the drawing-room, where I found Betty shutting up the French windows, with a hasty and nervous manner, which rendered me extremely suspicious. It was not the thing she would have done in ordinary circumstances at all, and I rather expect that it was to keep her face hidden from my observation that she lingered so long about it.

“‘Aren't they going yet, those men in the smoking-room?’ she asked, without turning her head. ‘It is nearly midnight. I really wish they would take themselves off. Don't you think it has been a very long evening?’

“‘I have not thought about it, Betty,’ I said. ‘Did you know that Captain Brand had gone?’

“‘Yes,’ she replied, curtly, and drawing the heavy curtains across the window with a distinct jerk, she presently turned her face to me. Then I saw that it was very white, and there was a

strange expression on it which somewhat prepared me for her words.

“‘Elizabeth,’ she said, with a sharp, shrill ring in her voice, ‘will you tell me quite candidly, as you usually do, whether you have seen anything in my conduct lately which would justify any man offering me the greatest insult it is possible for a man to offer to a woman?’

“‘I have disapproved a good deal of your extreme friendliness with Captain Brand,’ I replied, without the slightest hesitation. ‘Still, I should not like to say that I have seen anything light in your conduct; in fact, if I had, I should not have been able to hold my tongue about it.’

“‘You lift a load from my mind, and I believe you,’ she said, with a look of intense gratitude in her wonderful eyes. ‘I know that you don’t like him, that you have never liked him since you met him first, and now I know that you were right. He is one of those men to whom it is not safe to speak except in the most matter-of-fact and commonplace way. I will admit that I was interested in him, and that the romance of the past lent a kind of zest to our meetings; but I thought that as Geoffrey’s wife I was safeguarded, and that he

would never seek to overstep the bounds of ordinary acquaintance, or at least friendship—for I suppose we have been very friendly. But he has imagined all along,' she cried, with a little angry stamp of her foot, 'that there has been something else in my mind altogether: in plain language, that I was in love with him, and that I am unhappy with my husband, and would only be too glad to be assured that he has not forgotten me.'

"I shall never forget her look as she stood there, with one hand clenched on the table and the other in the exquisite lace which draped her bodice, her lovely face flushed a little now with the pain and shame of it, her whole attitude one of outraged dignity.

"'But you undeceived him, Betty; I could see that from his look,' I said quickly.

"'Yes, I think I did undeceive him. I managed, although I thought the words would choke me, to tell him that one hair of my husband's head is dearer to me than he ever was in the old days when I thought I did care for him; and I told him some other plain truths, too, which I hope that he will remember. But oh, Elizabeth, to think that I should have laid myself open to this! What would Geoffrey

say? Why did you allow me to make such a fool of myself?’

“‘Never mind, dear; it won’t happen again,’ I said, soothingly. ‘I am glad that you have been able to give Captain Brand the very wholesome lesson he requires.’

“I did not add what was in my heart—that my proud, beautiful Betty had also got a lesson which I hoped and expected would last her for many a day. She was still looking very white and rather excited when the gentlemen came out of the adjoining room, the last carriage being at the door.

“‘Hallo! where is Brand?’ said Geoffrey’s cheery voice. ‘I thought he was in here with you, little woman,’ he added to his wife.

“‘He has just gone,’ I said quickly, for I saw that Betty was hard put to it to answer composedly. ‘Didn’t he look in to say good-night to you?’ I felt obliged to ask that absurd and superfluous question in order to put some kind of decent face on the matter.

“‘No, we have never set eyes on him since the Traffords left.’

“‘Oh, I daresay he will explain and apologise

to-morrow,' I answered. Then the good-nights were said, and the last guests departed.

"As we came in from the hall I saw Geoffrey look keenly and anxiously at his wife, and finally lay a kind hand on her arm.

"I am sure it has been too much for you, Betty,' he said, all that great tenderness of his shining in his honest face. 'It was too bad of me to have all those fellows to dine on top of all the fatigue you go through for me in the daytime.'

"I saw a little shiver pass over Betty, and seemingly unconscious that Keith and I were only a few steps away, she suddenly flung herself in her husband's arms. Then I beckoned to Keith, and we slipped away upstairs to our own rooms, where I, of course, was bound to relate to him the incident of the evening as known to me.

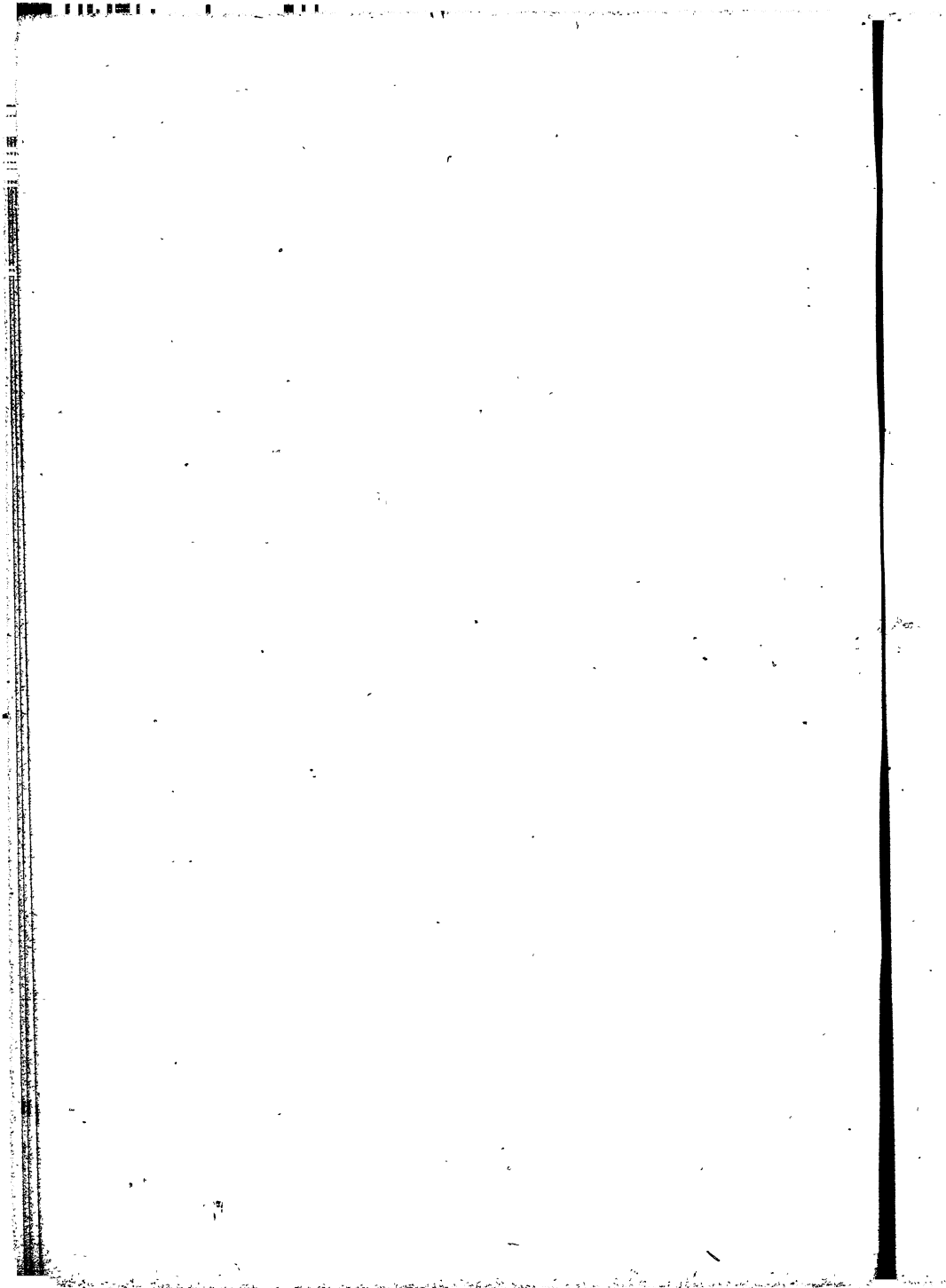
"Next morning there was very little trace of last night's excitement in Betty's look or manner—in fact, she was singularly quiet; but I could see that between Geoffrey and her there was a very perfect understanding, and I knew that their happiness had gotten a new lease of life.

