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[Illustration: "YOU MUST DROP INTO MY ARMS. SEE?"]

ANTHONY CRAGG'S TENANT

BY
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"GWENDOLINE," "THROUGH THE LINN," ETC.

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LONDON
THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY
4 BOUVERIE STREET, and 65 ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD

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ANTHONY CRAGG'S TENANT

CHAPTER I

First Appearance of Mr. Dale

"ANTHONY! I say, Anthony! you're wanted. Make haste, will you? Folks can't dawdle round the whole day while you're pottering about upstairs. What are you doing? Do you mean to come, or not?"

"All right, my dear," a man's voice said in the distance, not exerting itself.

Mrs. Cragg tapped her smart parasol on the dusty floor. Although her words held a commanding sound, she was addressing her husband, and not a shop-boy. Mr. Cragg's better half had a reputation for smartness of tongue.

Generally she liked to make her exit at the private door, from which business was excluded; but for once she had gone round by the warehouse, and had travelled down by the uncarpeted wooden staircase at the back of the shop, to a door which led into a side street. At this door she had stumbled on two people, waiting patiently for attention—a tall man, wearing a shabby coat, and a girl.

Shabby people were objectionable in Mrs. Cragg's eyes. She counted herself a fine lady, and loved gay clothes, which she looked upon as a mark of gentility. Mrs. Cragg was not the first person in the world to fall into that mistake.

At this moment she wore a gown of bright blue, while a large scarlet wing stood forth aggressively in her green straw hat. She had a high colour, beady black eyes, a profuse fringe of yellowish hair, and marked features. Not everybody would admire this combination, but Mrs. Cragg was wont to feel satisfied on looking into her mirror.

Six years earlier, when she had figured as the only and hard-worked daughter of a third—rate and unsuccessful country attorney, with a sickly wife and several boys, she had been rather a pretty girl. But then she had worn no fuzzy fringe, nor had she dressed in blue and green and scarlet, nor had she rattled and laughed in self-important tones. These new developments had taken her husband by surprise, and he was not yet used to the change.

"You needn't expect me to stop here, if you mean to be a whole week getting from the top to the bottom of the stairs!" she cried. "I've got something else to see to."

"There's no need. If you'll just ask the gentleman to step inside—"

"We can wait where we are. You need not trouble yourself. Perhaps we have come to the wrong door?" suggested the tall man. "I daresay we ought to have gone to the front entrance in High Street."

"It don't matter. May as well stop, now you are here," said Mrs. Cragg. "He'll be down directly. He's always slow. That's his way."

She had meant to go out this side to save time, but, on second thoughts, she turned back and met her husband.

"Well, I hope you've been long enough," was her greeting. "It's somebody after that new house of yours; and if I was you I wouldn't have anything to do with him. He's as shabby as shabby. Got on a coat that shines like anything, and a pair of gloves that our cook wouldn't look at. And I should think his trousers was made at a slop-shop. If you let him have that house, you won't get any rent for it."

"It isn't always the finest-dressed folks that pay their bills the quickest," replied Cragg, with a wisdom born of experience.

"He won't. You see if I'm not right." Mrs. Cragg liked to be always in the right, and seldom admitted that she was not. Having once committed herself to this particular view of the question, she was certain not to regard the tall man in future with favourable eyes. Cragg knew this, but he said nothing.

"You see!" repeated Mrs. Cragg, "I know a man that can't be depended on when I come across him. He's as poor as a church-mouse, and he wants to get a house rent-free. If you take my advice, you'll pack him off in a hurry."

Cragg was not in the habit of taking a woman's advice in matters of business, though he obtained plenty of it, gratis, from his wife. Her opinion, given lavishly and unasked on all occasions, lost value from its abundance.

Mrs. Cragg passed on, and Mr. Cragg finished the descent of the stairs, with the air of a man who prided himself on being never in a hurry.

"Good morning. This way, please," he said, and he led the strangers to a room behind the warehouse.

Cragg was a vendor of new and secondhand furniture, and indeed of everything required in house-plenishing. The main warehouse, or shop, which opened on the High Street, was full of furniture of all kinds, piled together, with lanes amid the piles. This lesser room in its rear held rolls of carpets and heaps of rugs. One chair stood in the middle, and upon it the newcomer slowly lowered himself, with a sigh of relief, as if he had had enough walking. The girl leant against him, drooping her head, as she had done all along, so that the wide-brimmed hat hid her face. From her height Cragg supposed her to be about thirteen years old, but he did not pay much attention to that matter.

With a business-like air of expectancy he stood waiting. He was much older than his wife, nearer fifty than forty, while she was still under thirty. He had a sensible face, with horizontal lines of care on the forehead, and absent eyes. People talking to Mr. Cragg often fancied that his thoughts were elsewhere; yet he generally heard what was said.

"I am a stranger in Putworth," was the first remark. "My name is Dale; and I am told that you have a house to let."

"Yes. About the only vacant house just now in Putworth."

"So I hear. One that you have just built. I went to the postmaster, and he advised me to come to you. My daughter and I arrived yesterday afternoon. We want to find a quiet home, somewhere on this line of rail. Easier to move my furniture than if we go elsewhere. I may want one or two things from you—possibly"—glancing round—"though we have nearly enough; very nearly enough."

"Putworth is a healthy place. You have not seen the house yet, of course?"

"The outside of it. We walked round yesterday evening for a look. Too late to do anything. It seemed to be just what I want."

"Extremely well situated."

"Well, yes. That meadow in front looks damp, and the surroundings are not pretty. Still, one can't have everything."

"Not pretty!" Cragg bristled up in a mild fashion. "There's green grass and a stream of water. What more can you want? And the meadow's drained."

Mr. Dale did not enlarge on his desires. A faint smile worked its way to his lips. He merely said: "What rent?"

Cragg looked him over carefully. He wanted a good rent, but also he wanted not to lose a tenant. Not that he was by nature grasping; but business was slack in Putworth, and Cragg had an extravagant wife. Her extravagant ways had grown upon her gradually, and Cragg had hardly yet begun trying to check her. Yet he knew that there was need, for embarrassments were increasing upon him, unknown to his friends. At the same time he had a stronger motive to make money and to save than ever in past years.

This motive was consideration for his daughter rather than his wife. He had not ceased to feel affection for his wife, though he found her a growing trial; but his very heart-strings were wound around the child. Each moment that he could spare from business was devoted

to Dot.

The building of a new house had been a sudden notion, no long time back, awakened by the sight of a slip of waste land, outside the town, put up for sale. The price asked had been merely nominal,—"dirt-cheap," he said to himself, though not to the seller,—and having a passion for bricks and mortar, he had been unable to resist the temptation; even though that passion had already landed him in difficulties. It was by no means the first speculation of the kind on which he had ventured.

Bricks and mortar are expensive, no matter how cheaply they may be put together. Now that the house was ready for an occupant, even to the extent of being painted and papered, which some said he should have delayed till he had found a tenant, he was naturally anxious to get it off his hands as early as might be.

"Depends on the length of lease," he made answer cautiously.

"I don't want a lease. I want a house by the year,—yours, if it suits. Not much doubt that it will. I have had a lot of trouble, and I want a quiet corner to rest in. May as well say at once that I can't give more than twenty pounds. That's enough for a poor man to pay. Will it do?"

Cragg knew that he was not likely to obtain a larger sum. The house had been run up very cheaply, and it lacked modern conveniences. He had recently let another house, of very much the same size, only in a prettier position, for eighteen pounds; but that was on a lease. Twenty pounds for this, taken by the year, would be as much as he had any right to demand. Yet, with the instincts of a business man, he hesitated. It would not do to snatch at the proposal.

"Perhaps you would like to come and see the place."

"Yes, I should. But I must know your terms first. We don't want a long trudge for nothing, do we, Pattie?"

The girl lifted her face in response, and a thrill of surprise shot through Cragg, seasoned though he was in varieties of faces. Hers was not a common countenance. It could hardly be called beautiful in the full sense, but it was full of goodness and purity; the features were small and colourless; the eyes were of a deep and wistful blue; the sensitive lips were sad. She looked older than Cragg had expected.

"Do we, Pattie?" repeated her father; and she said softly:

"No, daddy."

"So if you want more than that, we'll give up at once, and go elsewhere. I've been doubting between this and the next village."

"Well—I don't know—" began Cragg.

Then he stopped. Those blue eyes came to his, full of a nameless beseeching sorrow, and a faint flush of unshed tears passed over them. Cragg's business instincts went down before a stronger impulse of fatherly pity. Pattie's look made him think of Dot.

"Yes, that will do. Twenty pounds, taken by the year."

"Oh, thank you," breathed Pattie; "I'm so glad."

Then they started for the house, which was a good twenty minutes' walk distant. Cragg's suggestion of a cab was negatived. There was no need, Mr. Dale said; they would enjoy the walk.

Tokens of enjoyment were few; but they managed to get along, though at a lagging pace. Mr. Dale talked fitfully, remarking how the town was grown since his boyhood. Mr. Cragg observed that he could not recall any one of the name of Dale. Mr. Dale said, "No,"—he had been for three years at the big boys' school, and he would not be known to the inhabitants, unless by the former owner of the "tuck shop."

The house stood forlornly alone upon a patch of rough ground, which might in the course of time grow into a garden. At present it lacked soil, plants, and shrubs; in fact, it was no more than a stony little enclosure, surrounding an ugly small house. There were two rooms on the ground floor, with a kitchen behind, and three rooms overhead.

"Precisely the right size," Mr. Dale said.

Flat fields lay on one side, and on the other, beyond a space of untilled earth, lay a stiff row of red cottages. In front flowed a muddy stream, with flags along its edge, and behind were six or seven prim Lombardy poplars.

Mr. Dale was resolute in refusing to undertake "outside repairs," and for a minute Cragg felt disposed to show fight. But again those eyes came beseechingly to his; again he thought of Dot; and again he was vanquished,—he could not have told why.

The whole affair was quickly settled, and Mr. Dale strolled back to the inn with his daughter, Cragg going ahead at a brisker pace.

"That's a nice man, Pattie. A good sort of man, I'm sure. One is glad to have a pleasant landlord. It was quite an instinct that brought me here, wanting to see again the place where I was at school. All schoolboys are not happy, I suppose; but I was—happier than I have been since. Cheer up, little girl. We shall get on all right—now—I don't doubt."

A slight sob shook the girl's slender frame, but she allowed no sound of it to escape, and when she looked up there was a smile on her lips.

"Mr. Peterson won't be likely to find us out in Putworth, daddy."

"No, child, no."

"He won't think of looking for us in such a place."

"No, no, of course not. Why should he?"

"And since you've grown your little beard, you do look so different. I wish you needn't. I like you to look as you used. But even if Mr. Peterson did see you, I shouldn't think he would know you."

"We needn't talk about Mr. Peterson, Pattie. We'll try to forget all that."

"Only, I do wonder sometimes why he should be unkind to a nice dear daddy like you."

"People have their reasons for action, my dear; and one can't expect always to understand. So many mistakes, you know, and harsh judgments. But the comfort is that my Pattie knows her old father."

"I should think I did!" Two tears fell.

"And now we have to consider what to do. A good many things to be seen to—and the house cannot be ready to take us in till—how long did he say? A week was it? I must have another talk with Mr. Cragg, and settle all minor points. But we will go back to the farm for a week. You can write and tell them so; tell them to expect us to-morrow. Dear me, I like that man, Cragg, very much. Shouldn't wonder if he would help us to find a servant; some nice respectable body, who will do for us."

"If only we could have kept Susan! She would have liked so much to come."

"No, my dear." Mr. Dale spoke nervously. "I think we arranged all that."

CHAPTER II

An Unlooked-For Collapse

MR. DALE stood in the doorway of his new home, looking out.

He and Pattie had arrived nearly a week before, and already the house was in pretty fair order.

Furniture was not too abundant, and he had shown himself unwilling to make many purchases, even though Cragg named the lowest possible prices for things that really could not be done without. Over each one Mr. Dale had mused dubiously; and over each, when he gave in, he did so with a sigh.

A girl had been found for them by Mr. Cragg; clumsy and slow and dull, it is true, but good-tempered; and Pattie toiled like a horse to make up deficiencies.

Such carpets as they possessed were squares, needing only to be laid down on well-scoured boards; and old curtains fitted the windows, almost without alteration. Mr. Dale had given fitful help, but he was not a handy man; and most of the things that he did had to be undone and done again by Pattie, when he was out of sight.

He was tired now, even with the exertion of doing so little; and he made his way to the open front door for a breath of fresh air.

It was a very soft and balmy air which met him, and the world around seemed full of life. Insects buzzed and flashed to and fro, and birds were singing at the utmost pitch of their voices on all sides. The sun had just dipped below the horizon, and long red clouds lay over distant hills, bright with his radiance. Though the country round could not be called pretty, it looked pretty now, as almost any English country does on a fair June evening.

A bush near was clothed in wild clematis, and wild white rosebuds were bursting into bloom upon the hedge beyond. The muddy little stream, flowing amid grass and flags, carried a gleam of red.

Mr. Dale did not seem to enjoy the prettiness. His eyes had an unhappy careworn expression; and he sighed profoundly so soon as he found

himself alone.

Perhaps the sigh was loud enough to penetrate into the room behind, where Pattie was busy, putting a few last touches. It was easy to see that Pattie was tired with her week's toil, very tired indeed. The blue eyes were heavy, with dark shadows under them, and the small face was quite colourless. Yet as she came to the door, perhaps in response to that sigh, she smiled and spoke in a cheerful tone; for when Mr. Dale was depressed, Pattie was sure to wear a bright face.

"How the birds do sing, daddy! Isn't it sweet?"

"My dear, a man has to be easy in himself before he can enjoy birds' singing."

"Do you think so? They comfort me. Poor little things—they all seem so happy."

"For how long, I wonder?"

Pattie was silent, and Mr. Dale made a doleful attempt at a rally.

"Come—this won't do. I get a fit of the dumps now and then—not much wonder if I do, considering! But you mustn't mind me, my dear. Things can't be helped. How are you doing in the house? Got everything ship-shape?"

"I have just finished the books. They look nice. Come and see them."

She led him in as if he had been a child, and showed him the small book-case in their tiny dining-room, neatly filled.

"We must read them all through together. I think books are such friends, don't you? The only friends you and I are likely to have."

"But why? Why shouldn't we make new friends in Putworth? There are nice people everywhere."

Mr. Dale shook his head. Then he surveyed the ceiling with doubtful eyes.

"Seems to me this house is not too well built," he remarked. "Just look at those cracks. A house that hasn't been standing six months! I don't understand it. Wonder I didn't see them sooner."

"It is a cracky house altogether," laughed Pattie. "There are cracks in the sitting-room as well, and all up the side of the passage. I never noticed them till to-day; at all events, I didn't see they were so big. And in my bedroom they are just as bad. It can't be helped. They don't look pretty, but we mustn't mind that. When you can spare a shilling or two, I'll get a few Japanese fans to pin over the worst of them, and then they won't matter."

"Let me look at your bedroom, dear. I did not notice anything there."

Pattie felt disinclined to go upstairs. "It doesn't signify," she said. "Lots of houses have cracks in them."

"Not new houses, like this one, only just built. They ought not."

He began to mount the staircase, and Pattie followed slowly. She wanted to see all the best points in their new home, not the worst, and she knew her father's tendency to get into a mournful mood over

small discomforts. Naturally these big cracks, which oddly enough had made no previous impression, seemed less important to a young girl than to a man.

Mr. Dale went round her little bedroom, which lay above the dining-room,—his own being over the "sitting-room," so-called, while the maid slept over the kitchen. He examined the various cracks with anxious eyes, felt those that were within reach, murmured to himself, went into the other rooms on the same floor, and presently came back to Pattie, who had seated herself on the window-sill. She was too tired to remain standing. It was a rather low and wide window-sill, and afforded a comfortable seat.

"Pattie, I must have a talk with the landlord. There's something wrong. Cracks in my room, too, and in the girl's—some very bad ones. I shouldn't wonder if Mr. Cragg has been taken in somehow. He wouldn't have taken us in, I'm sure, on purpose. Those cracks weren't there when you and I first looked over the house. I know they were not. I should have seen them directly. Nor when we came last week. I believe they have all begun in the last day or two. We couldn't have overlooked them, you know. It's impossible."

He inserted the tip of his finger into a wide one near the bed.

"Just look at this. Of course we should have noticed it. Quite out of the question that we should not. It must have come in the last day or two. Something must be wrong with the foundations."

Mr. Dale stood surveying the wall with a gloomy air.

"Some people never seem to be allowed to settle down anywhere. I did really think we had found a quiet corner in the world, where we might be in peace. And it seems I was mistaken. No sooner are we here than fresh troubles begin. It really is hard. Such a nice little house, and just the right size; and now I daresay we shall have to turn out and go elsewhere."

"O no, father. A few marks in the walls don't matter. Perhaps our landlord will have them seen to. I'm sure he will do what he can."

"My dear, if the foundations are unsafe, we could not remain. It would not do. Really it is very tiresome—very unfortunate."

"We can't do anything to-night, at all events," and Pattie tried not to yawn. "We must go to bed and get rested, the first thing. To-morrow you might see Mr. Cragg, and ask him what he thinks. But I daresay he will say that the cracks don't matter, and that they have always been there."

"The house has not been built many weeks—months, at all events. And the cracks were not there one week since, I am positive—quite positive."

Pattie turned her head to look out of the open window. The sky was of a clear pale blue, and the red cloud-streaks had turned to a faint yellow. A bird flew past, uttering impatient little cries, and then a moth swept near. Pattie was gazing down the road which led from Putworth, and she saw a figure advancing along it. Something in the outline of the figure seemed familiar, and she studied it earnestly.

"I do believe that is Mr. Cragg himself, coming to see us. Or perhaps he only means to take an evening walk. You could meet him if you like, daddy."

No answer came, and Pattie turned her head, to find that her father had left the room. He called, after a moment, from the passage,—"I'll be back in five minutes. Just going out on the roof to take a look."

There was easy exit, Pattie knew, by means of steps and a good trap-door; but it seemed to her unnecessary trouble. She remained where she was, glad to be able to rest; and silence followed.

The door of her room was wide open, and the trap-door also. Suddenly a shout in her father's voice startled her. Something in the tone seemed to portend disaster, and a cold shock of fear went through the girl. She did not catch any words, it was the tone only which alarmed her; and she would have sprung up to go to him, but there was not time.

She was seated in a somewhat cramped position on the sill, her feet inside, her face turned the other way. Till that instant she had been looking down the road.

Afterwards she never could recall exactly what happened next. She was vaguely conscious of a whirl of noise and confusion, everything about her seeming to give way together, while she herself remained where she was. She had, indeed, no power to stir. A numbness seized her limbs, a kind of paralysis overwhelmed her, as the flooring of the room sank away, together with the whole opposite wall and part of the two side walls. Only the front wall of the house, which held the window in which she sat, and parts of the side walls, stood firm. The greater part of the house was gone, collapsing into some large hollow below.

Of the roof hardly a trace could be seen; and with the roof was gone Mr. Dale, who had been standing on it. Pattie found herself left behind, seated on the sill, with no flooring beneath her feet; a tumult of terror and agony surging in her brain.

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Anthony Cragg

"WHEREVER are you off to now, I wonder?" demanded Mrs. Cragg.

"Business, my dear."

"That's something new. I thought you always said you didn't choose to do business out of business hours."

"Well, then, it's amusement, if you like," said Mr. Cragg.

"I don't see why you need pretend that a thing is what it isn't, either."

Mrs. Cragg tilted her head in a superior fashion. She was vexed that evening, because she had just passed Mrs. Smithers, the chemist's wife, coming out of the chemist's snug house beyond the church. It was a standing grievance with Mrs. Cragg that her, husband would obstinately persist in living under the same ample roof with his goods. Other tradesmen of his level in the place had their private houses at a distance, where their wives and children might disport themselves at pleasure, free from touch of shop-keeping. Mrs. Cragg, who loved to describe herself as "a lawyer's daughter," considered that she had taken a downward step in the world by marrying Cragg; and she could not forgive him for refusing her the private house

for which she thirsted.

That he actually could not afford such a step was of course absurd—ridiculous! Mrs. Cragg knew better. Though he had as good as told her so, she did not believe it. She had married the man whom she regarded as the richest and most successful tradesman in Putworth, and it would have taken a good deal to shake her belief in his prosperous circumstances. She ascribed his refusal entirely to his overweening devotion to Dot, of whom, though Dot was her own child, she felt actually jealous.

No doubt Cragg would have sorely missed the child's presence under his roof all day. Now he could run for a peep at her if he had but five minutes to spare; and often the little one would creep into that part of the building where he happened to be, drawn by secret strings, and always content if he were near. If she were living away in another part of the town, he would seldom see her, except in the early morning and on half-holidays, unless, indeed, he went home punctually to early dinner. None the less, the avowed reason was true, although it did not stand alone.

"It may be business, and yet not shop-business," Cragg said, in explanation.

"If you'd been brought up as I was, you wouldn't be so desperate fond of talking about 'shops,'" quoth Mrs. Cragg, nose in air. She had a considerable nose, which required much tilting before it would rise to the occasion.

"My dear, you knew pretty well how I was brought up, before you married me," Cragg answered calmly. He could afford to be calm. He was a man known and liked and trusted in the country round; and not a gentleman within ten miles did not enjoy stopping for a chat with "Cragg of the Furniture Warehouse," when opportunity served. Cragg knew this, of course—quietly, and without conceit. His was the right sort of self-respect, which means an absence of all pretence. Cragg was perfectly well aware that his own family name had been untarnished for at least three generations past, while that of his wife's father and grandfather had been of a shady nature—in spite of which he had married her. In the opinion of his friends, he had been the one to take a downward step. But the idea of reproaching her with these facts never so much as occurred to him. He was content with his own certainties.

"Where are you off to?" she inquired.

"Going to see if the Dales are settled in all right."

"If you're not demented about those Dales I don't know who is. You'd better have taken my warning. That man isn't to be depended on. You'll be sorry some day."

"We shall see."

"Well, if you are, you can remember what I said. I don't know what in the world you can see to like in them. It's 'Dales, Dales, Dales,' morning, noon, and night with you."

Mrs. Cragg had only herself to blame if things were so. She could not see her husband cross a road without smartly requesting to be told his destination. This was her way of being wifely and confidential. If he opened a letter in her presence she demanded to hear the contents; and if he unlocked a drawer she wished to be told what he had lost. After

forty years of undisturbed bachelorhood Mr. Cragg was reserved in his ways, and seven years of married life had not effected a cure. Perpetual questioning still gave him a succession of shocks.

He would not be easily betrayed into a loss of temper, which also means a lessening of self-respect, but he detested jars and arguments. The natural result of his wife's prying tendencies was in him a growing inclination towards secretiveness in small things. More and more he concealed in his own breast the things that he thought or that he meant to do.

