



A QUIET VALLEY

Agnes Giberne.



A QUIET VALLEY

By

AGNES GIBERNE,

www.saptarshee.in

First published by www.saptarshee.in India.Pin:-413305

Phone:02188-299295

Email: saptarsheepakashan@gmail.com

This edition copyright ©www.saptarshee.in

While every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders and obtain their permission, this has not been possible. Any omission brought to our notice will be remedied in future editions.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic or mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission from the publisher.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by any way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on subsequent purchaser.

Typeset/Printed by Krutika Printers, mangalwedha

CONTENTS.

CHAP.

- A WELSH HOTEL
- THE CHILD
- A SEARCH
- JOAN'S MOTHER
- THE LETTER
- DAUGHTER OF THE HOUSE
- THE RED HOUSE
- OLD MR. BROOKE
- "GEORGE'S VALLEY"
- LIFE AND DEATH
- CAIRNS FARM
- "POLLY"
- A COLLISION
- MARIAN'S FEAR
- DULCIBEL'S NURSE
- MOTHER AND CHILD
- TROUBLE STILL
- ANOTHER MEETING
- ABOUT THE FUTURE

- HALL AND FARM
- AN UNLOOKED-FOR VISITOR
- WHAT MIGHT BE
- A PRESENT HELP
- JOAN'S CONFESSION
- PERPLEXITY
- SHOULD SHE GIVE HER UP?
- THE INTERVIEW
- WARFARE
- HIS CHILD
- THE VALLEY ONCE MORE

CHAPTER I. A WELSH HOTEL.

“COME, Dulcie! Dulcie, my dear! Not ready yet?”

A spice of good-humored impatience breathed through the rich bass tones. George Rutherford stood in the hall of a somewhat primitive Welsh hotel. The door opening into a sitting-room, on one side, displayed sundry ladies and gentlemen, occupied or non-occupied in various ways. The door opening into the kitchen, on the other side, displayed a waiter or two in shirtsleeves, coming and going. The front door, opening on the hotel grounds, displayed a bare, gravelly space, with shrubs around, a short avenue of trees beyond, and glimpses of distant hills softly outlined against a blue sky.

Mr. Rutherford was a man of perhaps five or six-and-thirty years, unusually tall and massive in make, yet not stout. Honest brown eyes looked

out from beneath a brow of remarkable breadth, which was framed in an abundant growth of tawny hair, fine as silk in texture. Moustache and beard, of a somewhat darker hue than the hair upon his head, almost hid a mouth of characteristic and beautiful outlines. He stood at the foot of the staircase, grasping a huge, crook-handled walking stick as tall as himself; and blissfully unconscious of, or indifferent to, the attention he was attracting from the inmates of the drawing-room, while he called again, in tones “not loud, but deep” —

“Dulcie, my dear, make haste!”

“That’s the bridegroom,” murmured a mild-faced maiden lady, quite an old resident at the hotel, since she had been there a fortnight. She addressed herself to a “new arrival,” seated by her side. “We call them ‘our bride and bridegroom.’ They came two days ago.”

“Why, he might be the father of half-a-dozen children,” quoth the newly arrived, a stout and genial widow, well on in middle life. “He a bridegroom!”

“I don’t know whether there has been a former marriage, but I rather imagine not. Oh, it is evidently a wedding tour!”

A boy of about ten came bounding downstairs in light leaps, clearing four or five steps at a time. He too had brown eyes, and a mass of tawny hair falling over a fine brow.

“She’s coming, uncle.”

“Would do for his son,” murmured the widow.

“Georgie dear,” called a small and eager voice from the landing above, “I’ll be down directly—in one moment. There’s a button off my boot, and I must sew it on.”

“All right,” responded Mr. Rutherford. “We’ll wait in front. Come, Leo!” and he strode out.

“He doesn’t look much like a ‘Georgie,’” softly said the new-comer to the maiden lady. “What a nice boy! But I don’t understand his presence if it is a wedding tour.”

“I don’t know that any one exactly understands. I fancy Mr. Rutherford is a man likely to do things in a fashion unlike everybody else. Perhaps he has adopted the boy. Here comes the bride.”

The lady, running swiftly downstairs, could hardly have been less than six or seven-and-twenty in age. She was as small and slim in make as her husband was tall and massive, and so fair in coloring that his tawny beard might almost be counted dark beside her smooth flaxen hair. The pale fringes to her blue eyes were unwontedly long and thick, and there was enough coloring in her cheeks to obviate insipidity. Her manner was marked by an eagerness amounting to flurry; and as she ran out of the front

door she grasped a long stick, a rolled-up waterproof, a closed basket, a book, and a pair of gloves.