"We did not go into Market Leighton that day, nor the next, but we all drove in together on the

following day, and were extremely busy doing what we could to further the interests of the candidate in whom we were so intensely interested. We saw Captain Brand several times in the distance, but never at close quarters, nor was his name once mentioned between us. You know what a splendid majority Geoffrey had, and the pride of his wife over it was one of the most beautiful and touching things I have ever seen. It was easy enough to see that the chief joy of his triumph was to be found in his wife's satisfaction over it, and so we came away and left them, I think, one of the happiest couples in the world."

X.

*THE PATIENTS IN LITTLE MERRICK
STREET.*



CHAPTER X.

THE PATIENTS IN LITTLE MERRICK STREET.

"How do you find your medical knowledge, Elizabeth?" I asked one night. "Is it getting a little rusty through never being called into play?"

"I do not think so," answered Elizabeth, with a little smile. "I am as much interested in it all as ever, and read the medical journals with a great deal more regularity than I ever did when I was a practitioner. Of course it is just possible that if I were suddenly plunged into practice again to-morrow, I might find myself a little rusty; but I was pleased the other night to find that my wits had not deserted me, and that I rose to the emergency in quite a creditable manner."

"When was that, Elizabeth?" I asked. "Would it make a story?"

"Oh, you look at everything from one standpoint. I believe your sole interest in me is as a provider

of copy, but I give you fair warning that I have placed myself on the retired list, and that after this I shall tell you no more; at least, if I do, it will be in such disjointed fragments that it will be practically of no use to you."

"But I can invent, Elizabeth," I suggested, "and I might improve your facts out of all knowledge."

"I quite believe you to be capable of it. But, seriously, this little incident was rather interesting, and I don't mind telling you it, or allowing you to print it either, because it could not possibly do the slightest harm to anybody."

"Very well," I said; "I am all attention."

"Well, the other night Keith and I were dining with the Gavestons in Sussex Place. He went down to the House from there, and left me to drive home alone. It was on Tuesday night, and you remember what a frightful fog there was; at least, away in the West-End we could not see a yard before us, and we were obliged to have two linkmen for the carriage both coming and going. It was just about eleven o'clock when Keith put me in the carriage and went off in his hansom to the House. I was thinking about him as we drove very slowly home, and I wished with all my heart

that he had been with me, more for his own sake than mine, because I have all a countrywoman's nervousness of those horrible fogs. But they expected an important division, and I knew that he felt he ought to be in his place. We had to drive, of course, very slowly, and I am not sure that Donaldson, careful Jehu though he is, was altogether sure of his bearings during the journey. I thought we should be getting near home when we suddenly came to a standstill through some block in the roadway, and then I was much disgusted to discover that we had not got very far beyond the end of Baker Street. After sitting there for about ten minutes listening to the shouts of the policemen and the protests of the perplexed and baffled drivers of the various vehicles, we went on again very slowly. It was bitterly cold, and I could not help thinking with longing of my comfortable little room at home, and my cup of beef-tea which I knew would be ready for me. Suddenly the horses were sharply drawn up; there was a confused noise and a scream which cut sharp and startling through the muffled air, and filled me with sudden terror, lest any human being had come to grief under my horses' feet. I drew my

wrap round my head, and, opening the window, tried to discern something through the gloom, but the fog was so dense that I could see absolutely nothing, scarcely the gleam of the carriage-lamps.

“What is it, Donaldson?” I cried. “Will you get down and see at once, in case any one is hurt?”

“I discerned William as he sprang from the box, then one of the linkmen brought his torch to bear on the darkness, and I saw a figure which looked like that of a woman huddled on the greasy pavement quite close to the horses’ feet. You know how wise and gentle the creatures are, and how they will not willingly trample on a human being; nevertheless, I was thankful when they pulled her out of her dangerous position. In a moment I opened the carriage door and jumped out. I could smile still when I think of the figure I must have presented with a pair of particularly thin and light satin slippers, which the greasy London mud by no means improved. The icy chill of the atmosphere seemed to lay hold of me as I stepped out into it, but in a moment I forgot personal discomfort in my absorbing interest in the poor creature whom they had now raised

to her feet and were supporting her between them. Once more I was Elizabeth Glen, M.B., and I am sure that never in her palmiest days did she take more vivid and intelligent interest in the case than in that one so curiously brought under her notice.

“I saw, though the light was poor and unsteady, that my new and unexpected patient was a faded and worn-looking woman, who might have been any age from thirty to fifty. She was very poorly dressed, and looked as if she sometimes lacked the necessaries of life. Certainly she was a stranger to its comforts and its luxuries, but withal there was an air of distinct refinement and gentleness about her which impressed me very much. Her face was deathly white, and I saw that she had a very ugly wound on her head, but how caused I could scarcely decide. For a moment I was at a loss what to do; we were at a considerable distance from a hospital, even if we could make sure of getting there in any decent time. We were equally far from my house, where I had everything that was necessary to treat her with. What was I to do? My old experience of dealing with emergency did not, however, quite desert me at this trying

moment, and though much upset, and having evidently received a severe shock to her nervous system, she was not unconscious, and would probably be able to answer any questions I might put to her. I made no superfluous remarks, but simply asked her, though, of course, in a kind and sympathetic tone, whether she lived near. She opened her eyes surprised—surprised, I suppose, at the sound of a woman's voice, and still more surprised, I could see, at beholding a vision in such extraordinary attire standing in the middle of the street.

“‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘I live quite close at hand, in Little Merrick Street. I came out to try and get a doctor for my little boy. There is a dispensary not very far away, but I have been more than half an hour trying to get there.’

“She was only able to speak those words slowly and with difficulty, and I saw that as she gradually recovered from her own personal shock, the anxiety which had driven her out to seek assistance for her child again rose uppermost in her mind. I hesitated only a moment.

“‘We must find this poor lady's home, Donaldson,’ I said, looking up at the coachman. ‘Put her in the carriage,’ I added to William, ‘and drive as

fast as may be safe to Little Merrick Street. What is the number, may I ask?’

“‘Thirteen : it is quite near,’ replied the woman faintly—‘at least, I think it is ; although I seem to have been wandering about a good while, I haven’t gone very far, I know.’

“‘Oh, it is just at hand, ma’am,’ said the link-man cheerfully. ‘I know it. I lived there once myself for nigh on four years.’

“‘Then you had better lead the way,’ I said quickly ; and entering the carriage beside my poor friend, we moved slowly away.

“It took us about ten minutes, I think, to come to our destination. Of course, it was impossible for me to see what manner of street it was, only the thoroughfare was undeniably narrow, and also rough, as the carriage-wheels jolted a good deal more than I was accustomed to. I did not ask any questions of my companion, because I saw that she was very much exhausted, and that the first thing necessary was that she should be attended to. Before we alighted from the carriage, I pinned the train of my gown up under my cloak, and was ready for action. She looked at me dubiously as I did so.

“‘You cannot come in, I think, madam,’ she said hesitatingly; ‘we have a very poor place, and besides I really ought to have kept on seeking for the doctor for poor little Eric, only I was so dazed with my fall that I could not collect my thoughts all at once.’

“‘You have got to be attended to first,’ I replied laconically, ‘and you need not be afraid of me. I am a doctor, and know exactly what should be done. I shall be able probably to help your little boy at the same time.’

“She flashed a grateful and astonished glance at me, and made no further demur. We got down presently, and the face of William, and also of Donaldson, I daresay, if I had chanced to look up at him, made a very excellent study as I gave my companion my arm and entered with her the narrow doorway which led to number thirteen. It was one of those narrow, confined, and miserable little houses which are so plentiful all over the city, let out in rooms to so many different families, and in its arrangements and general conditions was everything it should not be.