He certainly was aware of an unwonted interest in "those Dales," as his wife called them. He liked the man, though Dale perplexed him, and he liked and was sorry for the girl. She looked so old and so serious for a child of her years. Not that Cragg knew her years; and he would have been surprised to learn that she had passed her sixteenth birthday. He supposed her to be about twelve or thirteen, and he often told himself that he would not like merry little Dot to look in eight or nine years like Pattie Dale.

Despite Mrs. Cragg's opposition, he did not change his intention of going to the house to see if his new tenants were comfortable; but he started in an opposite direction, simply to evade further remarks. It would be easy to work his way round outside Putworth.

The ruse was of small avail. Mrs. Cragg watched him go, and tossed her head.

"As if I didn't know!" she said aloud. "He's crazed about those people. He'll go to-night before he comes home if it takes him two hours to get there. He's as obstinate as an old mule, once he takes a notion into his head. We poor women have a lot to put up with in the men, and no mistake! Anyway, I'm sure I have."

It never occurred to Mrs. Cragg that her husband might also find a great deal to put up with in her.

"I'm sure I can't think why in the world women ever marry. They're a deal happier without. A lot better keep oneself to oneself, and not be bothered."

But she would have been astonished to learn that the very same wonder had more than once occurred unbidden to Cragg,—regarding the man's side of the question. He had known less "bother" as a bachelor than as a husband.

Still, the question was answered differently by Mr. Cragg. Being a man, he thought of other circumstances in connection with the main point. Dot had to be considered. Had he remained a bachelor, there would have been no tiny loving daughter to rejoice his heart.

With this recollection in his mind, Cragg went off, smiling happily to himself. He had just spent an hour in Dot's company before she was put to bed, and he had found her very good company. She was full of fun and full of talk. Nobody called Dot a pretty child, but she was a most loving one to her father, and that was all that really mattered. When he and she were together the two were perfectly happy.

It did not take Cragg two hours, but it did take more than one hour to saunter round by the outskirts of Putworth to the north end of the town, where lay his new possession and its inmates.

Cragg, on the way thither, imagined his own arrival, and pictured a

pleasant reception from the tall man and the sad-faced girl, both of whom in different ways had captured his fancy. He thought he would apologise for calling, and would make a feint of going away at once, after just asking if everything was comfortable and to their minds. Then perhaps Mr. Dale would persuade him to stay for a little chat, and he might give in to the proposal. Cragg enjoyed chatting with Mr. Dale, who seemed to be a well-read, intelligent man, with pleasant manners, though disposed to melancholy.

But in all Cragg's picturings of what was to happen, he never approached the reality.

After quitting the town he had to walk a little way along a road, with rough ground on either side. No other houses lay near, except one row of small workmen's cottages down a lane to the right. Cragg passed that lane, and went straight on. He could see the newly built house clearly, and a figure seated in the front window over the dining-room drew his attention. That was at the moment when Pattie noticed him, and remarked upon him to her father.

"It's a nice evening," Cragg murmured aloud. "Shouldn't wonder if Mr. Dale was to think the place pretty to-day."

The croak of a frog on the border of a muddy stream beside the road made him turn his eyes in that direction. He stopped, and poked absently among the herbage. While doing this, he became aware of a prolonged rumble.

"Thunder! Dear me, I shouldn't have thought it!" uttered Cragg.

He looked at the clear sky, dotted with tiny cloud-fleckings, and wondered—could it be thunder?

Cragg turned towards the house, and stood petrified. Part of the building was still there, dimly visible through a cloud of dust; but something very strange had happened.

He might be a slow man generally. At this moment he was anything rather than slow. The first shock over, he literally bounded forward. A greyhound or a deer could hardly have improved upon the speed with which he covered the space between him and the ruin.

For a ruin it was. As he drew near, gasping audibly for breath, he saw that only the front wall and portions of the two side walls remained intact. The remaining portion of the house had disappeared. When the dense cloud of dust slowly lessened, he detected a slight figure in the window above, clinging there in a convulsed and terror-stricken stillness. Beyond was chaos—a dark gulf, into which the building had disappeared.

No voice spoke, no human being stirred. Cragg could see nothing of Mr. Dale, or of the maid-servant. Only Pattie Dale was visible, and Cragg hurried beneath the window.

"What does it all mean? Are you hurt?" he cried. He was close enough to render shouting unnecessary.

Pattie made no reply. She seemed to be dazed, perhaps hardly conscious. He could see that her blue eyes were widely-opened in a fixed stare.

"My dear," he called, "you must wake up; you must let me help you down. It isn't safe there." A shudder passed over him, as he realised

that at any moment this wall, too, might descend into the gulf, carrying her with it. "Rouse up, my dear. Try to hear what I'm saying. I'm Cragg, you know, and I want to get you down. You must drop into my arms. See?"

She seemed to him a mere child, and he was thinking of Dot—feeling unspeakably thankful that Dot was not in Pattie's place. The thought of Dot made him the more eager to rescue Pattie. "Come, my dear,—come!" he called.

At first Pattie paid no heed, but gradually her eyes turned in his direction, and a look of consciousness crept into them.

"What is it? I don't understand," she said at length. "Why am I here?"

"You're not going to stay there. Things have gone wrong, and we've got to put them right," called Cragg cheerfully, relieved to have her attention. "See!—I'm close by. I want you just to edge your feet over this side, and to let yourself drop. Don't be frightened—move slowly. No hurry. Just slowly—gently—"

He was in deadly fear lest she should fall on the other side of the wall, or lest the slight additional shake of movement on her part should seal the fate of the wall itself, and it too should go down, carrying her to death. She did not move at once, but after a little pause said vaguely:

"What am I to do? I don't understand."

"My dear, look this way,—this way—this!" urged Cragg, with intense earnestness, standing below the window and holding up his arms. "Don't think about anything else. Look at me, and think of me. Keep your head this way, and just bring your feet over the sill—quietly. Don't hurry. Don't look anywhere else. It's all right. I'll catch you. I won't let you fall. So—yes—that's grand-both feet over. You'll do it directly—and then—"

There was no need for any further exhortations. Pattie's strength proved equal to the moment's need so far; but the instant both feet were over, it failed her. She fell sideways, helplessly; and Cragg caught her, as he had promised. Though the height was not great, the ceilings being low, her weight brought him to the ground. He was undermost, however, and started up again, regardless of bruises.

"Not hurt, are you?" he asked anxiously.

Pattie seemed to be awakened by the shock of her fall. She sat up, looking with troubled eyes.

"No, I'm not hurt," she said slowly. "What does it mean? What has happened? Where is father?"

To this serious question Cragg dared not attempt at once to find an answer.

"Come a little way farther off," he said.

"That wall might go down too. Come this way. You're feeling queasy, aren't you?"

"Yes. I don't know where I am. I don't know what it means."

Pattie spoke slowly, like one bewildered. Then her eyes went to the

ruined house, and recollection flashed up. Till then she had been stunned. A cry broke from her.

"Father! father! He was on the roof. Where is he?"

But for Cragg's detaining grasp she would have rushed to the edge of the depth. He caught her, and held her back by main force. She struggled fiercely, then fell back, senseless.

"Thank God for that!" muttered Cragg, tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

A Rescue

IT is only fair to Anthony Cragg to say that in this first hour his thoughts were not of himself, nor of the heavy loss he would suffer. That part of the matter had to await later attention.

Without delay he carried Pattie farther off, and laid her down, senseless still, upon the grass. Then he walked quickly to the side of the ruin, studying with troubled eyes the open gulf into which his new structure had descended.

He could conjecture what had happened. This had been in the past, to some extent—never a large extent—a mining neighbourhood; and two or three disused mines not far off were known to the people of Putworth. Here probably was another old mine, long forgotten; and the weight of the house had broken through the thin roofing. Otherwise it might have stood the danger undiscovered. The greater part of the building had descended, and the rest might at any moment follow. That depended on whether the front wall of the house rested on a firmer basis than the other walls, or whether it too lay over a hollow, with only a thin roof to hold it up.

As to what had become of Mr. Dale and the maid-servant, Cragg could feel in his own mind little doubt. He believed both to have gone down with the ill-fated house; and if so, both must surely have met their death.

Yet, as he said this to himself, his ears were saluted by a terrified—"Oh, sir!"

"What! You're safe?" cried Cragg.

"Yes, sir; I was out in the back garden, getting a bit of green,—parsley, I mean," panted the girl, who seemed tolerably self-possessed, except that her eyes had in them a frightened stare. "And when I see everything go to bits like that, I just dursn't do nothing."

"And left Miss Dale to take her chance! If I had not come, what do you suppose would have become of her?"

Cragg spoke sternly, and the girl began to sob.

"Well, never mind now. You were startled, of course. Come and see to her. Here! this way. And mind, on no account let her go near the house." Cragg paused, doubting if any one but himself would be equal to the task of holding back Pattie, when she should again revive. "No; on second thoughts, I'll stay here. Go to those cottages,

and call the men—any who are there. Tell them what has happened. Say ropes will be wanted. Quick! don't lose a moment. I'll see to Miss Dale."

The girl fled, crying as she went, and Cragg went back to Pattie. He was relieved to find her coming to, though still hardly conscious.

"Not much hope for him," he murmured. "Don't know what the depth of the fall may have been, but he couldn't escape. She's an orphan, I'm afraid."

Leaving her again, he approached the edge cautiously, not too near, and raised his voice in a shout. No sound replied. Cragg tried again, and then he felt a touch on his arm. Pattie was standing by his side, her eyes shining, her face colourless.

"Is he down there?" she breathed. "Can't you get him up? He may be hurt."

Cragg fell in with the suggestion.

"Yes, yes, my dear, as soon as possible," he said cheerfully. "I've sent the girl to call some men, and we'll do our very best, you may be sure of that. They will be here directly."

Pattie looked at him with steady eyes.

"You think he is not killed?"

"I shouldn't wonder if he's stunned; yes, he must be stunned. He hasn't answered me, but that doesn't say much. You see, it may be a good way to go down. I'd no notion there was an old mine hereabouts, but that's what it's bound to be. An old mine near the surface, you know, so the roof wasn't strong enough to bear up a house on it for any length of time. Must have been giving way slowly for weeks past, I shouldn't wonder. If I had guessed such a thing, I'd never have built the house. Nobody had any notion."

"Is father in the mine?—far down?"

"Well, you see, I don't know," explained Cragg. "It might be the old pit mouth just hereabouts, or it might be only into one of the pit-galleries. There's no telling—nor how shallow it may be either. We'll soon find out."

"Father and I saw a lot of cracks in the walls to-day."

"Most of the houses here get cracks; it's from the nature of the soil. I did see some last week, and I thought they were showing uncommon early. That was all. I'd no notion of anything of this sort," repeated Cragg regretfully.

Pattie sighed.

"Father must think it so long. He must want to get out. I don't know how to wait. Couldn't we do something? If I were to go close, and call out,—he might know my voice."

"No harm trying," assented Cragg. "Not close, but a little nearer; it isn't safe close. The earth might fall in any moment. If he's stunned, he won't hear your voice no more than mine; but we'll try." He was desirous to keep Pattie's mind occupied until the men should arrive. "This way; not any nearer. Now, call."

Pattie obeyed, raising her thin tones once, twice, thrice, with a manifest effort.

"Father!" she cried first; and then, "Daddy! Daddy! Don't you hear me? Oh!"

She broke away from Cragg, taking him by surprise, and ran several paces before he could catch her.

"I heard father's voice. Let me go! Don't keep me!" she implored. "He cried out. Listen!"

A faint sound could be detected, seeming to come from underground.

"Pat—tie! Pat—tie!" it said.

"Father, we're here. We'll get you out. Don't be afraid," called the girl; and then wildly to Cragg, "Let me go! What can we do? Let me go!"

"Will you promise to do as I tell you, and not to stir unless I give you leave? I'll hold you till you do promise."

"But I want—O how can I?" gasped Pattie.

"What good will it do him if you kill yourself? Be sensible. Think what your father would wish you to do."

Pattie became suddenly quiet.

"Yes, I will," she said. "I'll be good. I'll stay here till you say I may move. Do ask him if he is hurt."

"I know you'll keep your word." Cragg left her, and went nearer, calling in strong tones, "Pattie is safe. Are you hurt?"

"Yes," came faintly, after a pause. "Keep—her—back."

"Where are you? Is it a mine?"

"I don't—know. I'm lying on—something—all dark—"

"We'll have you out in a jiffy!" shouted Cragg.

He saw the men hurrying across a space of rough ground, which lay between this part and their cottages. Afterwards it came out that they had heard the noise of the falling house, and had, like Cragg, mistaken it for thunder. Since the wind blew from them to the house, the noise was lessened.

Six able-bodied men appeared, and a brief consultation took place as to the best and quickest mode of rescue. Two of them carried a coil of stout rope, and another, a young fellow, Jim Waters by name, volunteered to go down, tied to this rope. It was decided that the descent should be made on the side away from the wall which still stood upright; though if that should fall while the rescuer was below, he could scarcely expect to survive. Jim Waters knew as much, and it made no difference to his action. Englishmen of the right stamp do not commonly stand still to measure risks and possible results when the life of another is at stake. Jim was nothing out of the usual way, just a steady plucky young mason, firm of foot and clear of brain. He was the lightest in make and the best at climbing of those present;

therefore he took it as a matter of course that he should be the one to undertake this perilous "emprise."

The rope was securely fastened to him, and the others all had hold of it, standing well back from the edge, lest the ground should give way beneath them. Pattie had insisted on coming also to this side. She was white as a sheet, but calm, and from time to time she raised her clear voice in a shrill cry of "Daddy, we're here! You'll soon be out." For some time no reply had been heard.

Then came moments of acute suspense, while Waters slowly lowered himself into the dark hollow, and the men above held the rope, slackening or tightening it as he required. So many jerks had been settled as signifying what he wanted either way. Sooner than they expected he had reached standing ground, and his voice could be heard, at first calling, then speaking. After which he seemed to be throwing aside stones or bricks, doubtless releasing the fallen man. Once or twice a groan travelled up, and Pattie sank on her knees, unable to stand, while her eyes grew wild and sad.

At length the signal was given to "pull," and with a will the men bent to their task.

Slowly the rope was hauled in, and slowly Jim Waters, with his heavy burden, rose to the surface. The rope proved strong enough to bear them both, but moment by moment the fear was present of the front wall falling. Not till the two men were safely landed on firm ground, and all had retreated to a safer distance, did any one draw an easy breath.

Mr. Dale had to be carried. His face was blanched and drawn, his hands were clenched. At first he made no sound; but when Pattie would have thrown her arms round him, he motioned her back.

"Don't touch me," he whispered. "I can't stand being touched."

The wonder was that he had not been killed instantly. Waters briefly explained the condition of things below. He had found a wide hollow, perhaps over thirty feet deep, and in it was the old pit mouth, half-choked with rubbish. Much of the falling mass had poured into that aged opening, to disappear utterly; but part had landed on one side of it; and upon this pile he had discovered Mr. Dale, badly injured, yet alive and still conscious. Jim had been too hurried, and the light had been too dim, for seeing more.

One of the cottagers, Jim's mother, had an unoccupied room, and there, with her consent, Mr. Dale was placed. A messenger rushed for the doctor, another for the village nurse.

There was no second room in the cottage for Pattie, so she had to be a small mattress on the floor of Mrs. Waters' room. Cragg would have liked to take her home, but he remembered Mrs. Cragg, and hesitated. Also, he was sure that nothing would induce Pattie to leave her father.

Presently the village nurse arrived, and took the patient in hand, and shortly afterward the doctor made his appearance.

CHAPTER V

Alone in the

CRAGG was finishing his breakfast with Dot upon his knee. He liked to have her company whenever it was possible, and breakfast being one of his leisure times, he generally then indulged the inclination.

Whatever the pressure of business might be, he always declined to attend to it until he had enjoyed a good morning meal.

To-day, for once, not even breakfast and the presence of Dot could prevent an air of haste. Mr. Cragg was anxious to get out as early as might be.

Dot was a small person, even for her limited age, with an obtrusively turned-up nose, and a wide mouth always on the grin. Dot was not easily suppressed. She had an aggressive look of self-confidence, and, like a cork, though she could be pushed under water, she soon rose to the surface again.

Without being in the least pretty, there was a certain charm in her expression of blissful content; and the wide-awake air was startling at less than four years old. Nothing escaped Dot. She already had her own views, ready-made, upon most subjects which came to hand.

Mr. Cragg had been telling her, between mouthfuls of food, about the events of the evening before; Dot listening to him, open-eyed. She possessed big light-grey eyes, and supreme pity now filled them, not so much for the injured man as for Pattie.

"She's a poo-ar lickle girl, ain't she?" came at the first pause. Dot had a considerable vocabulary, but the style of pronunciation was peculiarly her own. "Biggern me, I s'pose, dad?"

"Ever so much bigger than you, Dot."

"Evern so much," repeated Dot, with satisfaction. "And she hasn't got no ma-ma, nor no dadda."

"I'm afraid her dadda is badly hurt. That's what I'm after now, to see how he is, poor man."

Then Cragg was conscious of imprudence. He had not meant to let slip this intention. When one lives with argumentative people, the less said about one's intentions the better, and Cragg had by this time learnt as much.

Mrs. Cragg sat at the other end of the table, in a loose gown which could not be described as clean, while her hair was twisted up and still in curling-pins. The effect was not becoming. She jerked up her head, and said:

"I should think you'd wasted time enough already over those Dales. How much do you suppose that house cost you to build?"

Cragg intimated that all the bills were not in yet.

"And how much do you imagine you'll ever make by it?"

"A good deal less than nothing, I'm afraid."

"And that's what you call 'business,' I suppose?"

"I call it one of the mistakes which the best of business men may

make, once in a way. Nobody thought of any old mine being thereabouts."

"Somebody ought to have thought of it."

"I don't know who would. The old verger fancies now that he can remember hearing of one which was closed nearly seventy years ago, but he had forgotten all about it—till this happened."

"If you had taken the trouble to make proper inquiries before building, he would have remembered, fast enough. That's just your way of doing things."

Cragg was silent. He knew it would be useless to reply, that, when no idea of a possible mine is entertained, people do not go about asking after one.

"And now you'll be for ever croaking about expenses, I suppose; saying you can't afford this, and don't mean to afford that."

The opportunity was not allowed to slip.

"I think it will be needful to draw in a little, there's no doubt," her husband said mildly.

"You can draw in as much as you like. Nobody minds if you do."

"It will be needful for us both, my dear; not for one only. I can't go on at this rate."

Mrs. Cragg wanted to know what rate he meant. Mr. Cragg, being a kindly and placid man, found it difficult to state point-blank that his wife's bills were too heavy. He knew it must come to that, but for the moment he temporised.

"The present rate," he explained. "Business hasn't been good lately, and we are spending too much—a lot too much—all round."

"I s'pose you mean to say I'm spending too much, Mr. Cragg?"

Cragg did mean it, and he was silent. Mrs. Cragg held her head high, but curling-pins are not dignified. She also grew very red, and Dot, gazing with curious eyes, remarked,—"Ma-ma angly."

"The way you encourage that child's impertinence!"

"My dear, she does not understand. She is but a babe. I do not wish to vex you, but it is as well that you should know my means to be—not unlimited. I have had some heavy losses this year, and here is another. Unless we draw in a little now, I may by-and-by find my head under water. I think you should manage to fix upon a definite sum for your clothes and for housekeeping, and keep to it. That is what I have wanted to say for some time past."

"I'm very much obliged indeed!" said Mrs. Cragg.

Thereupon she flounced off in a huff, and once more Dot serenely observed, "Ma-ma angly."

"No, no, Dot, you mustn't say that." Cragg put the child down, kissed her, and added, "Run away to the nursery, little one."

"You'm going to see that poo-ar lickle girl, dadda?"

"Yes, yes; and when I come back, by-and-by, you shall hear how she is."

A few minutes later Cragg was wending his way to the row of red cottages, where lay Mr. Dale. On the road thither he met one of the numerous children belonging to those cottages, a small shock-haired boy, who stopped and thrust into Cragg's hand a folded slip of paper. Cragg opened and read it:

"My father is dying. He wants to see you. Pattie Dale."

"I'll be there directly," Cragg said.

Outside the cottage door he was met by Pattie. She had watched his approach from a window; and she looked up with grieved eyes.

"He will not live long, the doctor says. He has been worse for some hours. Nothing more can be done. And he keeps asking for you. I don't know why. The doctor thinks he doesn't know what he is saying, but I—I think he does know. And we thought—I felt sure—you would come, if you knew that he wanted you."

"My dear, of course I would. I would have come at once, if I had not already been on my way. I would do anything that I could for him. This is sad for you, isn't it?—poor girl!"

She gave him a watery little smile, then turned back, leading him in. Upstairs the nurse met them.

"Mr. Dale seems to know you are here," she said. "He must have heard your voice. He wants a few words with you alone, and I don't suppose it can make much difference now, either way—only of course the less excitement the better. He is very weak."

Then Cragg found himself in the small room with the dying man, whose face was altered and fallen. The others went away.

"Is the door shut? Shut it, please." Dale spoke in faint tones. "I've not much time. Pattie not here? That is right. Sit down, please. I want to say something."

Cragg obeyed, much moved.

"Anything you wish me to do for you?" he asked kindly.

"Yes. Pattie."

"You want me to care for her?"

"She has no one. No friends. We are—friendless."

"How is that?" Cragg put the question involuntarily, and there was an uneasy movement on the part of the sick man.

"Not my fault," came slowly. "I want—if you would promise me—I want—"

"Don't trouble yourself to say much. I think I understand. You want me to see that Pattie has a home. I had thought of that already. It is through me that you are like this. Not my fault, I hope, for nobody had a notion of the old mine being there; but still it is through me. I couldn't neglect your child."

"You will care for her? She will have—almost nothing of her own—almost nothing. Only twenty pounds a year."

"That is better than nothing. I promise to see to her. Something shall be arranged somehow." Cragg put aside recollections of his own embarrassments and of what his wife might say. He felt that he had no choice.

Dale's hand grasped his with a feverish clutch.

"You promise—promise—"

"I do indeed. Pattie shall never be without a friend, so long as I live. One way or another, I'll see that she is not homeless. I will count myself her guardian. Will that do?"

"You promise to take her in—to give her a home in your house?"

Cragg had carefully avoided giving that pledge exactly, and he hesitated, not from personal reluctance, but from a fear of what Mrs. Cragg might say.

"A home in your house," repeated the other faintly; and the craving gaze overmastered his doubts.

"She shall live with us as long as she wishes to do so."

Dale's face worked.

"Thank you—thank you," was murmured. "I may be sure—I may rely on your word?"