“Georgie, dear, I’m so sorry,” she was heard to say.

“All right,” responded Mr. Rutherford once more. “Hadn’t you better give me some of your paraphernalia?”

“Oh, yes—oh, thank you, dear! It’s only this book—Trench’s Poems, you know. You said you would read me some of it. Will it go into your pocket? And Leo said I must be sure to take my stick. And I thought we might want my cloak to sit on, if the grass should be damp. And in case of being late for lunch, it is best to have some biscuits and a sandwich or two, because then we shall not feel so hurried.”

“Anything else?” asked George, with an expressive intonation.

Mrs. Rutherford looked up, her anxious little fair face breaking into a smile.

“Now you are laughing at me, Georgie, dear.”

“Not at all. Always best to be prepared for emergencies. Well, come along, both of you. We shall not be back, at this rate, till—”

“Midnight,” suggested Leonard.

“No; dinner.”

“Lunch won’t matter, now we have something with us,” said Dulcibel, beginning to subside from her flurry. “You are going to show me your favorite valley, are you not, dear? Oh, don’t! I can easily carry the basket, please.”

“Give it to me. Here, Dulcie—I mean what I say. Leo will take your waterproof. If you can carry yourself there and back it will be as much as you are equal to.”

“I am sure I can. I feel equal to anything to-day.”

“Equal to anything” meant, as her husband knew by experience, equal to four or five miles, the latter part performed distressfully. Twenty or thirty miles were nothing to him. In her own home, before marriage, Dulcibel Lloyd had counted two miles an arduous undertaking, but George Rutherford was getting her slowly into training. They had been married just seven months, so it was not precisely a case of the honeymoon. In one sense they might be said to be still on their wedding trip, however. Dulcie had not yet seen her husband’s home, extensive alterations in it making a prolonged absence necessary.

They were by no means in one of the more mountainous parts of Wales. The hotel stood outside a small village, on the verge of a wild moor; the name of the village containing the liquid double “l,” as did the names of many villages near. Undulating hills lay around in all directions, showing

autumn tints; and two or three mountains, attaining the respectable height of two thousand feet or more, were visible at a little distance.

George Rutherford had been to the spot a few years earlier, and he retained warm recollections of his visit. He was anxious now to display the charms of the place to his wife and nephew.

The walk to his favorite valley was fair enough, and the valley proved to be fairer still. Dulcibel would not attempt to learn the name, which had a softly indefinite sound like running water, perplexing to Saxon ears.

“I want to see what you like, but I don’t care what it is called,” she protested. “It will always be ‘Georgie’s Valley’ to me. I dislike having to talk consonants; and what is the use?”

George laughed, and gave in.

The valley lay level and green, with rounded well-clothed hills surrounding, and a wide stream or

small river partly skirting it. The stream had to be crossed by a “shaking bridge” of local celebrity, a somewhat narrow structure of planks bound strongly together with wire, the whole depending on chains, and showing a singular elasticity, for it vibrated and swung at every step.

Dulcibel shrank back at first, absolutely refusing to cross or to let her companions cross. It was “dangerous,” she said; something would give way, or somebody would be giddy and tumble in. But George mercilessly strode to the centre and stood there, keeping the bridge in motion, with evident enjoyment of its undulations, and Leonard dashed merrily over. Dulcibel was fain to summon up her courage, and consent to be led across by her husband’s strong hand, growing absolutely white with fear.

“I shall enjoy nothing with the thought of having to go back,” she averred, tremulously, on the other side.

George looked down on her with a strong, tender pity, and said softly—

“O thou of little faith!”

“Georgie, dear, I’m very wrong—I’m always frightened at something,” she said, apologetically; “but you know it is my way.”

“You don’t really think I would bring my little wife where there was danger?”

“Oh, no! O Georgie, dear, no! It’s only that I am silly,” she said, her thick fair lashes downcast and wet.

“Well, don’t be silly any more. There are troubles enough in life, without manufacturing them out of nothing. See, isn’t this pretty?”

A very old gray church stood in the centre of the level green valley; and this of course had to be entered and examined, the key having been procured at a cottage on the way

thither. The whitewashed walls and dusty floor within roused George's displeasure; and Dulcibel cried out against the great roof-beams as "ugly," till she found that he counted them worthy of admiration, whereupon she quieted into brief silence.

They found their way then to the river edge, near the church; and Dulcibel would be content with nothing short of an immediate preliminary luncheon.

"Not the sandwiches yet," she said; "but biscuits. Now don't say you are not hungry, Georgie dear; for I know you are. I'm almost starving."