“It was now about half-past eleven, and the house was very quiet; the only sound which we

heard as we mounted the narrow stairs was the feeble wail of an infant, which, however, did not belong to my new friend. When we got to the top floor, I saw that she was very much exhausted, and glad to sit down when we entered the room. She had lost a good deal of blood through the wound on her head, though I had bound it up as fast as I could with the materials available, and she was so poorly nourished that she had not been able to withstand the sudden shock of fear which such an accident naturally caused her. She sank into a chair at once, and then there came forward from the inner room a tall slip of a girl about fourteen, very hollow-eyed and miserable-looking, but with a sweet gentleness of expression which touched me at once. She flashed one quick glance of unspeakable amazement at me, and then ran to my patient, who was sitting on the chair, and appeared to be in a kind of collapsed state.

“‘Oh, auntie, what has happened?’ she cried; and I was astonished at the form of her address, because I made sure that they were mother and daughter.

“‘Your aunt has had an accident, my dear,’ I said quickly, ‘but I hope it is nothing serious.

Get me some water and anything to make a bandage of as quickly as possible, my good girl, and we shall talk after.'

"I was, pleased and rather surprised to see how completely the creature had her wits about her. In a few seconds she had provided me with what I required, and I bandaged up the injured head to the best of my ability, she looking on amazed, I suppose, at the spectacle of a person in such extraordinary garb performing this slight operation.

"'Have you got any stimulant in the house?'" I asked the girl in a whisper.

"She shook her head rather sadly.

"'No, we haven't any.'

"'Not even a drop of brandy?'" I suggested.

"'No, nothing; we never have any.'

"'Couldn't you get it? It would be quite unsafe, of course, for you to go out in the streets; but is there no one in the house who could oblige you with a little?'"

"'There is the landlady,' she said hesitatingly.

"I guessed at once the cause of her hesitation.

"'Just go and ask her to step up here, will you?'" I said quickly, because I had no purse in

my pocket, and could not therefore give her the wherewithal to purchase it.

"She flew off, and in a very few minutes she returned with the landlady, who brought a brandy bottle with her. She was rather a vinegar-faced and unpropitious-looking female, who would be inclined, I imagined, to be rather hard upon any impecunious tenants. But I found her most willing to assist me in every possible way, and in a few minutes I had the satisfaction of seeing the colour, such as it was, creep back faint and flickering to my patient's pale cheek.

"'I feel much better, thank you,' she said, looking at me with a glance of gratitude. 'How is Eric now?' she said, turning quickly to the girl.

"'Just about the same, I think,' the girl answered.

"'Where is he?' I inquired. 'I should like to see him. Perhaps I may be of some use.'

"'He is in the next room,' she answered, rising to her feet; and I followed her rather unsteady steps into the adjoining apartment, where there was a little boy of about seven lying on the bed.

"I heard his breathing before I entered the room, and had no difficulty in diagnosing his case even before I saw it. The poor child was evidently

a victim to asthma, which the frightful condition of the atmosphere aggravated to the worst possible degree; indeed, his condition was most alarming. It seemed impossible almost that he could draw another breath. When I made a further examination, I found him to be suffering also from acute pneumonia, and that, altogether, he was in a very critical state. I was rather perplexed what to do, being far from remedies, the fog of course increasing the distance to immeasurable limits. But what little I could do, I did to make him more comfortable for the night, and then told her that I should come the first thing in the morning, or send a medical man if she preferred it.

“‘Perhaps you would not mind telling me your name, and a little about yourself,’ I said, as we went back into the sitting-room.

“‘My name is Martin—Elizabeth Martin,’ she said.

“‘I suppose you are a widow?’ I suggested, as delicately as I could.

“‘No, ma’am, I am not, neither am I married. These are not my children, though I call them so, and though I love them as dearly as if they were my own.’

“Ah, I think I heard this dear girl call you aunt,” I said understandingly. “I suppose they are the children of your brother or your sister?”

“No, no relatives. Perhaps another time I will tell you about them, but not to-night, I can never thank you enough for what you have done for me. Just think if I had been killed or even carried away to a hospital, as I certainly should have been if you had not brought me home, what would have become of my poor children?”

“There is always a Providence watching over us in our straits,” I replied, as cheerily as possible. “Well, it is getting very late, and I must not stay longer to-night. I hope I shall see you very early in the morning; I can come directly after breakfast.”

“I bade good-night to them, and was escorted downstairs by the landlady, to whom I gave sundry directions, which she received with attention, and promised to carry out with alacrity. I had observed that there was no fire in the little room, and that their only light was a candle, which flickered dismally, making the gloom and the denseness of the atmosphere only more visible. I was not surprised to hear from her that they were very

poor, and though they had never actually got into debt, they were often without the necessaries of life. She had not been harder upon them, perhaps, than was to be expected; indeed, she spoke, I thought, with a good deal of feeling of the devotion of the woman upstairs to the two children, to whom she had been more than a mother.

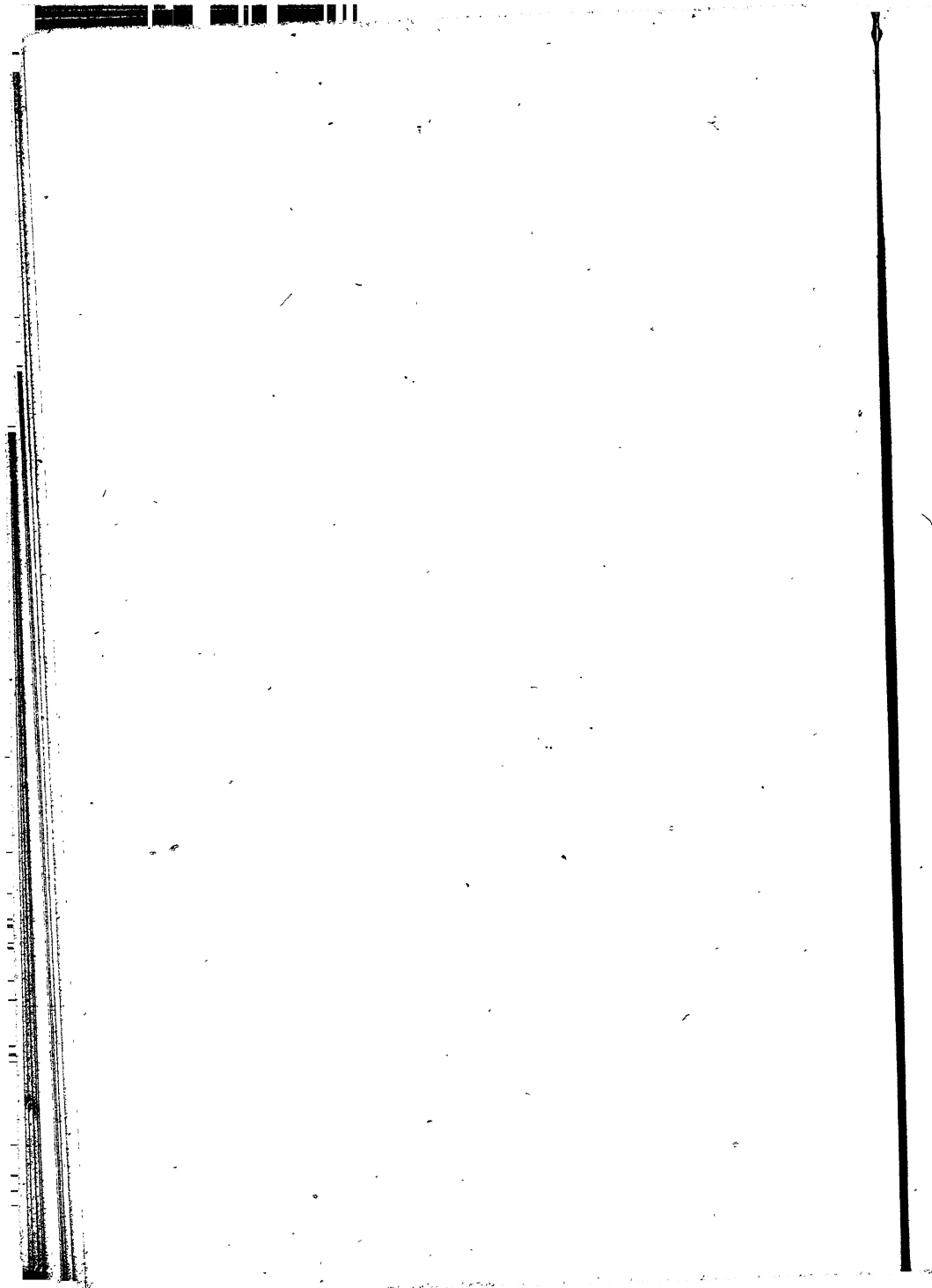
“I thought a great deal of them, of course, as I drove home, which we managed to do in a somewhat reasonable time, finding as we drove westward that the fog was inclined to lift.