"I promise," repeated Cragg.

"I thought—I was sure—you would not refuse a dying man's wish."

"You say Pattie has twenty pounds a year. But you have had more than that?"

"Yes. The rest ceases with my life. I mean—it goes elsewhere. I had—only a life-interest."

Then a pause. Cragg wondered if he ought to go.

"Remember—one thing—" broke out the other suddenly,—"remember, if—"

"Yes. What am I to remember?"

"If he—if Mr. Peterson comes—"

"Yes. Go on. Who is Mr. Peterson?"

"He was—he was my employer before we came here. If he ever comes—remember—I did not do it. In the sight of God I say that. It was not I. I didn't do it. You believe me?"

"I don't quite understand. You were accused of something wrongfully?"

"Yes, wrongfully."

"And that was how you lost your friends? That was why you came away?"

"That was why. I could prove nothing. It was done by another—not me!

But they would not believe what I said. Will you believe me? I could not keep up a lie now—in the face of death. And before God I can say that I did not do it. Can you believe me?"

"Yes, yes! I am sure it wasn't you. At such a time as this I am sure, quite sure, you could not tell me what was not true. I do believe you."

"I am speaking the truth to you. I say I didn't do it, and I don't know who did. I could not bear to be suspected by them—and they dismissed me. So we came here. Pattie doesn't know. I don't want her to know—unless my name is cleared some day, and everything comes out. Only, you will remember that it was not I. And Pattie will be alone in the world."

"No, not alone. She can never be alone while God is with her. He is with you too—at hand to help you."

Dale smiled dimly.

"If He wasn't—I should be in a bad way now," he panted. His breath came very painfully.

"Would you like to see the clergyman?"

"He has been. I should like to see him again. Soon—if possible."

Dale closed his eyes. Cragg wondered whether he would live until the Vicar could come. He doubted it. He would have liked to kneel down by the sick-bed and to offer up a few words of prayer, but shyness withheld him. He muttered only a subdued, "God bless you, poor fellow!" and then without another word he cautiously tip-toed from the room. Outside the door the nurse stood waiting.

"I'll ask the Vicar to call. He says he would like to see him at once, if I can get him. He looks bad," observed Cragg.

"He won't be here much longer. But he's ready to go," the nurse said confidently. "To hear him praying in the night—! I'm sure I wish everybody else was as ready as Mr. Dale is to go."

"I'm very glad," Cragg replied; and he went down the narrow staircase to find Pattie waiting for him below.

"So kind of you to come!" she whispered. "I'm sure it has been a comfort to him. I don't know what he wanted, but—"

"It was about you, a good deal. He didn't feel happy about your future."

"Oh, there's time enough for thinking about me. I only have to think of him now. And I must go. I mustn't wait. He might want me. But thank you very much for all you have done for him; it was very good of you."

Then Cragg went home, and Pattie returned to her father's side, to watch through the few remaining hours. He lingered over a good part of the following day; but before the Vicar could arrive, and very soon after Pattie's return to the room, he became unconscious. From the unconsciousness he never rallied.

Towards the evening of the next day Pattie Dale was an orphan.

CHAPTER VI

The Next Step

CRAGG was in a serious dilemma. He had to tell his wife of the promise made to Dale, and he dreaded doing so. Not that Mrs. Cragg could prevent his carrying out that promise, but she had it in her power to make matters extremely disagreeable, as well for him as for Pattie. Like most men, not to speak of women, he disliked to have things made disagreeable. He preferred "peace, and a quiet life."

Still, the thing had to be done. Having made a promise, he had to let his wife know of that promise.

After leaving Dale he regretted having made it. That he should undertake to look after Pattie in a general way was all right, and only to be expected of him under the circumstances. So he told himself. But that he should have bound himself to adopt Pattie as a member of his own family was another matter, and perhaps unnecessary. For some hours he quietly debated how far it might be possible, if he should see Mr. Dale again, to modify the exact form of his promise, and to leave himself a little more free. Then he heard that Dale was unconscious, and likely to remain so; and then that his tenant was dead. So he remained bound to what he had said.

If only he had had his wits more about him at the time of the interview, he might have evaded saying what he had said. He might have pledged himself in more vague and general terms. It was true that he had been the unwilling cause of Dale's tragical end; but the very catastrophe which had rendered Pattie an orphan had also added to his own money difficulties.

There were heavy bills yet to come in for the building of a house, by which he could not hope to make a penny. And now he had saddled himself in addition with the support of a young girl.

All things considered, he really had been rather foolish; so he privately decided. He would not so much have cared about the expense, which probably would be slight, if only he had not had to tell Mrs. Cragg. There was the rub!

Thus far, nobody knew of the promise that he had made.

This suggestion darted into Cragg's mind, as he considered the state of affairs.

Nobody knew anything about it. The matter had been between himself and the dying man. It was most unlikely that Dale should have said anything to Pattie, since so very soon after he had been seized with unconsciousness. Therefore, Pattie would not know, and no one else could have any idea.

Of course, a promise is a promise, and Cragg would have counted himself the last man in the world to repudiate a promise—more especially a pledge to a dying man. Still, since no one knew what had passed, there was the less need for him to speak out. He had to act upon the promise, but he was not obliged to inform everybody about it. There was no necessity for him to explain all particulars to his wife. He might prepare her for what was coming. He might simply say that he meant to give Pattie a home for a time; and then Mrs. Cragg might grow fond of Pattie, or, at least, might find her of use.

That would certainly be the best plan. Cragg felt relieved. He had shrunk from the thought of telling, from the prospect of black looks and loud-toned reproaches.

It was within the bounds of possibility that Pattie herself might not wish to make a permanent home of his house. Cragg had undertaken to give her a home, so long as she should wish it. If she did not wish it, he would be freed from his bond. He was glad of that proviso. He rather doubted if anybody would care to live with Mrs. Cragg, after an experience of what such living meant.

Before he could feel at case, it was needful that he should find out from Pattie how much she knew. She was still at the cottage, where Mrs. Waters had managed to fit up a tiny room, and where Pattie wished to stay till after the funeral. Cragg had agreed without protest, being in no hurry to take her away.

When his cogitations reached this point, he went to the cottage, and found her seated in the kitchen, quietly sewing at a black gown. She had had a little money in hand—enough to get for herself what was necessary. Cragg talked to Mrs. Waters, and then intimated that he would like a few words with Miss Dale. Good-natured Mrs. Waters took herself off to other regions, without delay.

"My dear, I wonder if you can tell me anything about your father's means?" he began, having decided not to take anything for granted. "I have been wanting to ask this, and it is about time, you know, to settle something or other. After to-morrow—"

Pattie looked gravely in his face.

"I shall have twenty pounds a year," she said.

"From—invested money? I promised to act as your guardian, and I want to understand." She seemed puzzled.

"I don't exactly know. It was left to me by my father's brother—for life. Eighty pounds a year to father, for his life, and twenty pounds to me. It has always been paid regularly—by lawyers, I think. The eighty pounds goes somewhere else now, but I shall have the twenty still."

"But you and he couldn't have lived on only one hundred pounds a year."

"Couldn't we? A hundred pounds seems a good deal. And I meant to do needlework. I would have earned money in that way, and I mean to do it now. And dear father would have done copying—if he could have got any. Of course we have had more."

Cragg waited expectantly.

"I mean, we had more before we came here, when my father had a clerkship; he had two hundred a year for that. And we were very comfortable. We had everything we could want. Father was always talking of beginning to lay by, but he hadn't begun. And then he gave the work up."

"Can you tell me why he gave it up?—on what account?"

Pattie shook her head.

"I never understood. He didn't exactly tell me why. Only that Mr.

Peterson had turned against him, and had said unkind things —things that were not true. Poor father was miserable. I never saw him so unhappy. He said one day that Mr. Peterson believed him to have done something wrong—something he never could have done. And he said he and I must come away, and must forget our friends there. We meant to live quietly in the country; and I thought we should manage on what we had—if I could take in needlework. Neither of us ate a great deal."

"And out of that he meant to pay twenty pounds a year house rent—not to speak of taxes."

"Was that too much? But it does not matter now." Tears filled her eyes.

"My dear, you must not think me unkind to say all this; it is— it is necessary. I have to understand your affairs. Did your father seem anxious about your future—or plan anything for you?"

"Sometimes. Not much."

"Not even since his accident?"

"I would not let him. There was no need. I told him I should be taken care of. There was no need for him to worry himself."

"And he was content to leave things so?"

Pattie put her work down, and once more looked up into Cragg's face.

"Would you have been content in his place—about a child of your own?"

Cragg was puzzled how to answer. He could not make out Pattie, and he found himself saying involuntarily:

"I wonder whether you are older than I have fancied?"

"I was sixteen on my last birthday."

"You were! Really! I have thought of you as only—well, about thirteen."

"No; I am sixteen. People have often taken me for less. Old enough to be independent." And a curious smile flickered over her small face.

"We must see about that. I am not sure. You would not find it so easy as you may think to make your way—unaided."

"No. But people would help me. People are always so kind."

"Are they?"

"Except Mr. Peterson,—and he had always been kind. It was only at the last that he changed. I suppose somebody had made mischief in some way. Somebody must have made him think what was not true of father. Yes, people are kind generally. You have been kind, and yet how little you know of us! When we first came you knew nothing at all."

"I hope I shall continue to be kind," Cragg said seriously.

"I am sure you will. And perhaps—perhaps—in a few days—you will help me to get something to do. I should like to find work. Needlework, perhaps,—or anything. I don't mind what." Her face flushed slightly. "I want to be independent."

"My dear, the feeling is most praiseworthy. But you must not be in a hurry. You are coming to us first. I told your father it should be so. You will come to us directly after the funeral."

"Not the same day."

"Then the day after."

"You say my father wished it?"

"Yes. He did wish it."

"Then I will do what he wished. But only for a little while."

"We shall see," Cragg answered.

So far, so good, was his thought as he went home. Pattie evidently had no idea of the full extent of his undertaking with respect to herself. Just as well that she should not know at present. He would tell his wife that she was coming for a while. If Pattie were bent on working for herself, the arrangement would not have to be permanent.

Cowardice seized him again, when he found himself in his wife's presence. He had meant to tell her as soon as he got in, and then he put off doing so until after tea. When tea was finished he still felt disinclined to speak, and he waited till Dot was brought in. Dot always devoted her small self to him for an hour before going to bed. With Dot on his knee he became more courageous, and Mrs. Cragg herself supplied an opening.

"So they are going to have the funeral to-morrow?"

"Yes; at two o'clock."

"Well, it's a good thing he didn't linger on in a helpless state. Nobody could have afforded that. What's going to become of the child?"

"Poo-ar lickle girl!" put in Dot appropriately.

"You should say 'little,' not 'lickle,'" reproved Mrs. Cragg. "It sounds so silly."

Dot hung her head.

"I do say lick-karl," she asserted impressively.

Now or never! Cragg knew he must speak out.

"I have asked Pattie Dale to come to us for a time," he said. "She—she is homeless. You see, my dear,"—nervously, for Mrs. Cragg's black eyes stared full at him,—"you see, her father's death is in a manner at my door. Of course I did not know about the mine. Nobody knew that. Still, if I had not built that unfortunate house, he might now be a living man. One can't help feeling a sort of responsibility in that matter—about his child, I mean. And so I felt sure you would wish—ahem—I felt that it was only the right thing to do."

"Of all born idiots!" uttered his wife energetically.

"Nay, my dear—"

"You mean to say you've had the folly to ask that girl here!—to this

house!—to my house, Mr. Cragg! To ask her to stay here!—under my roof?"

Cragg felt tempted to suggest that he had a share in the said roof, but courage failed. He stroked Dot's hair, and Dot gazed with serene curiosity at Mrs. Cragg's red face.

"You mean to say that, Mr. Cragg?"

Cragg plucked up heart. After all, the thing had to be done. The more plainly he spoke now, the better matters would go in the future. It was only a pity that he did not at once tell the whole truth.

"I have asked Pattie Dale to come here to-morrow, and to stay for a time—in fact, as long as it proves necessary. She is a very nice girl, and you will find her useful in the house. I could not do less under the circumstances. And I expect, my dear, that you will make her happy."

"You expect?"

"I certainly do expect it, as part of your duty."

"I'm very much obliged to you, Mr. Cragg!" And Mrs. Cragg again flounced out of the room.

CHAPTER VII

Into a New Home

PATTIE DALE was very young, and not much versed in the ways of the world. Nevertheless, she had eyes and ears, and she knew how to use them.

It had not escaped her attention, in these few days of trouble, that Cragg's kindness was all his own action, and not that of his wife. She had noted that he seldom spoke of Mrs. Cragg, that when he did speak, it was in a dubious and uncomfortable manner, that he brought no message of sympathy from Mrs. Cragg, that Mrs. Cragg never came with him.

Though she did not count it needful to tell him, she was not in absolute ignorance of what had passed between him and her father. A few minutes after her return to the sick-room, Mr. Dale had whispered feebly, "Lean down, dear. Listen to me, Pattie. That is a good man,—a good man! He will take care of you. He will give my Pattie a home—always—for always. He promised—promised me." Then, before Pattie could ask any questions, or could, if so disposed, make any protest, insensibility had come on. Those were her father's last conscious words.

None the less, Pattie thought things over. She recalled her impressions about Mrs. Cragg, and she decided privately that, whatever Cragg in his kindness of heart might intend, it was by no means certain that his wife would agree with him. She also thought that in any case she could not be content to live a life of dependence. If Cragg should offer her a home, she might go to him for a while, but certainly not for always. She fully meant to work for her own living. Sixteen is, however, young for making one's way in life, especially without previous training, and Pattie knew this.

Cragg did make the offer, and Pattie, while falling in with it, let him understand that she did not look upon the plan as permanent. She kept her own counsel, and would not show how much she knew. It seemed to her that he and she would both be more free, if he was unaware how much she had heard.

Mrs. Cragg on the day after the funeral was not very agreeable. She asked her husband no questions, but glowered sulkily. He told her after breakfast that Pattie was coming before night, and inquired where she was to sleep.

"How am I to know?" was Mrs. Cragg's reply. "I don't keep rooms for taking in of riff-raff."

"Pattie Dale is no more riff-raff than you and I are!" Cragg was roused to reply firmly. Things had reached a point when he would either have to set his foot down firmly, or to give way and break his word.

"I know what she is. I knew it the first moment I set eyes on those two."

"My dear, it really does not matter what you may imagine them to have been. Mr. Dale is dead, and I have—I intend to provide for his child, at all events until she can do for herself."

"You have—what?"

"I have made up my mind to do as much as that." Cragg wished now that he had been more open.

"There's the workhouse."

"She will not go to the workhouse so long as I can prevent it."

"She could get a place, I suppose—if she ain't too grand."

"My dear, Pattie is coming here for the present."

Mrs. Cragg tossed her head.

"There's only one other way," Cragg said suddenly. "If she isn't happy here, and doesn't wish to stay, then I shall have to pay for her being taken in by somebody else. It will cost more, and I've none too much money to spare. But if things come to that, why, it will have to be, and we must save in another direction. So now I hope you understand."

"I always said you were crazy about those Dales." But it was plain that Mrs. Cragg did understand. The idea of drawing in elsewhere was, unwelcome; and she thought better of some previous resolutions. She had meant to make the arrangement so far unpleasant to Pattie, that Pattie would speedily wish to go. Since that scheme could only end in her having less money to spend, she began to take a different view of the matter. If Pattie had to come, the best plan would be to make use of the girl.

These ideas passed through Mrs. Cragg's mind. While Cragg was still meditating on his last words and on her reply, she had travelled miles ahead, and her next remark took him by surprise:

"Well, if it's got to be—though I don't hold with you, mind, and I think a man's first duty is to his own wife and children—"

"But not his whole duty, surely!"

"That's another question, Mr. Cragg. What I was saying was, that I think a man's duty is to his wife and children, and not to any sort of riff-raff he can pick up anywhere. But if it's got to be, it's got to be; and I suppose she can have that little room at the back, on the ground floor. It isn't wanted particular for anything else, I suppose?"

"It'll want making comfortable."

"People living on charity have no business to expect grandeur."

"My dear, if you would but be reasonable! Who spoke of grandeur? I simply wish the room to be made comfortable. In an hour or two I will take a look at it. A bed is easily put there, and—but I will see what is wanted. Pattie will not be here till late in the afternoon. I have promised to fetch her."

"As if she couldn't walk alone. What's the good of making a fine lady of her? Hasn't she got any furniture of her own? Why isn't it brought up out of the mine?"

"A few attempts have been made, but the things are so broken as to be almost useless."

"I suppose she can take her meals with the servants?"

"No, my dear. She will sit at table with us. I wish her to be one of ourselves. When you have learnt to know Pattie, you will feel as I do."

Mrs. Cragg tossed her head.

"Well, if she comes here, she ain't going to be idle. I shall give her something to do."

"I am sure Pattie would wish to be useful. But she must not have hard work."

Cragg thought he had said enough, and he made his escape. Busy as he was, he did not forget to take a look into the small room, and it was owing to him that, when he brought her that afternoon, the said little room wore a cosy and comfortable appearance. Pattie glanced round with pleased eyes.

"How nice! What a dear room! I shall like to sleep here," she said gratefully.

Cragg wondered how she would like something else in the house. He had to present Pattie to his wife, and that meant an ordeal for himself, as well as for the unconscious Pattie.

Not that Pattie was so unconscious as he supposed. She had not the least expectation of a warm reception from Mrs. Cragg. And if her eyes did open rather widely at the first sight of the latter, it was not in surprise at the greeting vouchsafed, but in amazement at Mrs. Cragg's green velveteen jacket and red feather. Pattie's slim figure, in black skirt and jacket, with neat crape-trimmed hat, made an effective contrast.

"So you've come?" said Mrs. Cragg, looking her up and down.

"Mr. Cragg was so kind; he fetched me," Pattie answered, with a glow of gratitude.

"I'm sure I don't know how he managed it. He never has time to do anything I want. Always too busy."

"My dear, I really don't know that you have wanted anything to-day."

"If you had known, it wouldn't have made a grain or difference. You'd have had too much to see to, going off there."

Cragg looked apologetically towards Pattie.

"But I could have come alone," Pattie said quietly. "I dare say I should have felt a little shy, because I didn't know you; but that wouldn't have mattered. I could easily have done it. And then Mr. Cragg could have seen to whatever you wanted. I'm so sorry you didn't tell about it."

What could Mrs. Cragg say? There was no room for a sharp answer to Pattie's gentleness.

"And now you know my wife, I want you to know my little girl," Cragg said, delighted with Pattie's mode of meeting his wife's humour. He began to hope that things would go better than he had ventured to expect.

"Little Dot! I should like that so much. I love children."

"Here she comes!" exclaimed Cragg.

Dot made her appearance after her own fashion: calmly and deliberately, with small head held well up, and light-grey eyes widely-opened. She ignored her own relatives, and advanced straight towards Pattie. Then disappointment fell upon the infant mind.

"You'm not that poo-ar lickle girl. You'm drown-up,' she asserted.

"What a little darling!" murmured Pattie.

"All drown-up," repeated Dot, in profound disappointment.

"But I'm not grown up; truly I'm not. I am only a girl still, Dot. Not really grown up. And I love games of play. May I play with you sometimes? And I love reading stories aloud. May I read to you?"

"Pay glames and lead to me all day long," declared Dot, without an instant's hesitation. She seized Pattie's hand to draw her away.

"But, hallo, Dot,—you're forgetting me. Not a word for-poor old daddy!" protested her father.

Dot stopped and gave him a perfunctory kiss, then returned to Pattie.

"Pay glames and lead," she repeated. "Tome along."

Pattie looked at Mrs. Cragg.

"May I go?" she asked. "May I take care of Dot sometimes for you?"

Mrs. Cragg assented, not too graciously, and Pattie vanished, led by the fat little hands of Dot. Cragg looked at his wife.

"Well?" he said.

Mrs. Cragg tossed her head.

"Well, I just say the same, Mr. Cragg. I hold that a man's duty is to his own, and not to a pack of strangers. But if she's got to be here, she may as well be useful. If she likes to look after Dot, she's welcome; so long as she don't spoil the child worse than she's spoilt already. You've done enough that way, I hope. There's no managing her when she hears your voice. Not a child in the town is worse spoilt than Dot. And I say it's a shame."

"My dear, she's an uncommon good child. Why, Dot never cries."

"If she don't cry, she gets her own way a lot too much. You're for ever fussing about her. And if Pattie Dale is going to do the same, she'll be unbearable."

"Come, come, my dear. If people want a grievance, they can always make one."

"I suppose you mean to say that I'm making a grievance, Mr. Cragg!"

Mr. Cragg had had that thought in his mind, but he wisely held his tongue, and ventured on no further remarks.

Pattie spent a happy hour with Dot. As she had said, she dearly loved children, and Dot, though not pretty, was clever and winning and lovable. Few children, indeed, fail to be lovable, and Dot was not one of those few.

Pattie had been feeling very sore at heart and desolate; and nothing could well have comforted her more than Dot's soft arms round her neck, and Dot's smiling face close to her own. Before ten minutes were over the two had become fast friends; and Pattie knew that, though life in this house might mean divers rubs, and perhaps a great many harsh words, it would also mean a dear little friend and companion.

When Dot went to bed, Pattie had to go to tea with Mr. and Mrs. Cragg, and that event she had been dreading. Still, it could not be escaped, and she was quietly brave in meeting the duties of life, one after another, without needless fears and complainings. At the sight of her placid face, Cragg was aware of a satisfied feeling. Tête-à-tête meals with a person of Mrs. Cragg's temperament were apt to flag, since five times in six she was sure to be offended at something said or not said. Pattie's presence made a change. Mrs. Cragg seemed to be under some slight restraint, and she was not quite so tart as usual; while Cragg had one to whom he could make remarks, which he found to be an advantage.

But when tea was ended, somebody called Cragg away, and Pattie was left alone with Mrs. Cragg.

Mrs. Cragg eyed her curiously, expecting to see signs of embarrassment. There were not any, however. Pattie looked tired and sad, but not embarrassed.

"Shall I help to clear away the tea things?" she asked. "I always did at home."

"Well, yes, you may as well, I suppose."

Pattie at once set to work, with light, dexterous hands which made no noise, and Mrs. Cragg idly watched her.

"What made you and your father come to this place?" she demanded.

A faint flush rose in answer.

"We were leaving our old home, and father wanted to live in a country place."

"What made you leave your home? Where was it? How long did you live there?"

"A great many years. Ever since I was a little child."

"Then why should you have come away?"

"Father wished it."

"What for?" Mrs. Cragg was not troubled by delicate scruples when she wished to gain information.

"He had lost the work he used to do. There was no need for us to stay there any longer."

"What sort of work was it?"

"He was an accountant in a small bank—a branch bank."