“Next morning I was at the house in Little Merrick Street before ten o'clock, and the morning being fine, and clear, and bracing, I was not surprised to find my little patient considerably improved. Elizabeth Martin herself looked rather weak and ill, having not yet quite recovered from the effects of the shock. We had quite a long talk, and though I found her rather reticent about her own affairs, I gathered enough from what she said to come to the conclusion that she was one of the most unselfish and heroic of women.

“‘I feel like telling you my little story,’ she said, after we had discussed the state of the little boy and also her own ailments. ‘Perhaps you will



"I WAS NOT SURPRISED TO FIND MY LITTLE PATIENT CONSIDERABLY IMPROVED."
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be able to understand better if I tell you as simply as possible. I was brought up in the country, in a sweet little village in Surrey not very far from Dorking, where my father was a schoolmaster. He never had a large salary, of course, and being of a very generous and open-handed nature, he was never able to save anything. I was his only child, and I used to help him with the school-work, although I never had any proper training as a teacher or governess. I often wish I had. We were very happy together until he died quite suddenly, and left me without any resources. I stayed in the village as long as I could, earning my living in various ways, sometimes helping little children with their lessons at night, and taking in needlework in the daytime. Many people advised me to take a situation or to go to London, but there was something which kept me in the place ; perhaps you can guess what.'

“A dove affair,” I answered, with a little smile.

“Yes, I was engaged before my father’s death to a young man in the neighbourhood, the bailiff on an estate quite near the village. My father had given his consent reluctantly ; he did not care for my lover, and did not think he was good enough

for me ; but though there were many stories abroad about his habits and character, I never believed any of them, and would have married him any day without a question or a doubt. After my father's death he began to grow cooler, I thought, towards me, and my heart was very sore, because I thought he despised me for living, as I was obliged to live, in a little, tiny room all alone, and getting my own living, and yet I was the same girl who used to keep my father's house and play the organ in church on Sunday. I soon found out, however, that that was not the true reason of his coolness, but that he had seen somebody else he thought more attractive, and more likely to make him a suitable wife than I. She was the daughter of one of the village shopkeepers, a very bright, pretty little thing, and reported to have some money. I need not enter into a long history about them, but just tell you that he finally broke off altogether with me, though there never was any talk about it. He just simply left me alone and married this other girl. Then, of course, I left the village, because I could not bear to remain there where everybody knew my story, and be a constant witness to the happiness which I had hoped might have been mine. I took

a situation as a mother's help, but whether it was that I had been too long my own mistress, and had never had any experience in working for other people, I do not know, but I could never rest contented long in any situation, and finally I came to London, and tried to get employment as a needle-woman. I am very good at my needle; all sorts of sewing, both plain and fancy, I could do better than most. It is really a gift I inherited from my mother. I have been able to keep myself pretty respectably, and though I was often very lonely and miserable, still I preferred my solitary life in a great city to living in the old village. I occasionally went back, however, to see some of the old friends, and then I heard that my old lover was making a very poor husband to the girl he had preferred to me; in fact, that she was heartbroken with him, and that it was only a question of time whether she should leave him altogether. They had two little children, and even for them he did not seem to care. She, also, was an only child, and her father died a year or two after her marriage. He had always been thought to be very well-to-do, but it was discovered after his death that he had nothing at all to leave except debts. This so en-

raged his son-in-law, who had quite expected to get a little fortune with his wife, that he became more unkind to her than ever, and in the end the poor thing died of a broken heart. To show you how entirely heartless and worthless he was, I may tell you that when I went down to the village not very long after poor Rosy's death, I found to my sorrow and shame that he had actually run away from the place, and left his two poor little children dependent on the parish, and they were even then in the workhouse.

"I cannot tell you how I felt at this. Rosy and I had been very friendly as girls, and also it had nearly broken my heart when she supplanted me with my lover. I had very tender thoughts about her, still, I am afraid you will despise me, but I had a warm side to him too, and I could never forget all that had been between us in the past. I thought and thought about those poor little children living in the workhouse, which, as you know, is a very poor shelter for young things even at the best, and at last I made up my mind that I would take them home with me to London, and do the best I could for them, and I did. I have had them for four years nearly, and they have been the very joy

and comfort of my desolate life. But the only thing that has vexed and troubled me is in case I had done them harm instead of good by bringing them here ; for you see I am very poor, and of late years, I do not know whether it is the competition or not, but I don't seem to have earned so much as I used to be able to earn, and we have suffered a good deal of privation. But I think that the children love me, and I have made them happy.

“ I do not know why I should tell you all this, madam, but I feel sure that you will understand it, and perhaps you will be able to advise me as to what I should do now. Perhaps it would be better if I could send the children into the country for a little while ; perhaps I could find somebody who would take them and not charge very much, and you see if I was all alone I could do with less, and might be able to save something to help them.’

“ I could not speak when she ended her pathetic little story ; it had touched me so inexpressibly. She related her act of heroism and self-sacrifice as if it were the merest every-day occurrence, rather apologetically indeed, as if she felt her conduct required some justification.”

“ It is a very pretty story, Elizabeth,” said I

quickly. "I suppose it did not take your fertile brain long to find some way out of the difficulty!"

"No, indeed," she replied promptly. "I have oftentimes during the last few years thanked God for the abundant means with which He has blessed me. It is so exquisite a pleasure to be able to help others, and to give relief where relief is so bitterly needed, as in poor Elizabeth Martin's case."

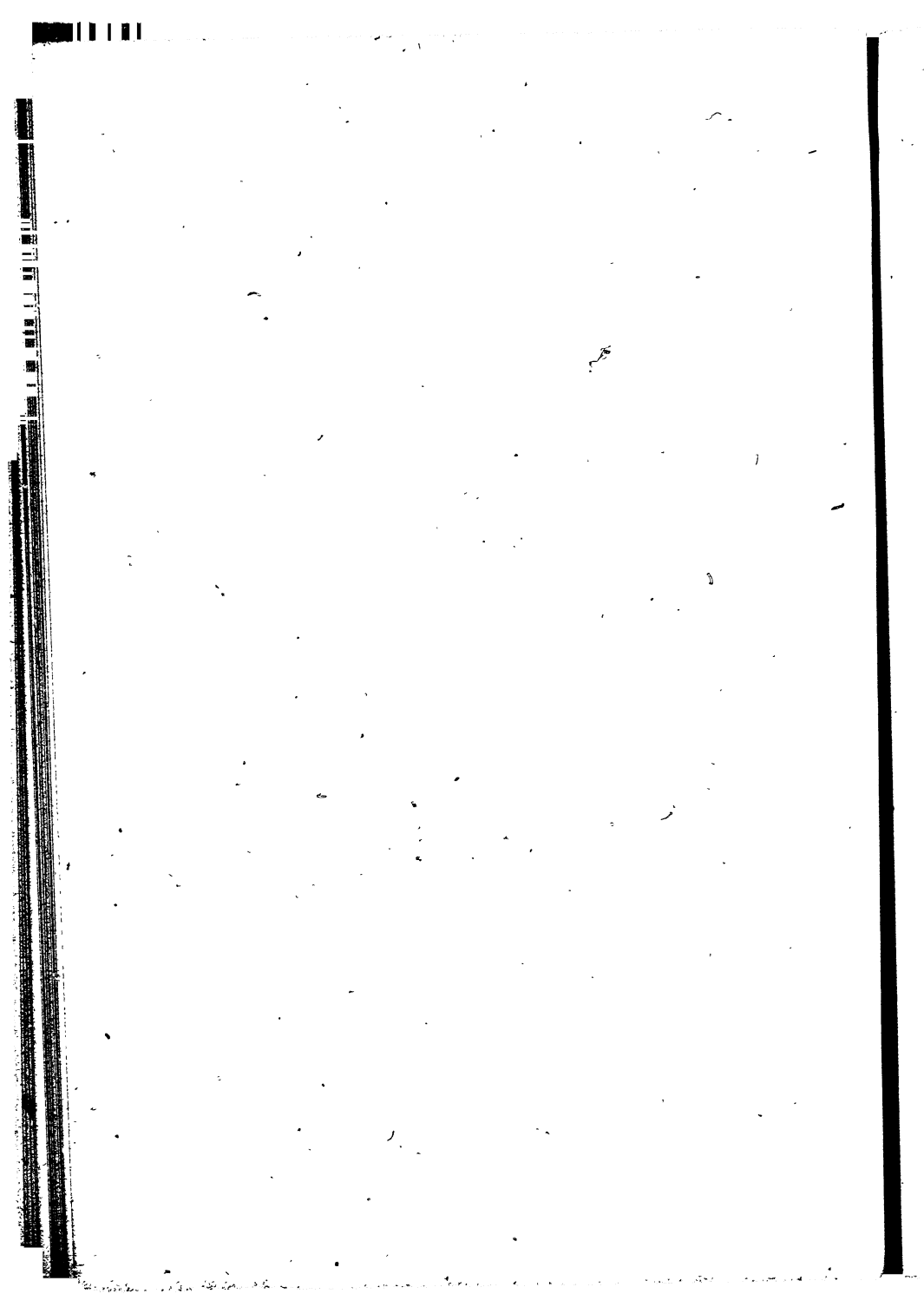
"How did you help them, then? What was the end?"

"Quite a story-book ending," Elizabeth replied, with a smile. "It happened that very day that Betty, whose story you wormed out of me the other night, was lunching with me, and of course I was so full of Elizabeth Martin and her children, as she called them, that I could not refrain from telling her the whole story. Betty is nothing if not kind-hearted, and she lifted the matter clean out of my hands by appointing Elizabeth there and then on my recommendation, without ever having set eyes on her, to keep the west lodge at the Court. So my little philanthropic plan concerning her is now nipped in the bud, and as soon as the little boy can be moved, which will, I hope, be next week, all the responsibility concerning them is lifted from

my shoulders. I will say this for Mrs. Geoffrey Vane, that she is very thorough in everything she does, and just at the present time her big heart is particularly soft and tender towards all those in distress."

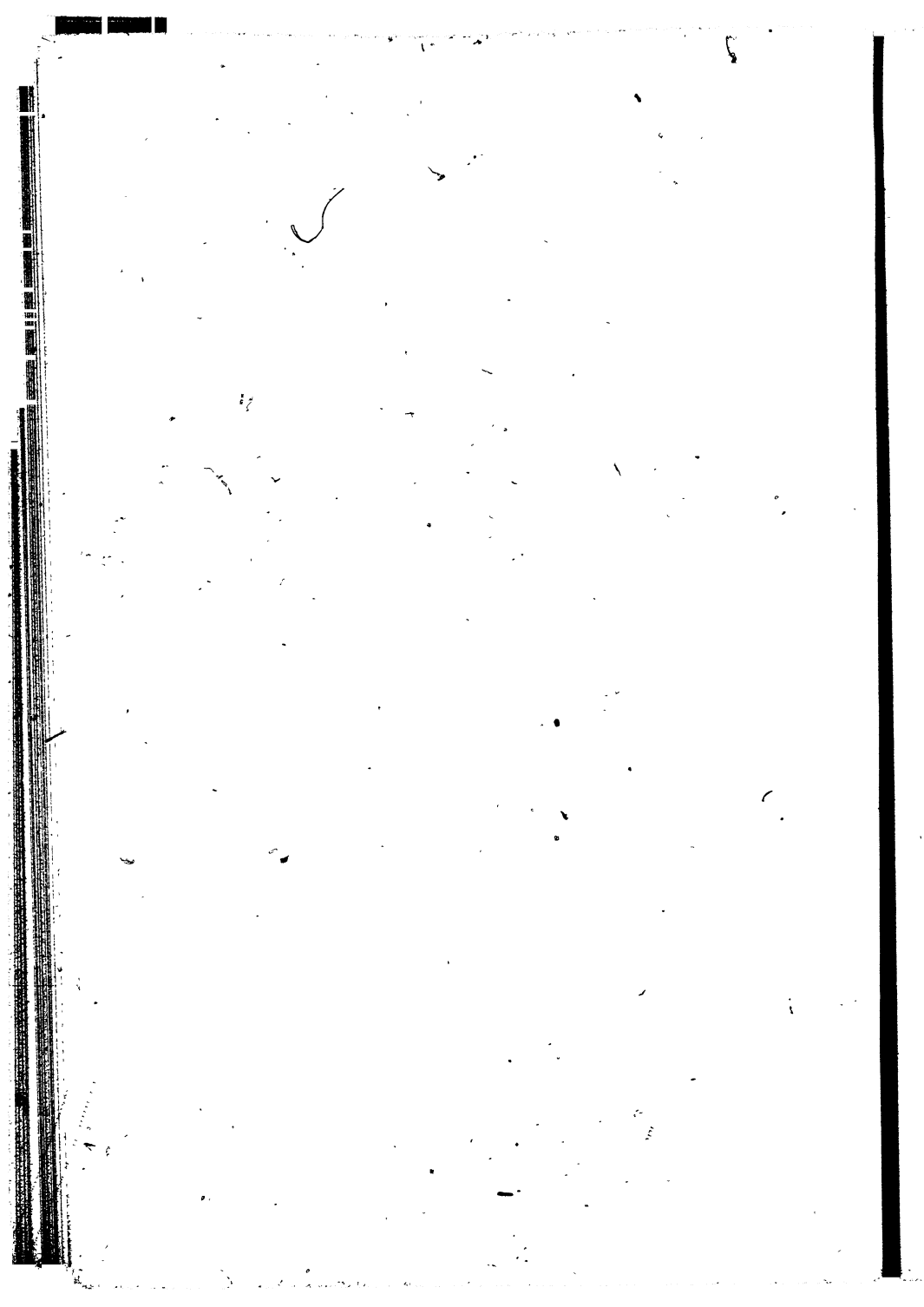
"It would almost do for a Christmas story, Elizabeth," I said softly, as I closed my note-book. "I really never met any one who has such splendid opportunities as you for garnering bits of experience that never come in other people's way. I do think that you are one of the luckiest of mortals."

"I would not put it just like that if I were you," said Elizabeth softly, and with a very beautiful light on her face. "I will tell you how I look at it. I am so humbly grateful for all the blessings with which God has endowed me that I perpetually ask Him that He will guide me that I may be a help and a comfort to others, and you know that you and I have not yet begun to doubt the truth of these old words: 'Ask, and it shall be given you: seek, and ye shall find: knock, and it shall be opened unto you.'"



XI.

AN ADOPTED CHILD.



XI.

AN ADOPTED CHILD.

"WE have come to the last of the second series of your experiences, Elizabeth," I said to her one night, "and you must give me something specially interesting for it."

"Before I retire into private life," answered Elizabeth with a little smile. "I feel very tired to-night, absolutely without an idea, and I don't believe I can recall at this moment a single incident which could be of the slightest interest to anybody."

It was the fourth week in July, and the season had been unusually brilliant. The Keith Hamiltons were greatly in request, and as both were young enough to enjoy society, they went into it a good deal more than I had expected; and, indeed, I sometimes wished that Elizabeth was not quite so gay, for the multitude of her engagements and

the exigencies of the social claims upon her took her away entirely from me, and it was only an occasional day or evening at an odd time when I could see her alone. She was beginning to look a little fagged, and I could not help remarking that I thought it was time she was back at Flisk. We had been talking of September, which we hoped to spend together in that beautiful place, and where I knew that I should have unlimited opportunities of talking freely and unreservedly to the friend who was still dearer to me than any one on earth except those within the four walls of my home.