"Where? And what was the name of the bank?"

Pattie was silent.

"Where was it, I say?"

"I don't think I ought to tell you, Mrs. Cragg. Father wished me not to talk of those days to anybody. He told me so when first we came."

"What for?"

"We had trouble there. He had, I mean. He did not tell me all. He had done nothing wrong. It was not that. It was something he could not help. And when we came away, he said I was not to talk about our last home. So I would rather not, please."

"But if you live with us, child, we've a right to know. Why, dear me, what rubbish! How can I tell that you're a proper person to have in the house, if you won't say more, or a nice companion for Dot? I never heard such nonsense in my life! Of course you've got to tell whatever we want to know. Your father might have been—anything—" as Pattie's quiet eyes gave a slight flash. "There mustn't be any mysteries. I shall just speak to Mr. Cragg."

"I am afraid I cannot tell more," Pattie said gently. "I must do what my father wished—even now."

"You've got to do what I wish, if you mean to stay in the house—that's certain!"

"I must do what father wished," repeated Pattie.

"It isn't a question now of what he wished, but of what Mr. Cragg and I choose. If you're going to be here, you've got to be open and

above-board. I can't abide secrets and mysteries. Don't you see, girl? Why, what do we know about you and your people? Haven't you got any uncles or aunts?"

"No; none."

"Nor any friends? It's they that ought to see after you. That's what I think."

"They don't know where I am. Father did not wish that they should. I am going to work for myself. As soon as possible I shall find something to do."

Mrs. Cragg tossed her head.

"You look like it! Who'd take such a child as you? If you have friends, you ought to write to them—not expect to be cared for by strangers. I never heard of such a way of going on! Of course they'll want to know where you are. And if your father did anything wrong—"

"My father did nothing wrong."

"They wouldn't visit it on you, at any rate," finished Mrs. Cragg. "You'd best tell me and Mr. Cragg all about it, and then we can advise you how to manage."

Pattie was silent.

"Well! D'you hear?" asked Mrs. Cragg sharply.

"Yes. I am very sorry; I can't do as you wish."

"Can't do what?" said Cragg, coming in.

"Who was it you went to see?" asked his wife.

That turned Cragg's thoughts, and he put no more questions. But Pattie knew that Mrs. Cragg would not let the matter drop.

CHAPTER VIII

A Search Unauthorised

FURTHER efforts on the part of Mrs. Cragg to find out Pattie's past history did not begin so soon as Pattie had feared.

The greater part of a week passed, on the whole quietly. There were many ways in which she could make herself useful, and she seldom overlooked them. Dot, from the first, became her abject slave, never content unless following her about; and Pattie could not have too much of Dot. The two were soon warmly devoted each to the other. Cragg could almost have found it in his heart to be jealous, when he saw how readily Dot would at any time quit him to go to Pattie. But he loved little Dot with too real a love not to be glad of anything that was for the child's good, and he knew that Pattie's influence would be for her good.

Mrs. Cragg speedily did become jealous, just as she had always been jealous of the child's greater love for Cragg. Her love was of a lower and smaller nature than his. She always liked to be first for her own

sake.

A few days after Pattie's coming to the house, young Waters called with a barrow full of goods, fished up out of the depth into which the building had sunk. No attempt had been made, or was likely to be made, to rescue aught from the greater depth, into which the main mass had poured; but a good many things had been brought up from the level where poor Dale himself had lain. Most of these were so hopelessly crushed and broken as to be worthless. This time, however, a small chest of drawers had been rescued, much damaged, yet with the drawers still full; and two boxes, one open, the other locked.

Mrs. Cragg scented a possible discovery on the instant. Mr. Cragg was away till dinnertime, and Pattie had started for a ramble with Dot, which was likely to keep her away at least another hour; so Mrs. Cragg felt safe. She had the things carried into an unoccupied room, told Waters to call again when her husband should be at home, and set herself to an examination. She was anxious to find out something as to Pattie's past, and for this purpose had already ransacked Pattie's room without avail. Here was a fresh chance.

The chest of drawers contained only clothes. Mrs. Cragg soon satisfied herself on this point. She rapidly pulled out the contents of each drawer in succession, returning the same with equal speed. Then she turned attention to the boxes.

The one which was open held only books. Mrs. Cragg glanced inside a few, to find upon the title-pages "J. Dale," or "Pattie Dale" nothing further. She would not waste more time in that direction. The other small box, very strongly made, was locked. Mrs. Cragg whipped out her bunch of keys, and tried one after another with eagerness. At first her efforts were useless, but all at once the lock yielded, a key turned, and the lid rose. Mrs. Cragg pulled it more widely open, and gazed upon the pile of papers within the box.

Across the top lay a large envelope, endorsed, "From Mr. Peterson," and at the head of the first letter inside was an address, "Sunnyside, Southville,—shire."

Mrs. Cragg looked through the letter. It bore a date two years before this time, and was very kind, even affectionate, begging Mr. Dale not to hurry back, but to take a few days' extra holiday if he felt inclined. Mrs. Cragg put that down and opened another. Much the same in kind. A third and a fourth still gave no information. Then she took up two or three more, and in one she found a difference. Instead of "Dear Mr. Dale," it began "Dear Sir"; instead of "Yours sincerely," it ended "Yours faithfully." Mrs. Cragg's eyes fell on a sentence near the beginning:

"Since you say that you have not done it, and declare yourself incapable of any such act, I can only reply that I sincerely wish things may be so. I have resolved not to prosecute, but it is impossible that I—"

The page ended here, and at this instant the opening of the front door awakened Mrs. Cragg to a sense of her position. She heard Dot's little shrill voice, and Pattie's softer tones asking somebody, "Where was Mrs. Cragg?" In a moment they might come in.

Mrs. Cragg had no strong objections to her present position from motives of truth and honour, but she did very much object to being found out, and she went hot all over with fright. There was no time to restore the letters to their envelope. She thrust them loosely into

the box, shut the lid, turned her key with some difficulty, drew it out, and dropped the bunch into her pocket. Then she whisked across the room to an old chiffonier in the farthest corner, and made believe to be hunting in a drawer.

"Ma-ma!" cried Dot's little voice, as the two came in; "Ma-ma, I'se had a clumble!"

"Jane said you were here," Pattie added. "Dot fell down and hurt her leg, and so I brought her home."

"And I didn't cly, ma-ma, not at all," protested Dot. "Pattie said I was blave. And my leg hurted—oh, ever so much."

"Oh!" Pattie's face changed as she saw the chest of drawers and the boxes.

"Yes, those were brought by young Waters." Mrs. Cragg was too busy to look Pattie in the face. "I told him to put them here, and to come again to be paid. Rubbish mostly, I suppose. You'll have to see if they are worth keeping."

"Yes; thank you. I think I had better have them in my room."

"They'll lumber you up there."

"It doesn't matter. May I have something to put on Dot's leg?"

"How did she come to do such a stupid thing?"

"But I wasn't scupid, not one bit," declared Dot in an injured tone. "It was a dreat scupid dog what runned against me, and clumbled me down."

Pattie devoted herself to displaying and doctoring the grazed little leg. Dot talked vigorously all the while, with a goodly amount of self-praise on the score of her own courage. She was very proud of not having been betrayed into tears; and presently she stumped off, anxious to display her lameness to others. Pattie stood looking at the two boxes.

"That one's locked," remarked Mrs. Cragg, unable to let the matter alone.

"Yes."

"What's in it?"

"I don't know. It was my father's. He always had it locked. He kept his papers there."

"You'll have to read them now, of course."

Pattie was silent.

"You'll have to read them all now," repeated the other.

"I don't—know."

"Why, it's yours now. Of course it is. Whose else could it be? Don't you understand? You'll find out in that box everything your father didn't tell you."

Mrs. Cragg meant to awaken the girl's curiosity, but her words had a precisely opposite effect.

"Yes, perhaps. But I don't wish to find out anything my father did not wish me to know—anything he did not tell me."

"Really! I never did see such a girl. Why, everybody reads other people's papers after they're dead."

"Do they? I am not sure that I shall. At any rate, I shall not yet—not in a hurry. I think I will wait."

"There might be something or other that wants attending to. How do you know there isn't money inside?"

"No, he would have told me that."

"I suppose you've got the key?"

"I have—his keys." Pattie's eyes were full.

"And you don't mean to unlock it? You don't mean to see what is inside?"

"Not yet. I'll wait and think. I don't feel sure what I ought to do."

"Why, of course you ought to do what anybody else would do. As if it made any difference now—to him, I mean. Everybody does it always. The papers are yours, and you'll be expected to know what they are about."

Pattie moved towards the door.

"I should like to wait," she repeated gently. "It cannot matter to anybody except myself. I will have the things in my room—by-and-by."

"Well, I can only say I never came across such a girl!" declared Mrs. Cragg aloud, as Pattie went away.

CHAPTER IX

What Mr. Peterson Had Said

THE sentence which Mrs. Cragg had read haunted her.

Not that she was able to recall the precise words. Her eyes had run over the lines hastily, and the fright of Pattie's unexpected return had left confused impressions. She was, however, disposed rather to magnify than to minimise what had been written, and one portion of the sentence recurred clearly, "I have resolved not to prosecute."

Then there had been something for which this Mr. Peterson might have prosecuted Mr. Dale. Something so serious in its nature, that Mr. Dale could have been had up in a court of justice, and possibly could even have been condemned to penal servitude. In which case Pattie would have been the child of a convict.

Mrs. Cragg leaped in a hurry to this conclusion, with very little to build upon. She found some gratification in it. Had she not taken a dislike to Mr. Dale at first sight? Had she not known by instinct that he was not a dependable person? Had she not warned Mr. Cragg to have

nothing to do with him? Here was proof of her sagacity.

No very decisive proof, after all, when she came to think it over. Mrs. Cragg did not for a moment doubt her own sagacity, or the correctness of her own hasty conclusions—people of hasty and shallow judgment seldom do—but she was aware that the reasons which satisfied herself might not satisfy everybody. They would not, for instance, satisfy her husband. So she became impatient for further proof. The idea of reading that letter through took hold of her, and she argued with herself that she had a right to do so. She and her husband were giving Pattie a home—at all events for a time—and if Pattie refused to answer questions as to her past history, Mrs. Cragg had a right to find out what she wished to know in some other way.

So Mrs. Cragg stated to herself. She did not feel inclined to state the same to Pattie, nor had she the smallest intention of being discovered in the act of reading a letter not her own. Her "rights" would wear a different aspect at such a moment. She did, however, intend to see the letter again.

After all, she argued, it was only fair to Pattie and to Pattie's father that she should do so. Now that the notion was in her head, she could not get rid of it, and she might be doing an injustice to an innocent man. The rest of the letter would, of course, either confirm or destroy her impression; therefore it was desirable that she should read it.

Whether Mrs. Cragg believed this line of reasoning may be doubted. She said to herself that she did.

Difficulties thickened when she had made up her mind. During several days she could find no opportunity. Dot was unable to go out, except for a turn, on account of her leg, and Pattie seldom cared to go alone. She was willing to undertake any errand for Mrs. Cragg, but she always came back quickly. Besides, so long as Dot was to the fore, Mrs. Cragg had to be cautious. Dot might be too lama for a walk, but she was not too lame to go stumping about the place, poking her sharp little nose into every room in succession. If Dot's keen eyes should detect her "ma-ma" in Pattie's room, Dot's high-pitched voice would cheerfully proclaim the fact. Mrs. Cragg preferred to avoid this. She wished it not to be known that she ever went inside Pattie's door. So she had no choice but to wait.

Dot's leg mended, and at length a day came when it was decreed that she might venture on a good ramble. Pattie was to take her, and Mrs. Cragg fixed on a time of the day when no one else would be about. She saw them off the premises, waited for Dot's shrill little tones to die away, and then betook herself to Pattie's room, bolting the door inside. The box of papers was no longer where it had first been placed, under a small table. Mrs. Cragg took a look round, and went to the cupboard, within which she at once descried it, below a pile of cardboard boxes.

"What nonsense to put it there!" said Mrs. Cragg.

The cardboard boxes had to be dislodged, and then her own key had to be fitted. It turned easily, and Mrs. Cragg, lifting the lid, drew out the two or three letters which she had laid loosely at the top. As she did this, terror sent all the blood from her face.

For Cragg's voice sounded outside the room, calling:

"Dora! My dear! Where are you?"

Mrs. Cragg dared not stir, even to restore the letters.

"My dear!" called Cragg again; and then—"Pattie! Pat—tie, where are you?"

He rapped at Pattie's door twice, tried to open it, and rapped a third time. Another step then became audible outside, and Mrs. Cragg turned sick with fright. Could it be Pattie already? Somehow Mrs. Cragg's "rights" did not look so clear at that moment.

"Ann, where's Mrs. Cragg?"

Then it was only the girl, not Pattie. A revulsion of relief swept over Mrs. Cragg.

"I don't know, sir. I think she's gone out."

"And Miss Dale?"

"Miss Pattie's out with Dot."

"Does Miss Pattie always leave her door locked?"

"No, sir, she don't."

"You're sure Mrs. Cragg is out?"

"No, sir, I ain't sure. Only, she don't seem to be nowhere."

"Well, when she comes in tell her I want to speak to her."

The voices ceased, but Mrs. Cragg could not at once recover herself. She thrust the letters into her pocket, shut down the lid, and tried to turn the key. It would not lock so readily as it would unlock, but after several ineffectual struggles it gave way. Mrs. Cragg heard the click of the hasp with delight. She put the keys into her pocket, hastily lifted back the cardboard boxes, stood up, and listened. Steps again. Mrs. Cragg's heart went into her mouth. This time it was Pattie and Dot. No mistake about it.

"You'm doing to dive me that dee-ar lickle sodger, Pattie?"

"Yes, darling. I'll get my purse, and I'll buy him for you."

"He's dot a yed coat on, Pattie."

"Such a grand red coat," echoed Pattie.

Mrs. Cragg's heart stood still. Pattie turned the handle, and the door refused to open.

"Why, it is locked! How funny!"

"Ma-ma doned it," Dot said promptly.

"Why should ma-ma lock it, Dot? How funny!" repeated Pattie. "Something must be wrong with the door, I think. It seemed all right this morning. Well, never mind. I'll get you the red soldier by-and-by, when I can have my purse. We'll take another little turn now, till ma-ma comes home, and then we'll tell her about the lock. Come, dear."

Again the voices ceased. Mrs. Cragg strained her hearing to listen. She heard the front door open and close. Then she slipped out, shutting the door behind her, and fleeing upstairs to her own room. She would not attempt at once to read the letters in her possession, but put them into an under pocket, and hurriedly donned her walking things. On her way to the front door she encountered the girl.

"Please, 'm, Mr. Cragg wants to see yer."

"Where is he, Ann?"

"I dunno. He come all round, hunting for yer."

"Oh, well; I can go out that way."

"And he tried to get into Miss Pattie's room, and he couldn't open the door. She was out, and the door was fastened."

"What on earth could it have been fastened for?" asked Mrs. Cragg, trying to speak with indifference. She was conscious of failure, however, conscious of a very red face and a disquieted manner, and she saw, or thought she saw, that the girl eyed her curiously. She would have preferred to avoid an interview with her husband just then, but no doubt he would ask later if his message had been given, and she did not wish to arouse a spirit of inquiry. So she walked through the warehouse, hoping not to meet Cragg. Her hopes were vain, for she came plump upon him. Cragg looked up at her abstractedly, and then his gaze grew interested.

"Has anything happened, my dear?"

Mrs. Cragg tossed her head, and increased in redness.

"Anything happened! What should happen, I should like to know?"

"I thought you looked as if something was not right."

"Well, something isn't. I don't want to be kept here, wasting my time."

Mr. Cragg felt disposed to make a useless remark on the small amount of time thus wasted. He refrained because it would be useless.

"If you've anything to say, you can make haste. I want to go out."

"Ann told me you were out some time ago."

"That don't hinder me wanting to go again now." Mrs. Cragg flattered herself that she had avoided telling an untruth, not realising the falsity of that little word "again."

"Where have you been?"

"I haven't been far; I'm going farther now. Anything else you want to know? I've got no time to waste."

"My dear"—Cragg spoke nervously—"I want to show you this. I want to know if it really is yours, because if it is—"

He held up a bill before her eyes, and Mrs. Cragg shoved it aside.

"Really, Mr. Cragg, I haven't got time for bills this morning."

"I'm afraid you'll have to find time. It's a bill 'rendered,' you see. No items given. You must have had it by you, unpaid, for some time. And not only that, but you will have to find the money too, if this sort of thing goes on. I cannot meet such demands."

"Pooh, Mr. Cragg! A paltry fifteen pounds! And everybody knows what you're worth."

"A good deal better than I know it myself, most likely. What are the fifteen pounds for?"

"How should I know? Whose is it? Wakeforth & Co.? I suppose it is my green velveteen jacket, and—a few other things."

"Dora, you will have to make a change. I am not a rich man. My business has been less successful the last two years than it used to be. There are more rivals now, and younger men with newer methods. I cannot afford this sort of thing."

"And you must needs go and build houses that tumble down in a week and take up people that aren't your own!"

"The first was a mistake; the second was a duty."

Mrs. Cragg walked away, and Cragg, with a hopeless gesture, thrust the bill into his pocket. What could he do?

Some hours later, in the course of that same day, Mrs. Cragg sat alone in her bedroom. She had taken the precaution to lock her door. Mr. Cragg was still busy in the warehouse, and Dot was occupied with Pattie. She had waited till now to examine the letters, and all three lay upon her knee.

The first of the three which she read was as follows:—

"DEAR DALE,—"

"Will you come round this evening at eight? I have something of great importance to say. I hope from the bottom of my heart that it is nothing—that all will prove to be right. But I am very uneasy. Pray come punctually."

"Yours sincerely,"
"J. PETERSON."

The second letter bore a date some three or four days later.

"DEAR DALE,—"

"I have gone into the matter very closely, making the most careful examination in every possible quarter; and, grieved as I am to say such words, everything points the same way. No one except yourself has had the opportunity. The whole suspicion rests upon you, and upon you alone."

"I see no other possibility. If a loophole existed, no matter how improbable, I would give you the full benefit of the doubt; but absolutely none is to be found. What have you to say? Better far, from every point of view, that you should make a clean breast of the whole!"

"Tell me that you have been in difficulties; that sudden temptation seized you; that your strength was inadequate

to resist; that you have done wrongly, and repent—tell me so much, and I am ready to forgive. Make frank confession, and though I cannot retain you in your present post, I will see what can be done. I will do my best to give you a fair opportunity to retrieve your character. For the sake of your child, as well as for your own sake, I entreat you to confess all."

"Yours ever,"
"J. PETERSON."

The third letter was that at which Mrs. Cragg had already glanced. It ran thus:—

"DEAR SIR,—"

"I have received and read yours with the deepest concern, and there is now little more to be said."

"Unhappily, I am unable to feel as I could wish to do about your assurances. Everything points in the one direction, and I fear there is no doubt whatever of your guilt."

"Since you say that you have not done it, and declare yourself incapable of any such act, I can only reply that I sincerely wish things may be so. I have resolved not to prosecute, but it is impossible that I should keep you on in your old post. Much as I regret to have to dismiss you, after all these years that we have worked together, I have no choice."

"Your next quarter's stipend will be paid in advance, but I cannot ask you to come again to the counting-house, nor can I wish to see you again. It is a sad ending to so long a friendship. The loss of the money to me personally is a minor matter. If, by-and-by, you come to a different mind, and if you are willing to make full confession, you will find me ready to act the part of a friend, and forgiveness will await you. Not, of course, re-instatement. That is impossible, for the sake of others."

I shall mention to no one the reason of your dismissal; but I fear that the matter will to some extent ooze out, through the various inquiries which it has been necessary to make."

"Yours faithfully,"
"J. PETERSON."

CHAPTER X

Dot's Opinion

"BY the bye, Pattie, were you out this morning about half-past eleven?" Mr. Cragg put the question at tea-time, nothing leading up to it.

"Half-past eleven! Yes; just about then I took Dot for a walk."

"I couldn't find Mrs. Cragg, so I tried to find you, and your door

was locked."

Mrs. Cragg writhed, conscious of a change of colour.

"Was it? I remember. I came back with Dot to get my purse, and I could not get in either. Somebody must have locked it by accident, or else the bolt may have slipped. It seemed all right a little later, when we came back again."

"You don't know who locked it, my dear?" Cragg noticed his wife's uncomfortable look.

"How should I know, pray?" demanded Mrs. Cragg.

"Somebody probably knows. It might be you or any one."

"As if I troubled myself with Pattie's concerns! I'm much too busy."

"Pattie's concerns have to be attended to, like everybody else's concerns, now and then," Cragg said, with a kind look at the girl. Pattie was gazing at Mrs. Cragg, and did not see the look. A recollection had come to mind of finding her cupboard that afternoon in a disordered state. Pattie was very neat, and she always knew exactly where each article in box, or drawer, or cupboard lay. She had supposed that the girl had been turning out her things for dusting purposes. But the discomfited expression and reddened colouring of Mrs. Cragg's face suggested something different. Pattie, however, said nothing. "Anyhow, I'll take a look at the lock, and see if it wants oiling," remarked Cragg,—"eh, Pattie?"

"Thank you very much," Pattie answered; and the subject was dropped.

Now that Mrs. Cragg had gained the information she wanted, the question arose—how to use it? She could not tell her husband what she had learnt, because she dared not tell him by what mode she had learnt it. She dared not refer to Pattie's past in the presence of Pattie. The questions that she had meant to put to Pattie became impossible, in the face of her own secret knowledge. She had small command of feature, and she knew that at any moment her face might betray her.

It was disgusting, she said to herself. To think of a girl, who might have been a convict's daughter but for the forbearance of this Mr. Peterson, fondling and petting Dot half the day, sitting at their table, being called "Miss Pattie" by the servant—for upon that Mr. Cragg had insisted. The whole thing was really too bad.

These thoughts made Mrs. Cragg additionally unpleasant to Pattie, and Pattie noticed the fact with some wonder. She supposed that Mrs. Cragg was growing tired of her presence in the house, and she began to cast about in her mind where to look for work. When she consulted Cragg, he put the matter aside, and said, "No hurry yet awhile." But Pattie did not fall in with this view.

Hers was not a suspicious temperament. Although the idea had flashed across her, in connection with Mrs. Cragg's look and with the fact of her disturbed cupboard, that Mrs. Cragg might have been examining something in her room, and might have locked the door, she had not encouraged the notion, but had done her best to dismiss it. She had a horror of suspecting falsely.

That she would sooner or later leave the Craggs, and go out to make her own way, was settled in her mind, though she knew that it might not be possible for a while. When the time should come, her trouble

would be having to say good-bye to Dot. The child had twisted herself in and out among Pattie's heart-strings, and life apart from Dot wore a forlorn aspect.