“Do you know what I have been seriously contemplating lately?” said Elizabeth presently, and her fair face took a more thoughtful shade. I also saw two little wrinkles between her brows, which came when she was particularly anxious and concerned about anything.

“I have not the slightest idea,” I replied, “though I have no doubt that it is some scheme which will ‘do equal honour to your head and heart.’”

I used that familiar quotation a little banteringly, but it provoked no smile on Elizabeth’s face.

"Well, I am sure you will be surprised. I am seriously thinking of adopting a child."

I sat up, surprised indeed.

"No, Elizabeth, you haven't seriously thought of such a thing!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, indeed I have, and spoken about it to Keith, too, and he has no objection. The difficulty is to get the sort of child that one wants."

I looked at her for a moment in silence, hesitating whether I should say what was in my mind, that I thought there was no need for such a step in the meantime. At last I did blurt it out bluntly, and without any extenuating adornment.

"But, Elizabeth, you are not old: you may have children of your own yet."

"I may," she said quite soberly, "but somehow I don't think I shall; and anyhow, even if such a happy contingency arose, the adopted child need not suffer. Of course you know perfectly well that we could not possibly make him the heir. I have really, without saying anything to anybody, been looking about and making some inquiries where I could find a suitable child. I want a little girl about two years old, belonging to gentlepeople if possible, and she must be given up to me

entirely. I have been on the look out for the last month or two, and I have had some curious experiences. There is one especially which I should like to tell you about, though perhaps you may not think it quite suitable for your magazine."

"Oh, I am sure it will be all right," I said eagerly. "I am only too thankful to get anything from you in these days, Elizabeth; you are as difficult to catch and as uncertain in your movements as royalty itself; more so, indeed, because they can always be depended on, and you cannot."

"Well, of course, you know," said Elizabeth, taking no notice of my last remark, "you do not need me to tell you that doctors have exceptional opportunities of seeing behind the scenes, and I have always found that they can give very reliable information on subjects such as these. You see I don't want a child from a home or an orphanage; these are not difficult to get. I did not come to you because I was not sure whether you would approve of it at all, and also because the subject came up accidentally one night in a conversation I had with Dr. Walderon. He happened to be sitting next to me at dinner; we were talking a little shop—a most unusual proceeding on my part,

as you know, for I always avoid, if possible, any professional talk in private, principally because Keith does not like it. But we happened to touch quite accidentally in the course of our conversation on the subject of heredity and environment, and out of that arose the question of childless and rich people relieving the care of the poor who have many children. We had quite an animated discussion upon the subject, and I found that Dr. Walderon was rather an enthusiastic advocate of it. He seemed to think that in this question of adoption lay some part of the remedy for the large amount of misery and even of crime which exists in the world."

"Does he think, then, that it is the duty of the well-to-do who are childless to relieve other parents who have children but no means, of their responsibility?" I asked.

"Well, I suppose that is what he meant, but he agreed with me that the great difficulty is to get the adoption made complete. You see most people are attached to their children," said Elizabeth, with a little odd smile; "mothers especially rebel against the idea of giving them up for ever, and relinquishing all claim upon them. They are quite willing to

give them up for a time or partially when advantage is to accrue to the child through it; but the idea of severing, as it were, the bond between them and never again seeing them, at least never again being allowed recognition of the tie which binds them, is intolerable to most mothers, and, indeed, I should think very little of the woman who looked at it from any other point of view."

"Yet I don't see how the thing can be satisfactory at all, Elizabeth," I said, "unless it was carried out on these very principles; because, take your case for instance, suppose you were to adopt a child of two years whom you desired to bring up as your own, and to fill the same position in life which you are now filling, it would be obviously impossible that your scheme should be carried out with success or satisfaction to anybody concerned if the parents of the child were allowed to see it often or even occasionally. I should think, myself, that the absolute success of the experiment would depend upon the child being kept in total ignorance that it had any ties except those which bound it to you."

"That is exactly my view, and I am glad to hear you speak so emphatically, because, as you are a mother, you may be supposed to feel properly on

the subject. I, of course, might be accused of want of feeling, and might very easily be told that I knew nothing at all of what I was talking about. I happened to mention to Dr. Walderon that I had occasionally thought of adopting a child. He gave me a curious look when I said this, which embodied the very words you spoke to me when we began this talk. But he was too polite, of course, to make any remark, and simply said that if I was in earnest about wishing to adopt a child, he could introduce me to one whom he thought would come up to my requirements in every possible way. We had just arrived at this stage of our conversation when the dinner ended, and as there was a large company present, and a reception followed immediately, I had no further opportunity of talking to him that night, but I thought a good deal of what he had said.

“Of course you know that Dr. Walderon is in the very first rank of the profession, and that he can be absolutely trusted in every way.”

“Oh yes, I know him well,” I replied. “I think he is one of our most splendid men.”

“Well, I told Keith what he had said, and thought a good deal about it myself during the next

few days. The upshot of it was that I drove round to Dr. Walderon's house one morning. I knew that he had consulting hours till one o'clock, and asked to see him. He was very pleased indeed to see me. I could see it in his face. He is a very large-minded and generous-hearted man, above all mean and petty prejudice, and he had not disdained to speak to me the first night I had met him just as he might be expected to speak to a brother practitioner whose opinion he respected. I was grateful for that, of course, because I am afraid I am a little touchy even yet on this professional point."

"I thought you had given it all up with the little house in Rayburn Place, Elizabeth," I said, with a smile.

"No, I have not; I sometimes wish that it was possible to do a little practice in Belgrave Square; it would be such a delightful change. However, I must to my story. After we had talked a little on chance subjects, I said to Dr. Walderon that I was thinking over our talk the night we had met, and that I would like to hear some further particulars, if he could give me any, about the child he thought might be suitable for

me to adopt. He looked at me quite keenly for a moment. You know what piercing eyes he has, looking out from under those shaggy brows of his, and what an idea of strength of character and shrewd observation he manages to convey in the way he knits his brows together."

"Yes, I have seen him many a time; he looks rather fierce and formidable until you know him," I assented.

"And yet he has the gentlest heart. I know of no more exquisite combination than to find the gentle heart of a child in a man of Walderon's strength of character and great intellectual power. I have never been more impressed in my life by the limitless influence a man of such nature is bound to possess; his personality is so fascinating and so strong that it is impossible to resist it."

"Yet he is disliked by many," I suggested.

"Oh, that is because they do not understand him; shams and humbugs, my dear, will shrivel up under Walderon's eye, and so many of us happen to be shams and humbugs that I do not wonder he has a good few enemies and detractors. But I am convinced that there is not in London to-day a more noble and Christlike man than Guy Walderon.

“‘I wish that you had been here half an hour earlier, Mrs. Hamilton,’ he said, when I had indicated to him the object of my visit. ‘I had a lady here whom it would have been interesting for you to meet, and I am going to her house by-and-by, when my consulting hour is over. Is your carriage at the door?’

“‘Yes,’ I said, ‘and it will give me the greatest pleasure to drive you anywhere.’

“‘Thank you, but my own brougham will be round in about three-quarters of an hour. I have still three people to see. Will you wait?’

“‘Wait for what?’ I said inquiringly.

“‘Well, I want to take you to see this lady, and we can talk as we drive. Might I suggest that you send your carriage home, and wait until I am ready?’

“‘I shall be very glad,’ I replied, and was shown into a little morning-room, where I remained until he had disposed of his three waiting patients. When they had gone he came to me again.

“‘My man has not come round yet,’ he said, ‘so I can utilise the time by beginning to tell you where we are going and whom we are to see. The lady who was here this morning is the daughter

of an old friend of mine. She is quite young—a mere girl, indeed, though she is the mother of two children. It is rather a long story, but I do not propose to inflict it upon you in its entirety. Suffice to tell you that she married against her father's will,—a very decent fellow I believe he was, although without means or prospects. Of course it was an idiotic proceeding on her part to make such shipwreck of her life; but, bless me, what can we expect from a pretty young girl but folly of that kind?

“I could not help smiling as he strode to and fro in the room, with his hands clasped at his back, looking very fierce, and all the time feeling so tenderly towards the young creature who had considered the world well lost for love; and yet he is an old bachelor who is supposed to take no interest whatever in womankind except as paying patients or interesting cases. Just before one we drove away in the doctor's brougham to make our call. We talked a good deal as we drove, finding much in common, and I was more and more impressed with the fine, strong personality of the man who had managed in the very short acquaintance I had with him to inspire in me the highest

admiration and respect. I had not noticed particularly where we were going, but at length we stopped in a quiet, dull, but respectable-looking street, which Dr. Walderon informed me was situated in Islington. It was a decayed and decaying neighbourhood, and yet had not entirely lost its air of respectability. The houses were roomy and old-fashioned, let out chiefly in flats and rooms to people who could not afford to pay the rent of a whole house. The doctor left me in the carriage when it stopped, while he went to inquire whether his patient was at home. Having ascertained that she was, he beckoned to me, and we entered the house and ascended the stairs together. We were shown into the front portion of a large double sitting-room, divided by folding-doors. It was very shabbily furnished, but clean, and even wearing a certain air of refinement, which favourably impressed me. We had not long to wait: presently there entered the room a young woman who did not look a day more than two or three and twenty. She had a baby in her arms, a little pale-faced thing; who looked as if he did not get sufficient fresh air and nourishing food. She was very thin and slender, wearing a shabby black gown, which, however, had a certain

gracefulness about it which would not have shamed a handsomer garment. She had a very sweet, earnest and sad face, which bore traces of the hard destiny to which she was now condemned. It was easy to see that she was a lady, and that she had been accustomed to other surroundings than these.

“‘Good morning, Mrs. Vivian,’ said the doctor heartily. ‘I hope I see you better to-day. I have brought a lady to see you who is interested in a little matter of which you spoke to me the other day. Let me introduce you to Mrs. Keith Hamilton.’

“I went forward, shook hands with her, and took the child in my arms. He did not relish the change, however, and gave vent to a dreadful cry, which caused the mother to take him hurriedly in her arms again.

“‘Is this the child?’ I asked.

“‘No, it is the little girl with whom Mrs. Vivian thought she could best part,’ the doctor put in hastily; and at these words I saw the girl’s soft eyes fill with sudden tears.

“‘You would like to see her? She is playing in her father’s room. I will fetch her,’ she said hastily, and withdrew.

“‘He is ill,’ said the doctor shortly to me as

the door closed. 'Consumption; hopeless for him. Might recover if he could be sent to the Riviera and have everything that he required. But as it is, it is certain death. Sad case, eh?'

"'Very,' I said. 'Have they no means?'

"'None, except a few shillings which he has from some fund, but I cannot precisely say what it is.'

"'Just then the door opened, and Mrs. Vivian reappeared, bringing with her a little girl, the sweetest little mite you ever saw, so like her mother that the resemblance was simply ridiculous.

"'This is the child, Mrs. Hamilton,' she said. 'I have left baby with his father; he will be good there, and we can talk better. She is a dear little pet. Daisy, would you like to go with this sweet lady?'

"I saw that she was in a state of extreme nervous excitement, and that her agitation was almost getting the better of her. I knew very well that to give up this child would be simply to break the young mother's heart, and yet she was willing to make the sacrifice, driven to it indeed by absolute necessity. I pondered the thing in my mind for one brief instant, and then took instant resolve.

“‘She is indeed a beauty,’ I said, holding out my hands coaxingly to the child, who ran to me at once, apparently fearing nothing. I saw the mother wince as I took her in my arms. ‘Will you come with me, little Daisy?’ I said gently, ‘and you shall have a pony to ride on, and all sorts of fine things.’

The child nodded, but in a moment held out her hands to her mother.

“‘Mamma too,’ she said quickly.

“‘Sometimes, by-and-by,’ I said. ‘If you are willing, Mrs. Vivian, to give up the child to me for a little time, I shall be glad to have her. We are going to Scotland shortly, and it is possible that the change there might do her a great deal of good. We can leave the question of adoption over, if you like, for a few months, and I will promise that she shall come back to you strong and well, and as beautiful as she is now.’

“‘I saw a quick look of gratitude leap into the poor mother’s eyes.

“‘Ah, that is too good,’ she said presently. ‘I could not expect so much from a stranger. Is it not so, Dr. Walderon?’

“‘There is no reason why you should not accept

it that I can see,' was the doctor's reply. 'Mrs. Hamilton is a woman of her word, and there is plenty of room in her Scotch castle for this little mite. I should advise you, my dear, to accept her offer at once, and you will have more time to devote to your poor husband. I will just go and have a look at him.'

"While the doctor was absent, we had a little talk, which made plain a good many things to me, and it was arranged between us that the child should be made ready to come to my house the next day. I had still a week or two in town, and I had a little project in my head which I hoped to bring to a successful issue, although it was rather risky. As we drove back to Dr. Walderon's house, I extracted all the information I could from him about the Vivians, but more especially about Mrs. Vivian's father, who, I was assured, was the most crusty and unapproachable old curmudgeon that ever lived. He was living in Surrey, near Guildford, and never came to London, so that any one who wished to see him must beard the lion in his own den.

"Next day Daisy was duly brought to Belgrave Square, and warmly welcomed, you may be sure.

She was a dear little mite, and had such pretty ways with her that she very soon won all our hearts. She did not seem to realise that she had parted from her mother for a considerable time. You know how fond little children are of change, and how readily they take to those who are kind to them. The maid whom I had appointed as nurse to little Daisy for whatever length of time she might reside in my house, became her devoted slave from the moment she saw her. Next day, Daisy and I took a little trip out of town as far as Guildford, taking the nurse with us. I had no difficulty in finding Mr. Winyard's house, which was about two miles out of the town, a lovely old place standing amongst splendid trees; although it was not particularly well kept, and gave evidence that it was the abode of a man who had shut himself up in a manner from the world.

"I did not send up my card, but simply told the man-servant to say that a lady from London wished to see Mr. Winyard upon urgent business. I left the nurse and Daisy in the room downstairs, and went up a little nervously, it must be confessed, to beard the lion in his den. I found him rather a formidable-looking old person, reminding me very

much of a certain old Anglo-Indian who was one of my former patients, very cross and ungracious in manner, but not quite so bad after you had got beneath the surface. He looked at me very keenly when I entered the room, and seemed somewhat satisfied by my appearance, because his manner visibly thawed as he wished me good-morning.

“‘I need not beat about the bush, Mr. Winyard,’ I said quickly. ‘I have come to see you on behalf of your daughter Millicent, Mrs. Vivian.’”

“He frowned instantly, and looked as black and forbidding as it was possible for a man to look; but I had faced his kind too often to be daunted by the first repulse.