On Sunday afternoon Dot was always supposed to be in Mrs. Cragg's charge, while the nursery-maid went to church. Of late, being with her mother had really meant being with Pattie. Next Sunday Mrs. Cragg, having eaten a heavy dinner, was, or appeared to be, particularly sleepy, and she sat nodding drowsily on the sofa.

The sleepiness was partly put on, for Mrs. Cragg was deep in cogitation. She had not yet restored the letters to their box in Pattie's cupboard. If she could not put them back soon, she would have to burn them, for fear of accidental discovery; but that she was reluctant to do, for more reasons than one —and by no means for Pattie's sake. There had been some talk of letting Dot go to the children's service with Pattie, and Mrs. Cragg presently asked, with a yawn,—

"Are you going to take Dot to church?"

"Dot would like it, if I may."

"I don't care if you do. You'll have to be in good time. And Dot must sit still."

"Dot will behave like a mouse. Yes, we will go early. It is too soon yet. The bells won't begin for some time."

"Tell me that tory adain," begged Dot. "About wicked naughty Gazi."

"But you know it, Dot. Suppose you tell me instead."

Dot pulled herself upright, and assumed a solemn air.

"Gazi was a naughty wicked tory-teller," she said. "Tory-tellers am always wicked. And when Lisha asked him, 'Where'd he'd been and wented to?'—Gazi said he'd not been wented nowhere. And then he got all twite whited all over him."

"But he had been somewhere, hadn't he?"

"Oh,—m-yes,—he'd been and wented after that other man, what was made well. He was naughty, too, only he didn't tell no tories, and then he was good. And he wanted for to give Lisha fings,—lots and lots of fings, and nice focks and ever so much pennies. And Lisha wouldn't have nofink; 'n so Gazi thoughted he'd go an' get somefink nice. And he wented and telled a lot of big tories—big, big tories," repeated Dot impressively. "And so he gotted all white, all over hims."

"That was his punishment, wasn't it?"

"Him's punishment," repeated Dot.

"Dot, you don't mean ever to tell stories, do you?"

Dot shook her head vehemently.

"Cause I'd get all white."

"I think if you told stories, you would have to be punished in some way. It might not be in the same way as Gehazi. But God is our Father, you know, and a Father has to punish His little children when they are

naughty, so as to make them learn to be good. You don't want to be naughty, do you, and to make God sorry?"

Another shake.

"Does drown-up peoples evern tell tories now?"

"Sometimes, I'm afraid."

"Does ma-ma?"

"Hush, Dot. You must never ask such silly questions. The question that you have to ask is, 'Does Dot?'"

Dot was not easily turned from her purpose. She said, in a loud and clear whisper:

"I know twite well when ma-ma telled a wicked tory. When she saided she was out and she wasn't. 'Cause she was in your room, own Pattie darlin'."

Pattie was startled.

"No, Dot, no. You are talking nonsense. Hush!"

Dot spoke more energetically, running her words together.

"I not spawking nonsense. Ma-ma was in, and she saided she was out. Ann telled me. 'Cause Ann saw ma-ma come out."

Mrs. Cragg sat up with a jerk.

"Really, Pattie, if you encourage the child in that sort of impertinence, I shall have—I think the less you're with her the better for Dot. She is growing insufferable, and it is your fault."

Pattie met the angry gaze quietly.

"I am not encouraging Dot indeed," she said.

"Ma-ma angly," remarked Dot.

"If I hear any more such impertinence—mind, Dot, I mean what I say—if you say such things again, I shan't let you be with Pattie. So you'd better take care."

Dot hung her head, and tears came to her eyes.

"I am sure Dot did not mean to be rude, did you, Dot?" asked Pattie, even while it flashed through her mind that Mrs. Cragg had made no attempt to deny the truth of Dot's assertions. But then, perhaps, Mrs. Cragg did not think it worth while. "Come, I think it is time for us to get ready for church. If I take you, will you be a good girl?"

"Vely dood," Dot declared cheerfully, restored to her usual spirits, and the two went off together. Mrs. Cragg remained gloomily behind.

CHAPTER XI

In the Very Act

DOT'S words had given something of a shock to Mrs. Cragg, and now she was sorry that she had taken notice of them. For her side of the matter, it might have been better if she had seemed not to hear what was said. Her anger would only serve to fix the recollection upon the child's mind, which otherwise might have passed away; and probably also Pattie would not forget.

When the two had gone to church, she would be secure of a quiet hour, the girl being out also. She meant then to restore the letters. That done, she would have no more to do with Pattie's possessions.

But when a person gets into a coil through wrong-doing, it is not easy to get out again.

Pattie and Dot disappeared, and Mrs. Cragg waited for the bells to cease. Mr. Cragg always went at this time for a country walk, and she believed that he had started.

Just as she meant to move, Cragg came in. While he was within reach Mrs. Cragg dared take no steps. She waited with ill-concealed impatience, answered tartly when he spoke, and asked whether he did not mean to have a walk.

"It's a new plan, your stopping in Sunday afternoon," said she. "I thought you always wanted fresh air, not to sit lounging about here!"

"You seem in a great hurry to get rid of me."

"Well, you always do go out on Sunday. Why shouldn't you?"

"I do generally. I am not feeling quite the thing this afternoon—a little out of order,—and I thought I'd take a quiet time."

"Fresh air's likely to do you good."

"Presently, perhaps. Has Pattie said anything to you about her father's papers?"

Mrs. Cragg reddened.

"Why should she? What have I got to do with them? Of all suspicious men, you are the very most—"

"My dear, what can you mean?" Cragg gazed in surprise. "I do not see anything to vex you in what I have said. Nor do I understand what you have in mind. There is no suspicion. I have asked a simple question. Has Pattie said anything?"

"Nothing particular. Why should she?"

"I do not understand her feeling about that box. She objects to examining the contents."

"Yes. It's ridiculous of her!"

"Then you do know?"

"I didn't see what you were driving at. She told me that. The girl's an idiot. I said it was absurd, and she was as obstinate as a mule. Of course her father's papers are hers now, and she ought to read them."

"I should have said that she ought. There might be something that he would wish done. But she has a feeling of delicacy. Perhaps that feeling might be more frequent—with advantage—as to those who are gone."

"I don't know what you mean. I know what Pattie means. Feeling of delicacy, indeed! Stuff and nonsense! Pattie knows that her father was a scamp, and she doesn't want to make it known, that's all."

"My dear! Do you know what you are saying? What reason can you have for such a notion?"

"I know! There's a lot too much mystery. People don't go hiding up things when there's nothing to hide. I believe he was a downright bad man. And I believe Pattie knows it too. That's why she won't tell us about him, and why she pretends she doesn't want to read his papers. It's because she knows things will come out, and she doesn't want to have to tell."

Cragg was silent. That some mystery existed, that some shade lay over Dale's past, he could not deny. But he thought of Dale's dying words—"Remember! I did not do it. In the sight of God I say that. It was not me. I didn't do it."

"My dear, you are mistaken. Dale may have been unfortunate. He was not to blame, I am sure."

"And I'm sure just the other way, Mr. Cragg. Some day you'll find out that I am right."

Cragg remained lost in thought. Then he stood up slowly, as if disliking further argument, and made his way from the room. Mrs. Cragg watched impatiently for his going out, and she had to wait nearly half an hour.

At last the coast was clear.

The letters and the bunch of keys were in readiness. Mrs. Cragg hurried across the passage, entered Pattie's room, rushed to the cupboard, pulled away the cardboard boxes, fitted in the key, and turned it.

She lifted the lid, and almost fell backwards in her amazement. The box was empty.

Had Pattie emptied it? If so, for what reason?

Mrs. Cragg sat upon her heels, staring bewilderedly. What to do next was the question. Should she restore the stolen letters to the empty box, trusting that Pattie would suppose herself to have overlooked them? Should she take them away and burn them?

After considerable hesitation, Mrs. Cragg decided on the latter course as the safer of the two. She slipped the letters into her pocket, and locked—or tried to lock—the box.

But the key refused to turn.

Mrs. Cragg struggled, and her struggles were in vain. Again and again she strove, and the refractory key had the best of it. Time was getting on. In a few minutes Pattie and Dot might return. Mrs. Cragg waxed desperate. There was nothing for it but to leave the box unlocked. Pattie might forget, and might imagine that she had done

this herself. She tried to pull out the key, meaning to decamp with all speed.

But the key refused to be pulled out.

It was attached to a large bunch, well known in the household as belonging to herself. Mrs. Cragg pulled, hauled, coaxed, struggled—all in vain. The key remained firmly fixed. It could neither be turned nor withdrawn. Mrs. Cragg, heated and alarmed, tried to loosen it from the bunch. The ring was of a new patent make, difficult to manage, and in her flurry she could not open it.

Then the front door creaked, and Dot's little voice asked in shrill accents:

"Were I a dood lickle girl, Pattie?"

"Very good, Dot."

"Nor I didn't fidget, nor make no noise, Pattie?"

"No, darling. Dot was the best little girl that ever was. I'll take Dot again to church another Sunday."

The bedroom door opened, and Mrs. Cragg stood up, crimson and defiant. Since she could no longer hope to escape detection, she resolved to take refuge in bluster.

"Well," she said, with a harsh laugh; "so you thought you'd cheat me out of it, did you? You thought you'd keep me from finding out anything, eh? But you haven't. I've been one too many for you this time. I've found out what I wanted to know—just that, exactly —and you'd better have told me at once, and made no fuss. Pretending that you didn't mean to read the letters, and then doing it on the sly, as soon as ever my back was turned! I understand what it all means. But you're too late, with all your cunning."

Pattie grew as pale as if she, and not Mrs. Cragg, had been the guilty person. Her lips parted, and a grieved tremor passed over them. She turned, without a word, and went to the door.

"Dot, dear, run away. Run to the nursery. I'll come there presently."

"I wants to tome into Pattie's loom."

"No, not now. I am busy, Dot."

"P'ease do let me," entreated the little voice.

"No, dear. Dot must be good and run away." Pattie came back, shut the door, and stood looking at Mrs. Cragg, her face full of wonderment. The cupboard door was open, the cardboard boxes were displaced, the bunch of keys hung from the lock of the open and empty tin box.

"You needn't have been at all that bother and fuss—sending Dot away. It don't matter. I don't care who knows," declared Mrs. Cragg hardily, while unable to meet Pattie's gaze. "I told you I'd a right, and so I have. If you don't choose to tell me things, I've got to find them out for myself, that's all. And I mean to do it. I shall do it again next time there's something I ought to know. I've a right, and I mean to do it. It don't matter Dot nor anybody knowing."

"I'm so sorry—oh, so sorry!" murmured Pattie. Tears filled her eyes.

"I didn't think you could."

"You took mighty good care to empty the box, anyway. I s'pose you thought you'd make sure I shouldn't find out your secrets. But I've been one too many for you."

"I did not empty the box because of that—because I ever could have dreamt that you would look." Pattie spoke with difficulty. "How could I think of such a thing? Mr. Cragg was speaking to me about the letters a day or two ago. He said I might feel free to read them all, and he advised me to do it. He said he thought I ought. And I could not feel as he did. How could I know what my father would like? I was afraid of being made in the end to do what Mr. Cragg wished—and what I could not feel to be right. And so—I took all the letters out, and—I burnt them. I took them into the kitchen, and put them into the stove."

"Then you're a greater fool than I thought you even!" Mrs. Cragg replied roughly. "Why, there might be money—there might be something written to yourself."

"No. Mr. Cragg said that too, and I looked through all the packets carefully—not reading, but just seeing the names and dates. There was no money anywhere, and there were no papers for me. None at all. All of them were letters to my father, and most were quite old—written a great many years ago. They were not meant for me to see. And you—you would have read them!" Pattie said this in a tone of unbelieving amazement. "You would have read them! You couldn't, surely, have meant to do that!"

A faint sense of shame kept Mrs. Cragg silent. Pattie came a step nearer.

"If Dot had seen—only think, if little Dot had seen!" she said. "Dot—who ought only to know you as true! Think—if she had known!"

"A baby like her! As if it mattered!"

"But it does matter—very much. Promise me that Dot shall never hear about this."

Mrs. Cragg broke into a laugh.

"And you are not sorry! You do not mind! Not in the very least."

There was a short silence. Mrs. Cragg had some ado to keep up her hardness before that grieved face.

"It's all your fault," she said at length. "You've been past everything with your fancies, not telling anything I'd a right to know, and pretending you couldn't read the letters. As if everybody didn't read other people's letters when they're dead! And so of course I thought I'd see for myself. There was no reason why I shouldn't. Mr. Cragg and I are giving you a home, and we have a right to know about you."

"Not to find it out in that way," said Pattie gravely. "And it was no pretending. I have thought it wrong to read the letters. Other people thinking differently did not make it right for me. I could not do what I felt to be wrong."

CHAPTER XII

Those Three Letters

Pattie pointed to the keys hanging from the japanned tin box.

"Those are yours—not mine," she said.

"I can't get them out. The key has stuck."

"When did you find that you could unlock my box?" Pattie's quietness had a mastery over Mrs. Cragg, subduing her vehemence, and this question received an answer.

"I found the other day that I'd got a key to fit."

"What day?"

"When the boxes first came. I found it out directly."

"And you read—did you read anything?"

"Not then—not that day, I mean." Mrs. Cragg wondered at herself for tamely answering these queries, yet she went on doing so.

"But another day you did?"

"One or two letters."

"That was what you meant just now, when you said you had found what you wanted to know." Pattie had to sit down, for her limbs gave way under her. "And to-day—you meant to read more letters."

"No, I didn't. I meant just to put them back—the ones I had taken. I didn't want to keep them."

"Where are they?"

Mrs. Cragg brought the three sheets out of her pocket, and gave them to Pattie. The girl had grown white.

"You have read these?"

"Yes; I didn't see why I shouldn't,"—with another attempt to brazen it out. "I don't see why I shouldn't,—if you wouldn't tell me anything. It was your own fault—being so obstinate."

"If you have read them, I must read them too."

Mrs. Cragg fidgeted uneasily. Pattie sat motionless, her eyes travelling down one page after another.

"Yes," she said at the end, with a deep sigh. "That was what brought us away. I see it now. He was accused of something—and I guessed it partly. I was told, but of course I did not believe what I heard. And my father never explained. He only said it was a mistake, and he was not to blame. And I believed him—because I knew what he was. I knew he could not have done the thing he was accused of. You did not know him, and so you could not tell. And he wanted to spare me knowing about this. He knew it would make me unhappy, and so he kept it to himself. And you—you could find it out for yourself—you could pry into another's secrets! I can't say much to you, because Mr. Cragg has been so good to me, and because just now I depend upon you. But—after this,

I cannot depend much longer. I must make a change as soon as possible. You have been very very cruel!"

Pattie hid her face.

"I don't see, for my part, what you've got to make a fuss about," remarked Mrs. Cragg uncomfortably. "I don't see that you need bother. It isn't more than you knew before."

"It is—much more!"

"Anyhow, I won't tell. There's no need that I should. If you like to burn those letters, nobody will hear a word."

"Ah!" and Pattie drew a long breath. "Yes —to-day you feel like that. But—another day—"

Pattie's tone was sorrowfully distrustful.

"But I promise I won't say anything. If I promise—"

Mrs. Cragg stopped. She knew suddenly that her promise had no weight, could have no weight, in Pattie's eyes. She had shown herself to be deceitful. Pattie could feel no confidence in what she might say. This fact struck home. Mrs. Cragg was unpleasantly conscious of distrust in Pattie's face. Her tone changed.

"You'll go next and tell Mr. Cragg, of course."

"No. Not what you have done. That is for you to tell him—not me. I shall tell him what I have learnt about my father, and nothing more. I shall tell him that I have read three letters, and that all the rest are burnt."

"He'll want to know why you didn't burn those three, too."

"I don't think so. Men are not so curious." Pattie spoke with unconscious rebuke. "If he should ask, I need not say much. I think, if I were you, I should feel that I ought to tell him everything. But that is for you—not for me. I have only to speak to him about what concerns my father and me."

"I can't get that key out." Mrs. Cragg spoke curtly, yet in her voice there was a new note, a something like regret.

Pattie knelt down and worked patiently at the lock. It was a long business. For more than five minutes her efforts were in vain. Then at last the key yielded, and she handed the bunch to Mrs. Cragg. After which she stooped, and pressed her lips to the lid. Mrs. Cragg waited uneasily, longing to escape, yet hardly knowing how to do so.

"Pattie, you have behaved uncommonly nice about it," she said at length. "And—I don't mind saying that I didn't mean any harm. I thought I'd a right—and I say so still. But I didn't mean any harm."

Pattie tried to speak, and failed. Tears were running over her cheeks.

"I don't see, for my part, why you should fuss about it. I don't see that it matters. What difference can it make now—about what those letters say?"

"No difference—to you—or to any one except me. Only I know better what it meant—what he had to go through. He bore it all so patiently—never

a hard word about anybody. And all the time he was accused of what he had never done. And I loved him so—I love him! It doesn't matter to you—not the very least. It does to me—more than anything in all the world."

"But—" and Mrs. Cragg came to a pause.

"I don't know how to bear it. And any time it may come out—and people will believe that he did what he never could have done."

"Only, you can't be sure—you don't really know."

"He told me himself. I do know. You cannot know," Pattie said bitterly. "And if it comes out, he will not be here to defend himself. He cannot explain how things were."

"But you don't think I would go and make it known now, do you?"

Pattie stood up. She had been kneeling by the box hitherto. Her lips moved, but no sound passed them.

"Why should I? It wouldn't do any good. I wanted to know—because I thought I'd a right. But you might be sure that I wouldn't tell anybody else."

"How can I be sure?"

"Why, what should make me tell?"

"I do not know what should make you not tell."

"Only, if I promise—"

A look of distrust again.

"You needn't put on that sort of air. If I promise that I'll never tell anybody what I know—and if I mean it—"

"You do not mean to say anything to-day. But another day, if you happened to be vexed, and wished to show that you were, you would tell the whole. It would be only natural—for you!" Pattie glanced at the keys, which still hung from Mrs. Cragg's hand.

There lay the gist of the matter. Mrs. Cragg had deceived her. For a long while to come Pattie could never feel sure that she was not being again deceived by Mrs. Cragg.

If Mrs. Cragg had never been abashed before, she was so now before that tear-stained face with its truthful gaze. There was no unkindness in Pattie's expression, no lack of forgiveness; but there was entire lack of confidence. Her look said plainly what her words implied,—how could she feel sure? Mrs. Cragg had proved herself untrustworthy. That fact once shown, trust in the person concerned becomes a thing impossible. There may be kindness, forgiveness, pity—there may even be an appearance of trust put on, for one reason or another—but real trust is out of the question.

Nothing more was seen of Pattie until half-past five o'clock, when they were wont to meet for a more substantial meal than on other days. Dot was always present at tea-time, and on Sunday she reckoned upon extra sweets and cakes, as well as upon extra leisure on the part of Mr. Cragg to pet and spoil her. Pattie was silent, and looked grave, and her eyelids were reddened, but otherwise manner was as usual. She

sat with her back to the light, so that Mr. Cragg did not quickly note the signs of tears. Dot claimed all his attention, as she eagerly related how she had gone to church, and how she had been "dood," and how Pattie had praised her. After which she launched into a description of what a lot the Vicar had "talked," and how Pattie had told her to listen, "so's I can tell you, dadda, all about it," she beamingly declared in the intervals of cake.

"Tell me, Dot, what did the clergyman say?"

"Lots," declared Dot, eyeing the jam.

"Well, let's have it. Make haste, because I'm going to church this evening, and so is Pattie, and I want to hear about the afternoon sermon."

Dot did what some older people are sometimes capable of doing. Since memory failed to recall the address in question, she calmly substituted something else.

"Gazi went and telled a wicked tory, and got hims whited all over," she asserted.

"No, Dot, it wasn't that," Pattie interposed. She felt the subject a dangerous one under the circumstances. "Not Gehazi—you're forgetting. That was what we talked about before we went to church. The Vicar preached something different. Don't you remember? About the little boat on the lake."

Dot declined to remember, and her small head was shaken with a positive air.

"Gazi was a wicked wicked mans, and he wented and telled a wicked wicked tory. And when he done that, Lisha made him all white, and he went off and he was most dreadful sorry; and lots of peoples tell tories, dad, and they'se all got to be whited."

"All right, don't stop the child," said Cragg, when Pattie would have spoken. "I like her to speak out what is in her little mind. After all, the important question is what has made an impression on her, not what might make an impression on you or me. Go on, Dot. What else did Gehazi do?"

Pattie would not look towards Mrs. Cragg, and Mrs. Cragg, remembering former errors, held herself in.

"He wented and he got focks and coats and lots of fings, and he hided them away, and he saided it was Lisha what had sented him, and Lisha didn't. It was all a bad tory, dadda. And Lisha was dreadful angry, and so Gazi got all whited. Poor Gazi! Ain't you sorry for Gazi?"

"But perhaps Gehazi deserved it, Dot."

Dot cheerfully assented to that view of the question.

"Naughty bad Gazi!" she remarked. "And Lisha wasn't naughty, was he, Pattie? Lisha was good. I saw Lisha in the picture, frowning at Gazi most dreadful. It's Pattie's little picture. And lots of focks and coats all hided away."

"But you couldn't see the frocks and coats in the picture, Dot?"

"O no, dadda, 'cause they was hided away, and Gazi telled a wicked

tory, and saided he hadn't not been nowhere. 'N then he was whited. Does everybody get whited what tells wicked tories? Does ma-ma when she tells tories?"

Mrs. Cragg was the reverse of white at this instant. Cragg uttered a hasty "Sh-sh-sh!" glancing at his wife as he did so. Something in her face made him repeat the look, even while he said again, "Hush! Hush! Little girls must never talk so. Hold your little tongue, Dot; that won't do at all."

Then his eyes fell upon Pattie. She had moved slightly, under the stress of feeling, and he could see her better than before.

"Why, Pattie, you've been crying!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIII

What Had Gone Wrong

CRAGG welcomed a change of subject. He could not, unhappily, feel sure that no cause existed for Dot's remarks, nor could he throw himself unreservedly into the defence of his wife. By this time he knew, only too well, that Mrs. Cragg was by no means always true in her utterances, that very often she was guilty of what Dot called "a tory." He was therefore the more anxious to divert attention at this moment.

"Why, Pattie, you've been crying!"

"One must—sometimes—cry a little," admitted Pattie, not trying to deny so patent a fact.

"Being a girl, perhaps one must. And it is nothing that I can set right? You are sure?"

"Quite sure," she said, tears in her eyes again. "I'll tell you more by-and-by; but there is nothing to be done."

"Pattie was crying, 'way in her loom," declared Dot, who never failed to put her small finger into every pie that happened to be going.

"You mustn't let Pattie cry any more, Dot. It's bad for her. If she does, come and tell me."

"All wite," nodded Dot cheerfully.

Tea presently came to an end, and Pattie noted as an unusual event that Mrs. Cragg had not flown into a passion. But little time remained for that or for other observations, since she and Cragg had to dress at once for church. Mrs. Cragg seldom troubled herself to go in the evening.

Coming out of church an hour and a half later, Cragg said, as he walked beside Pattie in the twilight:

"What has been wrong to-day?"

"I can't tell you all, but—part, if you like. It is about my father's letters."

"Yes. What have you done?"

"I have burnt them. Not to-day, but two or three days ago."

"You have!"

"I thought it right."

"In that case there's nothing to be said. People must follow their consciences, of course. But why?"

"I was afraid you might persuade me to read them—against what I felt to be right."

"Have I been so positive?"

"No. But you are so kind a friend to me, I might have felt bound to do what you advised. And I could not think it right. I could not feel sure that my father would wish it. So I glanced them through—just to see that there was no money, and that there were no directions to me about things he might want done. And then I burnt them."

"All of them! Every one?"

"I thought I had burnt all, but I found to-day that I had not. Three were in another place. I came across them to-day, and I have read them. I had a reason for doing so, or else I would have burnt those too. And they have made me very unhappy."

"Do you mind telling me what they are about?"

"I think I should like to do that. I think I would rather show them to you, if you don't mind. It would be a comfort. They tell me more about his past than I have known before. I mean, about the reason that we had to leave our old home."

"Poor girl!" he said, at the sound of a sob. "I'm sorry they distress you so much. After all, the thing is over now; and he is beyond the reach of such troubles. Can't you look upon it in that light?"

"Ah, but his name is not cleared," she said, very low.

"You have not got the letters with you, I suppose? You have? Shall we go into this field and sit on the log? It is not too dark for me to make them out. You would like that? Come along. Pattie, do you know that your father said something to me about this when he was dying? I have never told you."

"No. What did he say?"

"He implied that he had been wrongly accused. He said you did not know it, and he did not wish you to know, until the truth should come out; so I am sorry you should have read the letters."

"But you thought I ought to read them all."

"Did I say that exactly? Perhaps I hardly realised that you would discover more than your father meant you to know. In an ordinary case, if a man wishes his child not to know a thing after his death, he does not keep letters bearing on the subject. Now we can sit down, and no one will disturb us. Your father said something more, Pattie. He declared in the strongest manner, as in the sight of God, and as a man facing death, that he had not done the thing of which he was accused.

He implored me to believe him; and I did believe him. I believe him still. I do not think any man, as he then was, could have said what he said—deliberately and more than once—if it had been a lie."

"You believe him? I am glad!" whispered Pattie. "Now I do not mind showing these to you. I think you will believe him still."

She handed the three sheets to Cragg, and waited patiently as he made his way through one after another—not an easy task in the waning light.

"Yes," he said at length gravely. "I see."

"You think—"

"My dear, I think things must have looked black. This Mr. Peterson does not give me the impression of being hard or unjust."

"O no; he was always just and kind—before this—always a friend."

"And you had known him for years? You may be sure he would not suddenly have changed without believing that he had reason. But, on the other hand, I cannot think your father guilty. Even the little that I saw of him gave me an impression that he was an upright man; and what he said when dying—No, I do not think him guilty. I believe that some day his name will be cleared. What do you mean to do with these?"

"What ought I to do? May I burn them?"

"Don't do anything in a hurry. Put them in a sealed packet, with a direction outside that they are to be burnt after your death. Then lock the packet up, and do not let yourself dwell upon it. You can do no good to him; and remember that he would wish you to be happy."

Pattie murmured a faint assent.

Neither of the two moved at once. It was a still and mild evening. Now and again a soft twitter showed that not all the birds had gone to roost. Sometimes a sound of voices came from the town.

"Mr. Cragg!"

"Yes, my dear."

"I want to find something to do."

"What sort of thing?"

"I want to get my livelihood. Will you help me?"

"There's no hurry. Some day, perhaps."

"I want it now."

"Are you anxious to leave us? To leave Dot?"

"Not Dot. I shall feel that dreadfully. And you—you are so good to me. But I cannot go on like this. I want to be independent—to make my own way; and if you would help me to find something—I don't mind what—"

"Pattie, I must ask one question. Has my wife tried to bring this about?"

"No," Pattie said at once; "I don't think so. She has not said anything lately about wishing me to go. It is my own thought."

"Not because of anything she has said or done?"

That put the question differently, and Pattie could not reply with a negative.

"It is my own wish," she repeated. "I want to be independent."

"But your father wished you to be with us. I promised him when he was dying."

"Yes, I know. I went in directly after, and he said something to me before he became unconscious. He said you had promised; but I could not agree to that, you know. I could not be a burden on you, except for a little while. Now I have been long enough; and I must find something else. Perhaps I might take care of children, as a nursery governess. Would not that do?"

"We must think about it. I am not in a hurry to get rid of you, though you are in a hurry to go. It is pleasant to have you in the house."

Then he stood up. "I'm afraid we ought to move; it is growing damp."

Not much more passed between them on the way home. Mr. Cragg was thinking what a difference Pattie's absence would make. Now he could always look upon one face not clouded by ill-temper. He dreaded a return to the old condition of things. Pattie, wondering over his silence, feared that she had said something to vex him.

"It isn't that I am ungrateful," she pleaded, presently.

"If I wished you to go, I should be ungrateful," he answered. "You don't know how much you have done to brighten life for little Dot and me, since you came."

"Have I? No, I didn't know it. My mother always said one could do a good deal in that way, if one would take the trouble; and I do try. But it isn't easy. It is very good of you to speak so to me. But still—I think I ought to work for myself."

"Well, we must consider. No need to settle hastily. There's time enough—by-and-by."

Then they went indoors, and had to submit to complaints on the part of Mrs. Cragg, who had been waiting ten minutes for her supper.

Cragg received the complaints in his usual silence, and not much was said during the meal. Dot, the great talker, was in bed, sound asleep; and Cragg and Pattie had had their say. Mrs. Cragg wished to know whatever in the world they had been about; and she requested another time to be told beforehand, if they meant to go dawdling round after church. She wouldn't wait for them in that case—not she! Next time she should begin without them. Cragg and Pattie were willing that she should; but to have said so would have aroused her ire afresh.

Later in the evening, when Pattie too had vanished, Cragg put a direct question to his wife. "Has anything gone wrong with you and Pattie to-day?"

"Whatever should make you fancy that?"

"She has been crying. I saw that at tea-time. And she said something this evening about wanting to find work for herself."

"She says that whenever she's put out. It doesn't mean much."

"I never can see that Pattie does get 'put out,' in the sense you mean. What has happened to 'put her out' to—day?"

"How should I know, Mr. Cragg?"

A little voice in Mrs. Cragg's mind tried to suggest that she should tell her husband the truth, but Mrs. Cragg refused to listen. "You are more likely than any one else to know. Pattie has told me about having destroyed her father's letters. She has not told me everything, though I cannot guess what she has held back. I thought you might know."

Mrs. Cragg was silent.

"I do not gather that she destroyed the letters to-day; but she seems to have come across two or three others unexpectedly, and for some reason to have felt bound to read them. Why should she have thought it right to read these, when she had burnt the others for fear of being persuaded to read them? Are you sure you cannot explain this to me?"

Suspicion was written in Mr. Cragg's face. Pattie had not managed so cleverly as she had intended to manage. Mrs. Cragg took the bull by the horns, which she was capable of doing, as we have already seen.

"It's no such tremendous mystery, after all," she said. "Pattie found that I'd read the letters, and then she said she must read them too."

"You had read the letters!"

"Yes, Mr. Cragg. I had read them! And I'd read them again, if it was all to come over fresh!" Mrs. Cragg tossed her head.

"You read—without leave—letters that did not belong to you? You do not mean it!"

Mrs. Cragg hardened herself against her husband's look.

"Pattie was so ridiculous. Wouldn't tell this, and didn't choose to answer that, and so mysterious! So I just got hold of the letters, and found out for myself. And I'd a right, too. As if we weren't taking her in, and doing for her, all at our own expense—and she, if it wasn't for us, pretty near a beggar! If I hadn't a right, I should like to know who would have! Oh, I'm not ashamed of it! I'd do it over again, this minute. And so I told Pattie."

Cragg was roused for once. He had always been a man of honourable feeling.

"I would not have believed it—even of you!" he said pointedly. "If somebody else had told me, I should have said it was impossible."

"Well, then, it isn't impossible; and you're wiser to-night than you were this morning!" retorted his wife.

Cragg stood up.

"Now I understand!" he said. "I understand—and I do not wonder—that

Pattie should wish to live no longer under my roof. I have never been more ashamed—for myself—and for you!"

Then he left the room.

CHAPTER XIV

Little Dot—
A Catastrophe

THE household atmosphere was thick and uncomfortable during many days. Pattie heard nothing of that late Sunday evening talk, for Cragg would not complain to her of his wife, and Mrs. Cragg felt that she would gain little by repeating what had passed; but there was a general sense of strain. Cragg had become grave and silent; Mrs. Cragg was much out of temper; and Pattie found skill needed to steer straight. But for little Dot's devotion to herself, she would have felt the condition of things unbearable.

Nearly a week later Cragg, meeting her on the stairs, stopped to say:

"If you are still bent on leaving us, Pattie, I shall not hinder you."

Pattie again thought that the tone meant annoyance. She looked up with moist eyes.

"I don't think you understand."

"Yes, I do. I understand—better than I did last Sunday evening. I'm not surprised that you wish to go. And I have no right to prevent it—if I could. I will help you all I can. Not that I like you to go; but I can say nothing."

Pattie knew then that, in one way or another, the truth had reached him. She was glad and sorry; glad that Mrs. Cragg should have told him, if indeed she had done so; and sorry that he should be distressed.

"But I do not mean that I am in a great hurry," she said. "I do not want to go directly. Perhaps I shall not hear of anything to do for a long while. It is only that in time I ought,—I cannot go on being dependent. And you know this is not a new thought. Ever since I came I have said that it was only for a time."

"Yes, I know. But now—it's natural you should wish it more."

What could Pattie say? She could not deny the truth of his words.

Cragg sighed and passed on. To an upright man, it is a terrible feeling that he cannot trust his own wife, that she has not even so far the sense of honesty as to be ashamed of her own meanness when she has acted meanly.

He went to the room where he carried on his correspondence. He managed to get three business letters done, and then he lost himself in thought. A boy came in, bringing letters just arrived. Several were unimportant, containing orders or inquiries connected with his stock of furniture. But one brought an exclamation to his lips. It was a bill!—and one that he did not at all expect. A long bill, too, weighty in its sum-total. Cragg glanced at the name heading the first sheet. He knew it as that of a large linen-draper in a neighbouring town. His

wife often went there for her shopping. Being aware of her extravagant tendencies, he had always insisted that she should pay ready money for what she bought, except in the case of two or three specified Putworth shops, from which quarterly accounts came in.

More than once in the past Mrs. Cragg had broken this yule. She had not done so lately, to his knowledge. He had had to complain of the extent of her Putworth bills; but he thought they comprised the whole of her expenses. Now he knew his mistake. Here were two long pages of items, ranging through twelve months past. The sum-total was startling. Troubles were already crowding upon him, and he could hardly see how to meet his liabilities. He put the paper down, and groaned aloud. Then he examined it afresh. Evidently it had been sent to Mrs. Cragg, and sent in vain. The draper, despairing of getting payment for his goods from her, had decided on an appeal to her husband.

Cragg knew that he would have to pay it.

He could not let his wife remain in debt. Yet—how to spare the money?

A feeling of indignation swept over him. The manner in which she had behaved to Pattie made it harder for him to meet this patiently. The wife who should have been his help and stay was becoming a clog and a burden; something to be endured, instead of some one to be loved. And it was her own fault. Cragg wished to be a good husband. He had borne much patiently. Things now were getting beyond bearing.

He stood up, sheet in hand, and walked to the sitting-room, where Mrs. Cragg was generally to be found. She was there, and so was Dot.

"Dadda!" shrieked Dot in rapture.

Cragg took her up, kissed her, and said: "Run away, my pet."

"What's she to run away for?"

"I want a few words with you."

"If you're going to grumble, I'd rather not. Dot can stay."

"I must have a few words with you," repeated Cragg, his manner unusually stern. "Run away, Dot darling."

"All wite, dadda." Dot trotted off.

"I want you to explain this bill to me." Cragg did not say "my dear." He was surprised and alarmed at his own resentment-a resentment piled up by one thing upon another. It was half for Pattie, half for himself, and it was increased by the sense of his wife's falsity.

Mrs. Cragg looked at the sheet which he laid before her, and, as usual, hardened herself.

"They'd no business to send that to you."

"Where did you expect them to send it? How do you suppose you are going to pay it?"

Mrs. Cragg tossed her head.

"I shall pay it in time—of course."

"There is no 'of course' in the matter. The money that I allow you is never enough for immediate wants."

"Then you'd better allow me more."

"I cannot afford it. I am on the high-road to beggary."

"You're uncommon fond of talking nonsense, Mr. Cragg."

"I am speaking sober truth. At this rate I shall soon be bankrupt."

Mrs. Cragg declined to believe what he said. She took up the bill and glanced it through.

"Those people are cheats. I don't believe it ought to be a quarter as much."

"You mean that you have not had the things?"

"I had some, of course. Not all that list."

"Find something in the bill that you have not had, and I will make complaint."

"Really, Mr. Cragg, I didn't marry you to be kept in as close as this, and lectured as if I was a school-girl. And I don't mean to bear it. You've been worse than ever since Pattie came—and that's the truth."

"I shall have to be worse," Cragg answered coldly. "I cannot afford this sort of thing, and that's the long and short of the matter. If you run into debt, you must manage for yourself. But it's no use speaking to you. You don't choose to understand." And he left the room as Pattie came in.

"Has anything happened?" she asked. "Mr. Cragg looks—"

"He's in a temper," said Mrs. Cragg.

Pattie's lips formed a mute protest. If Mrs. Cragg had said, "I am in a temper," nobody would have questioned it.

"I came to find Dot," remarked Pattie, knowing it was useless to carry on any discussion with Mrs. Cragg. "Do you know where she is?"

"How should I know? Mr. Cragg sent her away."

A shrill cry was followed by a dull thud; and then scream after scream filled the air.

CHAPTER XV

A Heavy Fall

PATTIE knew in an instant that it was I Dot—her pet and companion, and the being in the world whom she most dearly loved. Before Mrs. Cragg had got beyond a bewildered "What's that?" Pattie had flown out into the passage, and had dropped on the ground beside a little heap at the foot of the stairs. The nursery girl stood on the landing above, uttering frightened shrieks.

"It isn't Dot! It can't be Dot!" cried Mrs. Cragg, horrified, coming

after Pattie. And though she could not be described as an especially affectionate mother, her flushed face lost its high colour, and she had a strange feeling at her heart, as if the whole world were at a standstill. This silent huddled form her little Dot—her bonny merry child!

"Don't move her! Don't lift her yet!" entreated Pattie, as Mrs. Cragg was going to seize Dot's arm. "Oh, don't!" she implored; and she had herself to grasp Mrs. Cragg's hand. "Wait, please! It might do harm. We don't know yet where she is hurt—or if any bones are broken."

Mrs. Cragg recoiled, and stood staring helplessly, while Pattie very very gently tried to stir Dot into an easier position. A faint moan was the only sound in response. The girl who had charge of Dot, a mere child of fifteen, came blundering down the stairs, sobbing, and loudly protesting that it was not her fault; she had tried her very best to stop Dot, and Dot would rush away, despite all she could do.

"I dare say you were idling your time somewhere. You'd no business to let Dot be near the stairs alone," Mrs. Cragg said, in angry distress. "You're always doing that sort of thing. Well, you won't get any character now, I can tell you! How far did Dot fall? All down this long flight! Why, it's enough to have killed her!"

"Eh?—what's this?" another voice asked, breaking into Mrs. Cragg's angry chatter, as Cragg walked through a door. "I thought I heard something fall. DOT!"

Cragg groaned aloud. He looked from his wife to Pattie.

"I think she is stunned. Not—killed!" said Pattie, in a tone which sounded unnatural to herself. There was a sound just now—a moan. "I'm afraid to try to lift her! Please bring her to my room, if you don't mind. That is the nearest. And some one ought to go for the doctor."

"I'll be off myself in a moment."

He raised the child tenderly in his arms, walked to Pattie's room, which was on the ground floor, and laid her on the bed. Again there was a faint moaning, but no other sign of consciousness.

Cragg bent over the pillow with a look of unspeakable sorrow, and then hurried away. Pattie loosened Dot's clothes, and spread a light shawl over her. As Cragg had done, she stooped once to kiss the cold white cheek. Mrs. Cragg stood by, making no offer to help, seemingly stupefied.

"Sweet Dot! dear little Dot!" murmured Pattie; and Dot's eyes half-opened. Though they closed again, Pattie's heart bounded with hope. Perhaps, after all, the child had received little harm.

"Dot!—little pet!" she tried again; but no second response came.

"She don't hear you! She don't understand! She never will again! She's killed!"—and Mrs. Cragg burst into noisy shrieking sobs, holding the foot of the bed, and shaking it with her movements.

"O hush! please, hush! If she comes to, you will frighten her. Did you not see just now that she opened her eyes? I thought you saw! She may be only stunned; not much hurt. Please stop crying, or go away," implored Pattie. "Please, for Dot's sake!"

But Mrs. Cragg, accustomed only to think of herself, paid no heed to this appeal. She went on sobbing loudly, swaying herself about, and still shaking the bed. Dot moaned again; and Pattie, almost beside herself, went to Mrs. Cragg, and resolutely unwrenched the hand which held the iron bar of the bed.

"Mrs. Cragg, you must not behave like this," she said. "It will not do. You are hurting Dot. She cannot bear the movement. Go out of the room, please, until you can be quiet."

Mrs. Cragg's only concession was to move a few paces off, and there to stand, holding now to the table, and sobbing still in a strident fashion. Pattie went again to Dot, and leant over her, and held her little hand very tenderly. Then, to her relief, Cragg came in, bringing the doctor, a young man with a kind manner, who lived in the next street. Happily, Cragg had found him at home.

"No crying or noise here, if you please," were his first words, as he sat down by the bed. He glanced round, and his eyes fell upon Mrs. Cragg. "I think you had better take your wife into another room until she is quiet," he said to Cragg. Then to Pattie—"You can stay."

He asked a few questions as to the manner of the fall, felt Dot all over, examined her carefully, and looked with especial attention at her head. She opened her eyes, as she had done before, not seeming to know any one. He asked for a lighted candle, which he held close before the child's face. She flinched, and turned away, with a little fretful wail.

"That will do," presently remarked Mr. May; and he went into the next room with Cragg. The latter soon returned.

"The doctor wants a word with you, Pattie. I'll stay here," said Cragg. He had left his wife elsewhere, still violently sobbing, half with genuine distress and half with annoyance at being ordered away.

Pattie found the doctor alone.

"Is Dot badly hurt?" she asked.

"It is too early to say much. We shall know better in a few hours. I do not find tokens of actual injury, beyond a blow to the head—hardly severe enough to account for the symptoms. At all events, no bones are broken. My fear is that the spine may have sustained some injury. At this moment she is suffering from shock, and quiet is essential. She will need great care during the next few hours, and the question is—who will give it? A nurse cannot be got at once."

"A stranger would startle Dot, if she came to herself. I think I could keep her as quiet as any one."

"But—" The doctor hesitated, looking Pattie over.

"I am older than you think. I am nearly seventeen, and I have nursed people since I was ten. Our old doctor used to say that I was born a ready-made nurse. Will you let me take Dot for to-night? You might not find a regular nurse so soon. Then you will see if I am able to manage."

"Unhappily there is much illness about, and nurses are difficult to find. But you do not look strong, Miss—"

"My name is Dale. I am strong enough for nursing. It comes to me

naturally."

"Mr. Cragg gave me to understand that he could not ask it of you—that—in fact—"

"That I am no relative," suggested Pattie readily. "No, I am not. But Mr. Cragg has been a kind friend to me; and I love Dot. I would do anything for her."

"Well, I confess you relieve my mind. I do not imagine Mrs. Cragg is capable of much. And I am told that there is not a servant in the house who can be trusted. If you are willing to sit up this night, it will be a great help. I shall telegraph to know if a nurse can arrive to-morrow. If Dot does not improve quickly, you must of course have help. A nurse for night-work would be needful. Meanwhile, we must depend upon you."

"Is Dot likely to get better soon?"

"Impossible to say. I will look in again later. She must be put to bed, and kept absolutely quiet. Absolutely—you understand? I should prefer that only you should be with her. There must be no crying, no talking and discussing of her symptoms, no whispering. If Dot rouses and shows an inclination to talk, you must discourage it. I will come again in two or three hours, and then you shall have fuller directions."

"Wait—one moment." Pattie was thinking seriously. "I will do my best, but I cannot make Mrs. Cragg do as I wish. Before you came in, I had asked her to leave the room if she could not stop crying, and she would not go. If that sort of thing is bad for Dot—"

"It mustn't be allowed for a moment," declared the young man. "I shall speak to her and to Mr. Cragg. If you undertake the nursing, you must have the entire management of the sick-room until a hospital nurse comes."

Pattie evidently had no fears as to what she was undertaking, and she soon proved that her confidence was well-founded.

As she had told the doctor, she had been early trained in nursing; and though she could not be reckoned equal to a fully trained nurse, she had by nature a gift in that line. She was quiet, placid, not easily flurried; she had much self-possession; her manner was gentle; she knew how to be firm; she did not worry her patient; she did not think of herself; and she recollected all directions given to her by the doctor, following his orders implicitly. He came again that night; and when in the morning he reappeared, he expressed himself satisfied with all that she had done.

"There is certainly some improvement," he said. "No,—I consider her by no means out of danger. It is impossible to say what turn may come next. Her state is not satisfactory; and I have little doubt that the shock to the spine has affected her brain. But on the whole she has gained rather than lost ground."

"You think you can trust me?" asked Pattie.

The doctor looked gravely at Pattie, before replying.

"I think you may take your full share," he said. "My own impression is that we may be in for a long illness. That means of necessity two nurses. I hope to have one here in three or four hours. She will want

to sleep in the day-time, and some one then must take her place, following out her directions. If you are willing to do this—"

"I am willing to do anything."

"Then that, no doubt, will be the best plan. It may be only for a few days—it may be longer. You had no difficulty last night, I hope—as to keeping the room quiet?"