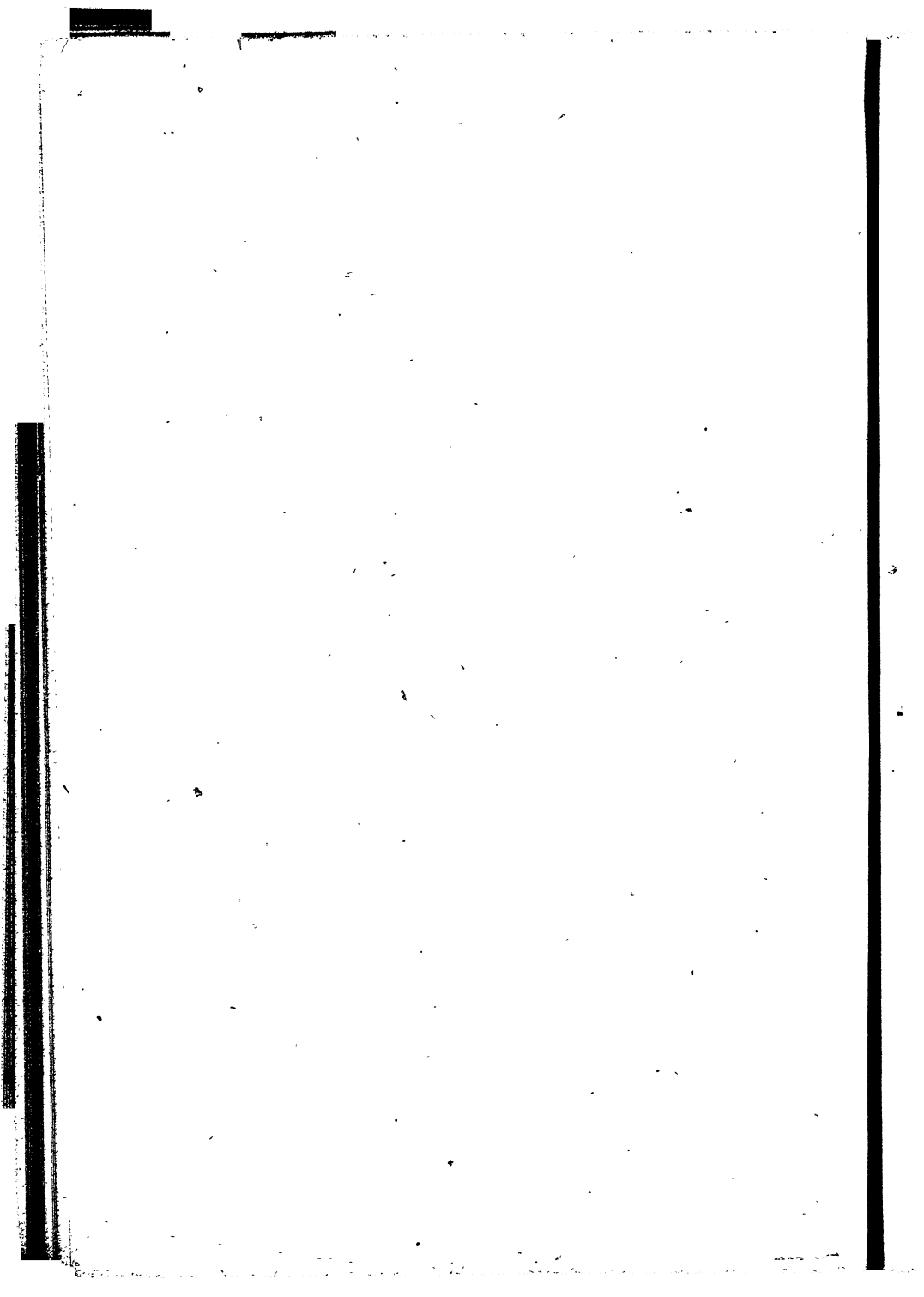
“‘Please don’t turn me out before I have had an opportunity to explain,’ I said, as pleasantly as I could. ‘I have brought something for you to see, something belonging to Mrs. Vivian. May I bring it up?’”

“He looked at me rather curiously, suspiciously even, as if he expected I was making fun of him.

“‘I wish to have nothing to say about that wicked, ungrateful girl, madam,’ he replied crossly; ‘and as for looking on anything belonging to her, I have no interest in it.’”



"WHAT A FUNNY OLD GENTLEMAN! SHE CHIRPED." [p. 271.]



“‘Oh, but I think you will have an interest in this,’ I said ; ‘anyhow, I have brought it all the way from London for you to see, and it may as well come up. Excuse me a moment.’

“I turned round and left the room so quickly that he had no time to call me back, and, catching up little Daisy in my arms, brought her up to the old man’s room. I put her down at the door, and bade her run in. She was the prettiest little picture in her white coat and bonnet, her cheeks like twin roses, and her eyes as blue as the forget-me-not. I saw what a start her unexpected appearance gave the old man ; and she, with that fearlessness we so often see in children, ran forward and took hold of one of the tassels of his dressing-gown in the boldest manner.

“‘What a funny old gentleman !’ she chirped, in that quaint, pretty way of hers. ‘What is your name ?’

“He merely grunted and looked sternly at me.

“‘What is the meaning of this, madam ?’

“That is your granddaughter, Mr. Winyard,’ I replied calmly, ‘and I have brought her down to you to plead for her mother and her father, who is very ill, almost at death’s door. I fear I have no

excuse for my presence here, or for the appeal I am making, except the cause of common humanity. I happened to hear of your daughter's position and circumstances accidentally, through your old friend Dr. Walderon, of Cavendish Square. I believe he has spoken to you about Mrs. Vivian before; but I thought perhaps if you saw this little darling, you might feel your heart moved to forgive her mother.'

“‘She did not think how she wrung my heart with her headstrong, rebellious conduct, madam,’ he said sternly; but I saw his eye soften as it rested on the sweet round face of little Daisy. ‘Ill, did you say Vivian was? I warned her before she took the fatal step what she might expect, and that the fellow would never be able to give her a decent home or any comfort.’

“‘But he has made her happy,’ I put in quickly; ‘he is the man of her choice. I saw her yesterday, and I am quite sure that she loves him as dearly as ever. It is not their fault that health has been denied to him, and I think it is your duty, if you will excuse my speaking so plainly, to bring them home to this house and give them a chance. Don't you wish to see this sweet little

maiden running all over the house, making music in every corner of it? And she has a little brother, and they have called him after his grandfather too, although he has been so harsh.'

"'Did she say anything about me?' he asked unexpectedly. 'I suppose she told you a frightful tale of my harshness and injustice; but I say, madam, that if we bring up children, as she was brought up, lavishing the best we have upon them, with never a thought of self, we have some right to look for obedience and filial duty in return.'

"'I quite grant you that, Mr. Winyard,' I replied; 'but pray don't quite forget that you were once young and in love yourself; and do bring them home for little Daisy's sake.'

"'We talked a great deal more all to the same purpose, but I need not expatiate upon it; suffice to say that when I left, all I could get out of the grumpy old man was that he would think about it. But I noticed that he was extremely careful to note down the address of his daughter. This filled me with such hope that I returned to London in great glee. I was not disappointed in my expectations. The very next day, somewhat late in the afternoon,

a hansom drove quickly up to my door, and Mrs. Vivian's name was brought to me. When I went down to her she was radiant, and before I could utter a word of congratulation or welcome she simply fell down on her knees in front of me, clasping my hands in the most passionate manner, and pouring out broken words of thanks which I was hard put to to stop.

“Papa has come to-day, and we are all going back home; and he has even said that he will take Jack to the south of France, and give him a chance of being restored to health. Oh, how can I thank you! I shall never, never be able to thank you: it is no use trying; and it seems abominable of me to come and take Daisy away.”

“Daisy is to go too, then?” I said.

“Yes,” she answered, though with a slight hesitation. “Papa particularly asked for Daisy.”

“It was Daisy, I think, who won the victory,” I answered, “for she looked so ridiculously like her mother that I saw at once she had won her grandfather's heart.”

“So, now, there is another story for you with a pretty ending; and that is the story of the first child I thought of adopting, and how very short

was her term of adoption with me—only forty-eight hours ! But I do not regret it.”

“I am sure you could not, Elizabeth,” I said quickly. “And how did it end then?”

“Oh, it is not ended yet,” said Elizabeth. “You see it is only about ten days ago since the happy family were installed in the house at Guildford. I have had several letters from Mrs. Vivian, and I have promised to go down and see them before we leave town.”

“And are you going to look for another child to adopt?” I asked, with a little smile.

“Not just yet. I think I shall wait a bit. I do not know whether it would be very satisfactory in the end or not.”

“I think you are wise to wait a little, Elizabeth,” I said, though without any special significance. A year afterwards, however, she recalled these words of mine to my remembrance, as we stood together beside a dainty white cot, looking down upon the little heir to Flisk and Glenspeed.

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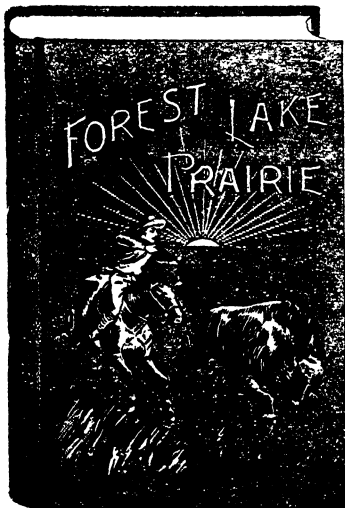
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