No; Pattie could assure him of this. Cragg, warned by the doctor, had taken the matter in hand, and had insisted on his wife's compliance. The doctor had spoken to Mrs. Cragg also, telling her plainly that Dot's life might hang upon the question of absolute quiet, and desiring that Pattie should be allowed to decide who might or might not be present. "She seems a sensible girl," he said, "and evidently knows a good deal about nursing. Let her use her commonsense, and I do not think it will lead her astray."

But if Pattie had had no actual difficulties, she foresaw very actual disagreeables. Mrs. Cragg's look, when she did enter the room, was by no means pleasant.

"You've got your way, and you can manage my husband and the doctor as you choose," she muttered.

"But what can you mean? I am only trying to do my best for Dot," said Pattie, in a low voice.

"Oh, I know!" retorted Mrs. Cragg. "Some folks are never happy without they're managing everybody. I know."

Then Cragg, hearing the loud whisper, interposed:

"Now, my dear, this is just what doctor forbids!" Mrs. Cragg walked grumbling to herself; and Pattie turned again to the bed, her eyes full of tears.

CHAPTER XVI

The Course of Events

THAT Pattie should be counted able to nurse Dot, when she—Mrs. Cragg—was not able, aroused Mrs. Cragg's jealous temper to an unpleasant extent. She knew herself to be incapable, and she would not have undertaken the nursing, had she been asked to do so. But now that she had not been asked, now that she had been ousted in favour of another, she regarded herself as a deeply injured individual; and she was angry with Pattie.

This made Pattie's work harder than it would otherwise have been. She did not see much of Mrs. Cragg, for almost her whole time, from morning till evening, was spent with Dot; and when not engaged in the sick-room she was usually, by the doctor's orders, either walking or resting. Still, encounters were inevitable; and if anything were wanted, if any doubt or question arose, Mrs. Cragg immediately sided against Pattie. Even the thought of what might be good for Dot could not make headway against her temper.

Happily for Pattie, the new nurse was a sensible kind-hearted woman; and an appeal to her would always settle matters as might be desirable

for the child. But Pattie could not rouse her unnecessarily from well-earned sleep, and that was the time when difficulties occurred.

Cragg was very unhappy during these days of suspense. Dot was his darling, his treasure, the light of his home; and the thought of losing her was terrible to him.

He blamed himself sorely for the accident, because he had sent Dot out of the room without taking precautions to ensure that she would be looked after. She was so clever and wide-awake a child, that they were all rather apt to think she could take care of herself; and she had done so dozens of times before. Now that the result had been an accident, dangerous to life, Cragg could not forgive his own carelessness.

Pattie knew nothing of this till a week after the fall, when she came across him, alone, with his head down on the table, crying like a child. She had left the sick-room in charge of the nurse, and was going to have her supper before retiring for the night.

"But you must not mind," she urged. "It was only what we all do. Dot goes about so often alone. We never think anything of it. You could not guess that she would fall."

"I ought to have guessed. I ought to have taken heed."

"She was with Jane. Dot did not fall when she was alone. Don't you see? You really were not to blame. Dot went upstairs all right. Jane was in fault,—not you."

"No, so I hoped at first. But she was not with Jane. The girl saw her coming, and supposed one of us to be with her. And then Dot started off full speed for the top of the stairs, before Jane could get up with her."

"Because Jane is naturally slow. Anybody else might have been in time. I suppose she cannot help being stupid, but I do think she ought to have made more haste. I don't think you need blame yourself. Dot seems so much older than her age—I suppose we forget what a baby she is."

"Wouldn't you blame yourself in my place?" asked Cragg sorrowfully. "I think you would. If she dies, I shall never get over the feeling. I shall always know it was my doing—being so angry with my wife's extravagance, that I couldn't give a thought to anything else."

That was news to Pattie, and Cragg had not intended to speak of his wife's doings; but in his distress he for the moment forgot. Pattie took no advantage of the slip. She asked no questions, and she never afterwards alluded to what he had said.

For Cragg's sake, as well as for her own, it was an immense relief when they could begin to feel that the worst was over, and that Dot was taking steps towards recovery.

The main injury had been, as at first conjectured by the doctor, to the spine; and the blow upon the spine had affected the head. The little one's mind wandered much, fever ran high, and weakness became extreme.

"If Dot gets through, it will be due chiefly to Miss Dale," the doctor remarked more than once, and the hospital nurse said the same. So far as experienced nursing was concerned, she of course was far superior

to Pattie. But Pattie had a power, possessed by none other, of soothing Dot in pain, of quieting her in restlessness, of making her take the food and medicine from which she turned; and these things were invaluable. The nurse often sent for Pattie to influence the child, and so to save a needless struggle, which would have exhausted the little one's strength. Dot would do anything at Pattie's request.

At the end of three or four weeks, however, the worst was really over. Dot was to be accounted convalescent, and the household began to settle into something like its usual state. Dot would have to lie flat for many a week yet—perhaps even for many a month; but the doctor gave every hope that the jar to the spine would not be of a lasting nature. Great care would be needed, he said; but there was no reason why, in a year or two at most, she might not be as well and vigorous as ever.

Only, everything depended on proper care now. Pattie felt that her work was cut out for her. She also knew that her worst difficulties might lie in the future.

The hospital nurse remained at her post, taking all night duty; but in a few days her presence would be unnecessary.

"When she goes, I shall sleep, of course, in Dot's room," Pattie said quietly, and Cragg tried to express his gratitude. But for Pattie, what they could have done at this juncture was an enigma to him. Mrs. Cragg expressed little gratitude, for she felt none. She was still jealous of Pattie's position in the sick-room, still offended at having been compelled to submit.

With Dot's rally came, as was to be expected, a spirit of fractiousness; no bad sign, the nurse said. Children getting better from an illness were always fractious. The little one was not old enough to exercise self-control, as a grown person might have done; though in truth grown persons often fail egregiously in this matter.

Dot wanted everything that she could not have, and she disliked everything that she might have, alike in the way of food and of amusement. She could hardly endure to have Pattie out of her sight, and the cry for "Dadda" was only second in frequency to the cry for "Pattie."

It was noticeable that Dot did not cry for her "Ma-ma." She had received too many snubs in that direction to turn thither in weakness and pain, with any confidence. Mrs. Cragg could not but observe this fact. It made her unhappy, and even more jealous of Pattie than before. Instead of reproaching herself, as she ought to have done, she reproached Pattie, and looked upon herself as a wronged individual.

This feeling, given way to without restraint, at last bore fruit. Mrs. Cragg, though she had uttered threats to Pattie, had not made up her mind that she would break her own promises of silence, or that she would deliberately injure the girl. But when temptation came, it round her powerless to resist. A habit of ill-temper is weakening to the moral fibre.

Mrs. Cragg's particular crony walked in to see her one certain morning—Mrs. Smithers, the chemist's wife, a smart young woman, and one of the greatest gossips in the place. A matter revealed to Mrs. Smithers was revealed to the country round. Mrs. Cragg knew this,—not that it made much difference in what she said or did not say to the woman in question.

"So you've had no end of bother about Dot," Mrs. Smithers remarked. "And she's getting on all right, I'm told."

Mrs. Cragg gave her own version of affairs. It was all Cragg's fault, according to her. He had been in "a fuss," and had scolded the child for being in the room, and Dot had run away and tumbled downstairs. This was not exactly an accurate report.

"And Pattie Dale's been doing all the nursing, has she?"

"Dear me, no. She's helped; but we've had a regular nurse in the house all this while. Mr. Cragg says she's got to go next week. He says he can't afford to keep her longer. Dot is getting on all right. I believe she'd be as well as ever, if the doctor didn't keep her lying down. 'Tisn't natural for a child. She ought to be up and about. But he gives all his orders to Pattie Dale, and I'm not allowed a word. You'd think Pattie was mistress, only to hear her."

"I don't like that girl, for my part. What makes you put up with her?"

"Haven't any choice. She's got the upper hand of Mr. Cragg—twists him round her little finger. And Dot won't look at anybody else."

"Well, I wouldn't have it so, if I were you. I'd make a stand. She's got a conceited look."

"Conceited! I should think she was. There's nobody in the world that's Pattie's equal, if you believe Pattie."

"And nobody knows wherever she came from," reflected Mrs. Smithers.

Mrs. Cragg pursed up her lips with a meaning air.

"Well, you may know, but nobody else does. What is Pattie Dale? Your husband's been going about saying she wants to find a situation. What sort is she fit for, I'd like to know?"

"When Pattie's in a temper, she always says she wants to find a situation."

"I'd let her go, if I was you. Why shouldn't she? She's no relation of yours."

"Cragg thinks he's bound to do something for her, because it was his house that fell, and that's how her father got killed."

"Ridiculous!" declared Mrs. Smithers. "I'd like to hear my husband talking like that."

"Your husband isn't Cragg," observed Mrs. Cragg, with truth.

"If he was Mr. Cragg I wouldn't let him. People ought to have sense."

Mrs. Smithers' eyes roved, and Mrs. Cragg saw that another subject was about to be introduced.

"Nobody can tell you anything about Pattie except me."

"But what do you know about her? thought they came here as strangers."

"All the same, I know something." Mrs. Cragg's air was of fascinating mystery.

"Tell me, there's a good woman. What do you know?"

"Well, I know one thing—that her father was a scamp."

"Shouldn't wonder! I saw that man, and I didn't like the looks of him. Nor Smithers didn't either. He wasn't worth much, I shouldn't think."

"Took some money that wasn't his, you know." Mrs. Cragg was drawing freely on her imagination.

"You don't say so!"

"Yes, I do. And got turned off—so he had to go away. That's why they came here. Nice sort of people, eh? I found it out by accident. It isn't easy to throw dust in my eyes. I suspected from the first, and one day it came out. It don't matter how. Pattie only wanted me not to tell."

"Well, if I was you, I shouldn't like that young woman to be with Dot. Dishonesty is catching. You'll have Dot infected."

"That's Cragg's doing. He won't hear a word against Pattie."

"Nor against Pattie's father?"

"Won't believe a word of it. Pattie declares it isn't true."

"I should like to see Smithers behaving like that! I just should!" remarked Mrs. Smithers.

CHAPTER XVII

A Secret Made Known

"MISS DALE, we shall have you ill next. You must go out this fine morning." The doctor was impressed by the smallness and paleness of Pattie's face. He had come late, and for once the nurse had retired, leaving Pattie in charge.

"Not this morning, I think. By-and-by, when nurse can come."

"Not till evening, you mean. But how do you suppose you are going to manage when nurse is gone? You cannot be in the room always. Now that Dot is so much better, other people must take a share in the nursing."

By other people the doctor meant Mrs. Cragg.

"Would it be good for Dot?"

"I don't see why not. Dot only needs to be amused and kept quiet."

Precisely what Mrs. Cragg was not fitted to undertake, thought Pattie; but she could not say so. The doctor would have to find out for himself.

"I don't feel that I want to go out this morning."

"The more reason why you should do so. You are getting used up. Mrs. Cragg"—as she came in—"I am telling Miss Dale that she must take a run early; not spend the whole day in this room. You can arrange it?

She's looking tired."

"Pattie has nothing to keep her indoors," declared Mrs. Cragg. "She's only got to please herself."

The expression that crossed the doctor's face was odd, to say the least.

"Can one of the maids take care of Dot?" he asked, bent upon his object.

"We haven't found a new nursemaid yet, and Jane's gone. I can stay, of course. It don't matter what I have to do anywhere else. Dot'll be all right."

"She cannot be left alone," remarked the young doctor.

"I know that."

"Well then, you'd better be off, Miss Dale," said the doctor.

Pattie had to submit. Dot stretched out a small hand.

"Pattie mustn't do. Wants own darling Pattie."

"Pattie will soon come back," the doctor said, holding Dot's hand. "She's going for a little walk."

"And I'll bring you some flowers, Dot," Pattie stooped over the bed.

That made Dot submit for the moment, and she slipped away.

It was a lovely morning; and if Pattie could have felt easy about Dot, left at home in charge of Mrs. Cragg, she would have enjoyed her breath of fresh morning air—not very early air, since it was past eleven, but deliciously fresh. She went at a good pace down the street, intending to take a run to the nearest meadow, on the banks of which, close to a tiny stream, she might hope to find a few wild-flowers. Not many remained now; but it did not take much to satisfy Dot.

On her way she met two or three of Mrs. Cragg's friends, people whom she had often seen and spoken with. Pattie noticed, with a feeling of slight surprise, that they hardly observed her. One of them looked away; one of them gave her a curt nod; one stared her rudely straight in the face. Pattie felt disturbed, wondering what the change of manner might mean. She did not care for any of Mrs. Cragg's friends, and she felt that they did not care for her; still, they had hitherto been civil. Naturally the question came up in her mind—had anything been said to turn them against her?

Pattie slackened her speed, and walked thoughtfully. She knew Mrs. Cragg too well not to know the possibility of this,—even at a time when she was devoting herself to the child, and when Mrs. Cragg might be supposed to owe much to her.

Somebody stopped. Pattie involuntarily stopped too, before looking up, to find herself face to face with Mrs. Smithers. She and Mrs. Smithers had met fairly often, and neither liked the other very much. The chemist's wife wore a look of complacent superiority.

"Good morning," she said. "Tisn't often we see you strolling about this time of day, Pattie."

Mrs. Smithers was given to calling people by their Christian names, with or without leave.

"No. I shall not be out long."

"But you've got a regular nurse in the house."

"Yes. She sleeps in the day, still."

"How is Dot getting on?"

"The doctor says—very nicely."

"Why doesn't he let her be up and about? How long does he mean to keep her lying down?"

Pattie felt annoyed.

"I suppose as longs he sees it to be needed," she said.

"Ah, I don't think much of that young fellow! He's very young, you know. Mrs. Cragg and I think he makes a deal too much fuss. If Dot was allowed to play about, she'd soon be all right."

"I think the doctor is likely to know more about it than you or I,—even if he is young," Pattie observed quietly. "We have not had a doctor's training."

"I hope we've got a grain of commonsense, though!" retorted the other, not pleased. "Well, and so you've taken up with the Craggs, and mean to live with them? It's all a mistake, I suppose, what Mr. Cragg was saying before Dot's accident,—that you wanted to find work?"

Pattie showed some surprise.

"It is no mistake," she said. "Of course I wish to support myself. Just now I could hardly be spared from Dot."

"Oh, as for that—I don't know about the 'sparing!' It isn't much of a question of 'sparing,' I take it. Not but what Mrs. Cragg has been a kind friend to you, I make no doubt; but all the same, it isn't likely she should want to have your father's daughter with her child."

Pattie looked at Mrs. Smithers, with eyes that had a sharp light in them.

"I don't understand."

Mrs. Smithers tossed her head.

"It's nothing so very hard to understand," she said. "Only, you do give yourself an uncommon lot of airs, Pattie; and when one comes to know that your father was turned off from his situation for being light-fingered —why, then, of course—"

"If Mrs. Cragg has told you that—"

"Oh, I didn't say it was Mrs. Cragg. I didn't say it was anybody in particular. But the tale's going about, and folks believe it. It don't matter who said it first. It was somebody that knows. You've been uncommon close about yourself, ever since you came here; but that sort of thing is sure to come out. And it isn't to be wondered

at neither that Mrs. Cragg don't like a girl of your stamp to be in the house as one of themselves."

Pattie had grown white, but she did not lose her composure.

"Mrs. Cragg, of course, has told you," she said. "No one else could do so. Mrs. Cragg does know that my father was accused—wrongly accused of what he did not do. Some day the truth will come out, and my dear father's name will be cleared. I did not think that Mrs. Cragg would have done this. But—you of course cannot understand. I would rather not talk any more about it to you, if you please."

Pattie turned away and walked on. She felt like a bruised creature, longing to hide herself.

[Illustration: "YOU'VE BEEN UNCOMMON CLOSE ABOUT YOURSELF."]

For a while she could not think of Dot, could not remember anything except that the place now knew of her father's trouble, and that nobody would believe him to be innocent—nobody except Mr. Cragg. It was hard to bear. That Mrs. Cragg should have acted in such an unfeeling way, just when she was doing her utmost, spending all her time and strength on behalf of Dot, seemed almost beyond belief.

Pattie made her way into the meadow, and sat on a fallen log, tears running down her cheeks, and no recollection of flowers in her mind. It was very, very hard. Though not naturally resentful, resentment for once rose high, and she almost felt that she could not go on any longer under the same roof with Mrs. Cragg.

Yet, to leave little Dot to Mrs. Cragg's care; to sheer off, for her own sake only, and not to help Cragg in his difficulty! Impossible!

No; not for her own sake only, but for the sake of her father's good name! That was where Mrs. Cragg's conduct most sharply stung.

Yet what good would it do to her father, if Pattie should yield to bitter feeling, and should tell Mr. Cragg that she could no longer stay and nurse Dot? She would injure her kind friend by so doing, and she might harm dear little Dot; but her father would gain nothing by it.

"No—I'll wait," murmured Pattie. "I'll do what I can for Dot. And some day, surely,—I do believe it,—some day the truth will be known. But I don't see that I should help that forward by leaving my duty now. It isn't a question of pleasing Mrs. Cragg. It is a question of dear little Dot's needs, and of doing what is right."

Then she remembered her promise to take home some flowers, and she went to the bank, plucking as many as she could find. After which she turned homewards.

Not far from the street in which the Craggs lived, as she was passing along a lane between street and hedge, the doctor drove up in his gig. Seeing Pattie, he pulled the rein, stopped, and bent over to speak to her.

"Had a good walk? You don't look much the better for it."

"But I have done as you told me."

"What has happened? Anything unpleasant?"

Pattie hesitated. Should she tell him? He would be certain to hear the tale now spreading through Putworth.

"Eh? What is it?"

"Only—something that was said to me," she replied with difficulty. "Mr. May, if you are told a story about my father, I want you not to believe it, please, too quickly. Not without more proof than you can have from Putworth people."

The doctor nodded. Pattie wondered—had he already heard it? She could have supposed so from his look.

"It is not a true tale. I—know who has started it. There was a great trouble. That was why we left our home and came here. But my father did not do the thing he was accused of. He never could have done it; and if you had known him, you would say the same. If the story gets to you, please ask Mr. Cragg about it. Mr. Cragg knows more than anybody else in Putworth."

"I'll be sure," said the doctor seriously. "You may trust me. And if I were you, Miss Dale, I wouldn't think too much of the chatter of a lot of silly women. It isn't worth your worrying yourself about. Just go your own way bravely, and don't mind. You've been a kind friend to the Craggs, and Mr. Cragg knows it. Other people don't matter."

Pattie smiled; and he gathered up the reins.

"As for Dot, we must consider. You ought to get out more; but I—well, I see the difficulty. Yet Mr. Cragg is anxious not to keep the nurse longer than can be helped. It's an expense, of course."

"I'm ready to do everything I can for Dot."

"I know you are. Wish other folks were as ready, especially those who ought to be doing the most. Well, you won't lose in the end by your kindness. People never do, I believe. I must be off. Good-day, and don't fret."

Pattie went on her way, a good deal cheered. After all, Mrs. Cragg's opinion, and the opinion of Mrs. Smithers, were both unimportant. Things said might be painful; but they should not touch Pattie's peace. And as for her father, he was beyond the reach of any such little earthly gnat-bites.

Another subject took hold of her mind. How had Dot been getting on during her absence? Pattie looked at her watch, and found that she had been fully an hour away. She had meant to stay only half an hour; but busy thought had made time slip by faster than she knew. A whole hour for the little invalid alone with Mrs. Cragg! Pattie quickened her steps.

As she reached and opened the house-door it was the door in the side street through which she and Mrs. Cragg usually went in and out—screams saluted her ears. Screams in Dot's voice. Pattie hurried towards the bedroom, and opened that door also. Mrs. Cragg was standing by the bed, with a medicine-glass in her hand, which she was plainly trying to force Dot to drink from. Dot was resisting with all her little might and main, shrieking indignantly as she fought.

Pattie gave one glance at the bottle on the table, from which, apparently, Mrs. Cragg had poured a portion into the tumbler, and then, ghastly pale, she rushed forward.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Dire Mistake

"RIDICULOUS fuss and nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Cragg. "Never saw anything like it!"

The doctor had taken his departure minutes later than Pattie, and Cragg had into the room. Dot lay with wistful watching the door through which Pattie disappeared. Mrs. Cragg jerked her chair.

"Absurd rubbish! Just when I've g end of things to see to. But it's Pattie all over!"

"What's the matter now?" asked Cragg mildly. "Where is Pattie, did you say?"

"I didn't say she was anywhere, Cragg!"

"But she must, of course, be—somewhere. Is anything the matter?"

"Matter enough; as you'd know if you hadn't got your head in the clouds, as usual. Here am I, tied hand and foot, just for nothing in the world, but because Pattie chooses to go grumbling about herself to Mr. May he says she's to go out for a walk. Wanting a walk at this time of day! I never heard such nonsense!"

"Pattie did look white this morning," observed Cragg.

"She didn't more than usual. Pattie always is a washed-out creature. It don't make a grain of difference whether she's out-of-doors or in, for the matter of that."

"At any rate, if the doctor says it—"

"Oh, if the doctor says Putworth mustn't eat anything except green cheese, it'll have to do it, I suppose! I've no notion of that sort of thing. Mr. May don't know everything, after all; and he's easy taken in by a designing girl."

"You don't call Pattie—"

"I call Pattie what she is, Mr. Cragg."

"And all these weeks she has been slaving here—"

Mrs. Cragg broke into the half-spoken sentence:

"Slaving, indeed! Who gives Pattie board and lodging, I'd like to know? What would become of her if it wasn't for us, Mr. Cragg?"

"My dear, there are two sides to that question. You would not find a professional nurse giving you her services for board and lodging. If Pattie is not a professional nurse, the doctor says she is as good a nurse as can be had without the training. And both he and the nurse say she has done more for Dot than either of them."

"Dadda!" murmured Dot, clinging to his hand, as he sat beside her.

"Dear little Dot!—But you see, don't you?"

"I see that Pattie manages to get the upper hand of you men somehow! I'm sick and tired to death of hearing of nothing but Pattie's goodness. If she'd condescend to be bad for once, I could put up with her better."

"You would probably be the first to blame her," rejoined Cragg, aware how useless it was to answer his wife, yet for once unable to resist doing so. "There are bad people in plenty. We need a few more good ones."

"Wants own darling Pattie!" murmured Dot.

"There you go again! Will you hold your tongue, Dot, and not talk in that ridiculous way?"

Dot's eyes grew large, and filled with tears.

"My dear, think of Dot's state. You must not make her cry," urged Cragg anxiously. "She is not used of late to be spoken to in such a tone."

"Wants—Pattie!" sobbed Dot brokenly.

"Yes, yes, dear; Pattie will soon come back," said Cragg, stooping over her. "Don't you mind, little one. It's all right. Pattie's only gone for a walk, and she will soon be here. Don't cry, Dot. Ma-ma didn't mean anything unkind. I've got to go to business now, but I shall soon look in again."

Dot clutched at him, casting glances of evident shrinking towards Mrs. Cragg.

"Dadda—stay! Dadda—not go!"

"But I must, dear. I've got somebody waiting now to see me. Just for a little while, and then I'll look in again. And Pattie will come back. And Dot will be good, won't Dot?"

Cragg went off with a heavy heart, feeling little doubt that his absence was better than his presence at that moment. Mrs. Cragg, left to herself, would no doubt do what lay in her power for the child. So long as he remained, she would go on showing temper.

Dot sobbed quietly, half under the bedclothes, and Mrs. Cragg sat in moody silence. Then she began to grow uneasy. She did not wish Pattie to come back and to find Dot in tears. It would be an admission of failure on her part. So she moved to the chair which Cragg had vacated, and said in a tone meant to be encouraging:

"Come now, Dot, you needn't be a little goose."

Dot shrank from her. That movement went home. With all Mrs. Cragg's faults, she did love her child.

"Come, Dot; don't be cross."

"I not doss! Ma-ma doss."

Another pause.

"Come, don't be silly. What do you want to do? How do you like to be amused?"

"Wants darling own Pattie!"

"But you can't have Pattie. Not till Pattie chooses to come. She's gone off to amuse herself. You've got to put up with me, so you may as well be good-tempered about it. What's this book? Shall I read to you?"

Dot, becoming aware of the position of affairs, determined to make the most of her opportunity. Tears stopped, and she studied Mrs. Cragg from a fresh point of view.

"Ma-ma tell a tory," was the result of these observations.

"I don't know any stories."

Another break.

"Ma-ma tell a tory," came again.

Mrs. Cragg actually started off in an attempt at compliance.

"Well, once upon a time," she said, "there was a man, and he went out for a walk. He had to go and see his—oh, his grandmother. And he took some nice new-laid eggs for her, and he—he thought he'd see—"

Mrs. Cragg broke down.

"Thought he'd see—" repeated Dot encouragingly.

"Thought he'd see if he couldn't get his sister to go with him."

Another pause.

"And did hims sister go?"

"Well, no, I don't think she did."
Pause again.

"That's a toopid tory," said Dot calmly. "Pattie tells oh such lovely, lovely tories."

Mrs. Cragg did not like to be compared with Pattie.

"Seems to me Pattie does every single thing right in your opinion, Dot."

Dot's look was of assent.

Mrs. Cragg had exhausted her powers of invention, and the "tory" advanced no further. Dot, not finding it of interest, did not ask more. She lay silent, her eyes roving, on the watch for Pattie.
Mrs. Cragg fidgeted about the room, gazed out of the window, and walked to the table, where she found a slip of paper fastened to the pin-cushion. On the slip was written, "Dot's medicine—at half-past eleven, half-past three, and half-past six."

"Why, it's over the time," she said. "Pattie seems in no hurry to come back. Where does she keep your medicine?" Mrs. Cragg was glad to escape any more "tory-telling."

Dot's little finger pointed vaguely towards the mantelshelf.
Mrs. Cragg walked thither, not noting that Dot's finger was now

directed towards the cupboard.

"Ah, here's the bottle," she muttered, as she took up one with eight divisions into doses marked upon it. "What queer-looking stuff! That's Mr. May's concern, not mine. I don't believe Dot needs such a lot of medicine." She carried bottle and glass to the small table near the bed.

"I not like it," declared Dot. "Nor I won't take it till Pattie tomes."

"Nonsense! You'll take it, of course, if I give it to you. You've got to be a good girl." Mrs. Cragg was out of patience with Pattie's admirers.

She had seen the nurse administer Dot's medicine, and had once poured out a dose herself, the nurse standing by, so she felt secure as to quantities. Besides, the bottle was marked into doses. The liquid did not look as she would have expected from her recollections; but Dot's medicine had been once or twice changed, and Mrs. Cragg's mind was too much bent in another direction to allow of her noting details. She was growing annoyed with the length of Pattie's absence.

The door opened to admit—not Pattie, as at first Mrs. Cragg hoped, but the untidy maid-of-all-work.

"Mrs. Smithers wants to see yer," she announced.

"What a bother, and Pattie not come back! Well, tell Mrs. Smithers to come into the passage. I can't leave the child, and if I have her in the room, somebody is sure to say it's bad for Dot."

Mrs. Cragg had poured out the dose, and she put it on the little table, going outside the open door. Mrs. Smithers came briskly up.

"I haven't got a moment to spare," she said; "but I want you to come along presently. I've got something to tell you. There's going to be that flower-show next week, and I mean to get a new bonnet, and you ought too. And we'll settle to go together."

"Yes, I know; I've heard about it. I'd like to go with you."

"Well, how soon can you come?"

"As soon as ever I can get away. Pattie's gone out—such nonsense, this time of day!—and I'm shut up here. The child's past everything, with her whims and fancies. Pattie and Cragg do their best to spoil her. But I shan't stop one minute longer than I have to."

"I met Pattie walking along—going off to enjoy herself. As pert as could be."

"Shouldn't wonder!"

"Seemed to make out that she was doing all the work of nursing Dot, and was so useful she couldn't be spared. If I was you, I'd take care and not let her get the upper hand in this house. You'll live to repent it some day, see if you don't."

"She shan't have the upper hand with my will."

"Well, you just come along to me as soon as ever you can. While Pattie is living on you and your husband, you'd best make use of her. I can

tell you, I gave her a bit of my mind, and she didn't like it—not at all. I told her it wasn't likely you'd want her father's daughter to have much to do with Dot. You should just have seen how she looked. There's Dot beginning to cry. You'll have to go back to her."

Mrs. Cragg did go back, not in the best of humours. It was with an annoyed jerk that she took up the medicine-glass.

"What a silly child you are to be always crying!" she said impatiently. "I wish you would have some sense. You must take your medicine now. Pattie doesn't mean to get back yet, it's easy to see."

"I not going to, till Pattie tomes," sobbed Dot.

That aroused Mrs. Cragg's opposition. She gave no second look towards the bottle, but brought the glass to the bedside, and held it ready.

"Now, Dot."

"No, no!" shrieked Dot.

Mrs. Cragg laid a hand on Dot's shoulder, and Dot buried her face in the pillow.

"No, no, no, no!" she cried loudly.

Mrs. Cragg endeavoured to lift Dot up, and to force the edge of the glass between her clenched teeth. Dot struggled and screamed, and wrenched herself away. Mrs. Cragg by this time was really angry, ascribing Dot's resistance to Pattie's influence. She took firm grip of the child, and again did her best to pour the liquid through those fast-shut teeth. Dot fought hard.

This was the moment when Pattie ran in. She heard the child's cries, and saw Mrs. Cragg's excited face. Then her glance fell upon the bottle which stood on the small table, and in one terrible moment the truth flashed upon Pattie. It was a moment that she never afterwards forgot.

For the bottle bore a label with a word upon it, which Mrs. Cragg in her disgraceful carelessness had failed to notice. That word was—"LAUDANUM."

CHAPTER XIX

A Very Narrow Escape

PATTIE knew that she had not the smallest fraction of time to spare. Dot's resistance was giving way, and Mrs. Cragg had all but gained the victory. To scream would be useless. Mrs. Cragg would listen to no warning of hers.

She flung herself wildly across the space between, full against Mrs. Cragg, and Mrs. Cragg went down in a heap upon the bed, the glass of liquid being jerked out of her hand and shattered upon the floor. Pattie, with the force of her own impetus, went down upon Mrs. Cragg, and Dot was in some danger of being demolished.

"You rude, unmannerly girl, you!" shrieked Mrs. Cragg, pulling herself up and glaring at Pattie. "You dare to treat me so! You—you—you—" breath and words failing her together. "I'll tell Mr. Cragg the sort

of way you go on! See if I don't!"

Mrs. Cragg shook herself, and pulled down her sleeves, which had been dragged out of position in the scuffle.

"Never saw such behaviour in my life! But I can tell you I'm not going to submit to this sort of thing. I'll have you turned out of the house! I'll have you made to remember yourself another time. It's disgraceful!"

Pattie was seated upon the side of the bed, white as ashes, gasping for breath, and clutching Dot, as if to save the child from some terrible danger. Dot had become composed the moment she had Pattie by her side. Pattie's gaze met Mrs. Cragg's furious eyes, but to speak at first was impossible. That short horror had robbed her of all strength. Dot whimpered, and then put her finger into her mouth.

At length Pattie found power to point to the bottle upon the table, and to whisper hoarsely,—

"Look! It is poison!"

Mrs. Cragg did look, and understood. Suddenly her fury died away, and she stood, convicted, trembling, almost stunned with the awful knowledge that, but for Pattie's prompt action, she might have killed her own little child.

The dead silence was broken by Pattie's sobs. Dot's arms were round her neck, pulling her down.

"Pattie, why you cly? Pattie own darling. Pattie mustn't cly. Pattie stay with Dot."

Pattie could do nothing but "cly" for a while. The morning had been one long strain, and this final fright broke her down. She hid her face in Dot's pillow and sobbed helplessly.

But presently the silence of the other who was present crept into her consciousness; and she lifted her head to look around. Mrs. Cragg sat apart, grey and wordless. All the self-assertion was for once washed-out of her. She had no excuse to offer, no self-defence to put forward. That abashed face was new to Pattie. She could not see in it the Mrs. Cragg whom she had hitherto known.

"Is ma-ma angly?" asked Dot's little voice.

"No, Dot. I think ma-ma is sorry," replied Pattie's trembling tones.

Mrs. Cragg neither moved nor looked round.

"I'm sorry to have had to be so rough," at length faltered Pattie, her chest heaving still. "I couldn't help it, you know. There was no time. If I had not made haste—"

Then a new fear swept across her.

"Did Dot take any? Mrs. Cragg, are you sure?—did she drink any of that stuff?"

"No," was the answer; "not one drop."

"If she had—"

The girl shuddered; then, standing up, she went nearer to Mrs. Cragg.

"You didn't know, of course. You didn't think what you were doing. I suppose you fancied it was her medicine."

"Dot pointed to the mantelshelf. I asked her."

"No. That stood there. It oughtn't to have been. But we kept the medicine in the cupboard. That is only meant for—" Pattie broke down afresh. "It ought not to have been left anywhere within reach," she went on presently. "But, oh, if I had not been in time—"

"If Mrs. Smithers hadn't been to see me, she'd have had it all ever so long ago," muttered Mrs. Cragg. "And if you hadn't come back just when you did—"

Mrs. Cragg spoke in a strange, husky voice, and before Pattie could answer she asked abruptly:

"If Dot had drunk that, would she have died?" Pattie whispered a "Yes." Mrs. Cragg's shoulders shook, and Pattie's hand came on her kindly.

"I don't know, I'm sure, whatever makes you so nice to me," faltered Mrs. Cragg. "You've behaved uncommon well, I must say. And I've treated you bad, I know that. I don't know whatever made me. But I shan't forget this. I shan't ever forget it." Mrs. Cragg began to choke and gulp. Dot seemed inclined to go to sleep after the morning's agitations.

"Don't keep her awake," whispered Pattie; and Mrs. Cragg did her best to cry in subdued tones—not an easy matter, since self-command was not one of her virtues.

By the time Dot was soundly off, Mrs. Cragg spoke again:

"Pattie, you don't know what I've been and done! I've told Mrs. Smithers all about you."

"Yes; I know you have."

"I mean—about your father. I felt cross, and so I said it out. If you'd known that, you wouldn't, perhaps, have—"

"Not have tried to save dear little Dot!" Pattie spoke in amazed accents. "You can't think so, surely! I would do anything for Dot. Mrs. Smithers told me when I was out. She did not say that she had heard it from you, but of course—" Pattie stopped.

"I am very sorry," she said quietly, "because everybody will hear it now. But still, if you will let me stay a little longer to take care of Dot, I would rather do it. I should like to be sure that she is taken care of properly, till she is well."

"I don't wonder you think I'm not fit to look after her!"

"I don't think you are a good nurse," came in reply. "A nurse would be more careful. But, after this, you will never make such a mistake again. And I do think nurse and I have been to blame, leaving out a bottle of poisonous stuff where anybody might get hold of it. In an old medicine bottle too! I can't think how we could! It's a lesson to me as well as to you."

Mrs. Cragg gazed at Pattie with troubled eyes.

"I've treated you uncommon ill," she said.

"But you are sorry now. You will be kinder from to-day, won't you?" asked Pattie, putting her hand into Mrs. Cragg's. "You will try to like me more than you have done?"

"And, Pattie, you don't mind—what I've been and told Mrs. Smithers?"

"Yes, I do mind. I can't help minding very much. It is a question of my father's good name; and I must mind that. But it is done, and I have to bear it. I shouldn't make things any better by going away, and making dear little Dot unhappy. Only, may I say one thing? I do want very much that Dot should never hear about this. I mean, I want her never to know that you could find out my secret as you did, and that you have broken your promise not to tell. Don't let it come to her ears."

Mrs. Cragg broke into almost a laugh.

"I should have thought it would be me, not you, to want that," she said. "And Dot's such a baby!"

"But she understands. Dot notices everything. And she has to learn what goodness and truth are—through you. She ought to know first what God is—through you. Don't you see what I mean? When I think of my mother, it helps me to know how true and loving God is. How can Dot learn in any other way? I can talk to her, but words don't mean much. Dot ought to learn the lesson—through you—through what you are."

Mrs. Cragg's head hung low. This went home like a dagger-thrust. If Dot were to form her childish notion of God from what her mother was, it might well be asked what would be the picture of God in that little mind?

Then she burst afresh into tears.

Dot's accident had at the first opened Mrs. Cragg's eyes to the reality of what her child was to her; but after tempers and ill-moods had obscured the lesson. Now, far more sharply, a second time it had come. In the hour when she stood, glass in hand, recklessly striving to force between Dot's lips that which would have rendered her a childless woman, and when Pattie had dashed the fearful peril aside, Mrs. Cragg became a changed person.

The change could not be otherwise than gradual in its working; yet in actual fact it was abrupt. Hitherto Mrs. Cragg's life-attitude had been away from good and towards evil. She had lived for herself only, not for God, not for those who were about her. Now, as in a flash, she had learnt to know something of her true self, to realise something of whither that self-pleasing attitude might lead her. Thenceforward her face was to be turned another way. Hard fighting would lie before her; but from this day she did fight, she did not merely drift. She began to wish to be more like Pattie.

Also she began ardently to wish for more of her little Dot's affection. Not now because she was jealous of Pattie, but because she found how much of the sweet child-love she had thrown away.

Dot bore no malice. When Mrs. Cragg set herself to amuse the little one, Dot magnanimously accepted all attentions. But at any moment she would turn from Mrs. Cragg, with a cry of joy, to "Pattie or

Dadda." There was no cry of joy when Mrs. Cragg appeared. It would take long before Dot could forget the past.

Cragg was told by his wife the terrible story of little Dot's narrow escape. Pattie had promised to say nothing; but Mrs. Cragg showed that her penitence was real by confessing it herself. Cragg was much overcome by the thought of what might have been—but for Pattie.

"My dear, I don't know how you feel," he said, "but I feel that nothing we can do for her will be too much—after this!"

"I think so too, Mr. Cragg. And I'd like Pattie never to leave us."

Cragg surveyed his wife seriously.

"You wish it now. But, by-and-by—when you begin to forget—"

"I shan't forget. I never shall. I couldn't—how could I? It isn't like a common thing happening. Just think—what it is that Pattie saved me from! No, I'd like Pattie to stop with us always. And I want to say something else too. I really am sorry now that I've spent such a lot lately, and I do mean to do better. I mean to be more careful. It hasn't been right."

Cragg came near and gave his wife a kiss.

"I'm glad you feel so, my dear," he said kindly. "It's a great relief to my mind."

"I mean to save all I can. And I'll spend as little as ever I can do with, till that bill is paid. I will really, Mr. Cragg. And—I think I shan't be so much with Mrs. Smithers. She hasn't been a nice friend."

"I hope it will all come true as you purpose, my dear," Cragg said gravely.

For a moment Mrs. Cragg was tempted to be angry, recognising the doubt in her husband's tone. Then she remembered that she had not been careful always to keep her word. Better than being angry was to resolve afresh, not in her own strength, and to show in the course of time that her intentions and promises were worthy of reliance.

CHAPTER XX

Made Clear

"PATTIE, I don't know what to do. Tell me how I'm to make Dot love me."

This was three weeks later. Dot was asleep, and Pattie had come to the sitting-room, leaving the new nursery-maid in charge. Mrs. Cragg broke out with the above remark.

"But Dot does love you. I am sure she does. Dot is such a loving little thing."

"She don't care to have me with her. I can see that plain enough. I can see the difference when you come in."

"A little child's love is so easily won. Haven't you found it so?"

"I don't know. I suppose I haven't taken the trouble. I've been too busy—thinking about other things."

"You will never be too busy again for Dot—your own little Dot. Think how much you ought to be to her—and how much you have to teach her!"

"You said so once before. I've not forgotten. I don't think I can forget. It frightens me sometimes. Pattie, did you really mean what you said—quite all that?"

"All what?"

"The other day. Don't you remember? You said to me—you said something—something about—about Dot having to know what God is, through me. It frightened me then, and it frightens me now, when I think of what you said."

"It was true. Of course it was true. Don't you see?"

"No, I don't."

"But you can't help it. God has given little Dot to you, just that you may teach her about Him—that you may show her what He is. No one in all the world can teach her as you can."

"I can't! I don't know how."

"You have to learn how. You ought to be able. Other people can talk to her about God; but you can show her what the talking means, by what you are to her yourself. There's no love in the world so near to the love of God as a mother's love. And Dot can never have another mother,—so it all depends upon you."

"Pattie—you don't mean—"

"I mean just what I'm saying," Pattie replied quietly. "If you don't show her what is meant by the love of God, she may learn it in some other way; but she can't learn it in the best way of all. It isn't so much a question of what you say or don't say to Dot, as of what you are to her. She ought to feel that she can always turn to you in everything—that she can always be sure of your truth and your love. She ought to know that, if all the world went wrong, you could never fail her. And then that would help her to understand what is meant by the love and the truth of God and of Christ. Don't you see now?"

"Doesn't sound as if I ever could!" muttered the other.

"But if it is right, you can. There's always a 'can' where there's an 'ought.'"

"I do mean to try." Mrs. Cragg was looking down and twisting a corner of the tablecloth. "And I want you to help me. I know you can—more than anybody."

"I'd do anything I was able."

"Yes, I know you would. I'm sure of that. Pattie, I want to know—do you think you can ever forgive me for getting at your letters, and then telling Mrs. Smithers what I thought? I told Mr. Cragg the other day about it; and he says you behaved beautifully, and we've got to do the best we can to make up to you for what you've had to bear. And we want you always to live here,—to be like Dot's elder sister. If it

hadn't been for you, we shouldn't have any little Dot now. Cragg and I can't forget that. Do you think you can forgive me?"

Pattie had had no chance of getting in a word thus far. As she could not make her voice heard, she spoke with her face.

"I'm sure I don't deserve you should. And I've given my husband a lot of bother lately. I can't think what's come over me the last few years. But I do mean to be different now; and I'll try to learn to be what you say I ought to be to Dot. Only, I shall want you to help me. And if you went away, perhaps I might forget. I don't think I should, but I might."

The conversation was interrupted. Cragg walked in, carrying a letter, which he gave to Pattie.

"Post this minute come," he remarked. "Dot is looking more herself this afternoon than I've seen her. Just been there, and she woke up. She's all right; you needn't hurry. Eh?"—as an exclamation burst from Pattie.

The girl clasped her hands.

"O! I am so glad! It's the one thing I wanted! I am so glad! My dear father!"

"Anything happened?" asked Cragg.

Pattie's face was a mixture of smiles and tears.

"Yes. A letter from Mr. Peterson himself—such a kind letter. He has found out who took the money, and he knows now that it was not my father. He is so grieved to think he could ever have suspected him. He says he would give his right hand to undo the past."

"The man must be a wretch! Why, he ought to have known your father better!" declared Mrs. Cragg. Like most persons of suspicious temperament, she was voluble in condemning others for doing what she would have done herself.

"I think he ought; but it is easy for us to say that now. I suppose it was not easy for him to feel sure then. My father never spoke a hard word of Mr. Peterson."

"And your father will never know that the truth is found out. I do think that's too bad."

Cragg was silent, watching the light on Pattie's face.

"Why should he not know? How can we tell? If he cannot see or hear for himself what goes on here—and we don't know anything about that!—I should think the angels would tell him. If he cares to know, I am sure they would. I am so thankful it is cleared up. It is like a great weight taken off me."

"And you mean to say,"—began Mrs. Cragg,—"you mean to say, Pattie, that you can feel kindly about that man—that Peterson?"

"I think he did wrongly. He was sure too quickly. He ought to have trusted longer. But it was difficult for him—things looked black, I suppose. And now he is very very sorry. No one could be more sorry."

"Well, you're not my sort. If a man had behaved so to me, I shouldn't

forget it the rest of my life. I shouldn't want ever to see him again. Why, just think—if he hadn't turned your father away, you wouldn't have come here at all, and your father might be living now! Just think!"

"My dear!" remonstrated Cragg.

But even this suggestion could not shake Pattie's peace, though two tears fell.

"It must have been God's will," she said. "It wasn't only Mr. Peterson's doing. And if God meant to call my father Home just at that time, He would have done it in some other way—even if we had not come to Putworth. And if it was the right time for father to go, how could I want to keep him back?"

"You're right, Pattie," said Cragg. "And my wife is wrong to try you like this. It's a great mercy to know that your poor father's name is cleared. And you'll feel all the happier for it. You're right enough to forgive Mr. Peterson. Only I do think he ought, in some sort of way, to try to make up to you for the past. He has done you and your father a great wrong, though I dare say he didn't mean it. And, take it any way you will, it's through him in a sort of manner that you are an orphan. I think he ought to do something for you."

Pattie placed the letter in Cragg's hand.

"Read that, please," she said.

Cragg read part to himself, but one sentence he gave aloud:

"'As a small token of my undying regret, I intend at once to settle upon you the sum of fifty pounds per annum for the rest of your life. Then I shall know that the child of my old friend will not come to actual want. I am most thankful to have found your address.'"

"She won't come to want, if we can help it," remarked Cragg. "Pattie, does this mean that you'll want to go back among your old friends? I shouldn't wonder if it does."

Pattie looked, smiling, from one to the other.

"Not yet," she said. "I shall like to see them all again—some day. But, as long as you and Mrs. Cragg want me, I shall feel this to be my home."

And Pattie lived with the Craggs for two full years from that date. Then one day she went to church, with many friends, and came away as the young doctor's wife—Mrs. May. Some said he had won a treasure.

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