George disposed of a biscuit obediently, and then found himself called upon to read poetry aloud. Not that Dulcibel possessed any ear or soul for poetry; but she knew George loved it, and she was a most dutiful wife. George thoroughly appreciated her wish to please him, though no doubt he would have appreciated still more

heartily the discovery of a kindred taste in her. But this was not to be expected; so he only smiled under his tawny moustache, and asked—

“What shall I read?”

“Oh, something short and pretty, dear! Trench’s poems have such nice stories in them sometimes.”

The tawny moustache twitched again.

“Now don’t, Georgie, dear! You know I shall like whatever you choose. What have you opened upon now?”

“These are only couplets—favorites of mine, rather. How do you like this, Dulcie?—

“Things earthly we must know ere love them; ’tis alone

Things heavenly that must be first loved and after known.”

“To see the face of God, this makes the joy of heaven;

The purer then the eye, the more
joy will be given.”

* * * * *

“When God afflicts thee, think he
hews a rugged stone,

Which must be shaped or else
aside as useless thrown.”

“I don’t like that,” said Dulcibel.
“Why, Georgie, it sounds as if one
ought to wish for trouble.”

“No; only to recognize the good
of trouble when it comes.”

“But I can’t. And I dislike the
thought of its coming—of anything
ever changing. I’m so perfectly happy
now, I should like to go on and go on
always—just like this. But I know I
can’t. I suppose one has to be ‘shaped’;
but it seems to me very dreadful. I
can’t bear to look forward sometimes,
and to fancy all the things that may
happen in life.”

“Fearing again, Dulcie?”

“How can I help it? I love you so; and changes must come. And I dread changes.”

Her hand was on George’s knee, and the words came with almost sobs between. Once more George said softly—

““O thou of little faith,’ Dulcie!”

“I think I must have little faith—very, very little. Looking forward makes me so afraid. I can’t bear the thought of anything passing away—as things are now. I never was so happy in all my life before. Georgie—was it very foolish of me?—last night I was lying awake, crying, thinking what it would be if you were to be taken. Life wouldn’t be worth living then. It wouldn’t, dear;” and there came a downright sob.

The boy Leo was away at some distance. George’s eyes fell again on the open page of the book; and he read aloud, in answer—

“Ill fares the child of Heaven who
will not entertain

On earth the stranger’s grief, the
exile’s sense of pain.”

“But I don’t,” said Dulcibel. “Of course one speaks of heaven as one’s home; and I suppose it ought to seem so. But I don’t feel the least like an exile on earth. And the pain is in expecting things to change, knowing death must come; not in being away from heaven now.”

“Dulcie, I would leave off expecting and fearing,” said her husband.

“I can’t. It is my way.”

George turned a few pages, and read aloud once more, in his strong deep voice:—

“I say to thee—do thou repeat
To the first man thou mayest
meet,

In lane, highway, or open street—”

“That he and we and all men move

Under a canopy of love,
As broad as the blue sky above;”

“That doubt and trouble, fear and pain

And anguish, all are shadows vain,

That death itself shall not remain;”

“That weary deserts we may tread,

A dreary labyrinth may thread,
Through dark ways underground
be led.”

“Yet if we will one Guide obey,
The dreariest path, the darkest way,

Shall issue out in heavenly day.”

“And we, on divers shores now
cast,
Shall meet, our perilous voyage
past,
All in our Father’s House at last.”

Dulcibel’s hand came over the page.

“George, you are making me dreadfully melancholy. I don’t think I can hear any more. I shall have to cry outright. I’m quite sure the last verse means something about being parted, and I can’t bear to think of parting. Please stop! I’m going to dip my hands in the water: and you can read a little more to yourself if you like. I wonder if there are any fish in the river.”

CHAPTER II. THE CHILD.

GEORGE did not continue reading after his wife had made her way to the water's edge, some few yards distant. She was soon busily engaged dabbling her hands in the clear water, so much occupied as to be for the time oblivious of her fair surroundings. Yet they were very beautiful.

Leo had betaken himself to a steep, rounded hill on the other side of the valley, where he could be seen, vigorously ascending. George would have liked to perform that ascent himself; but he knew that the climb would be quite beyond Dulcie's limited powers, and that she would not be happy to remain behind. So he kept his seat, giving himself up to a dreamy enjoyment which was after all quite as much in his line as the more active enjoyment of bodily exercise. George

Rutherford was a many-sided individual.

A scene lay around well worth attention. The river-bed showed golden tintings, and green reflections from the opposite bank danced on the ripples. Facing him were three hills, rising like great rounded billows across the valley. The church, built of whitish-gray stone, with low, square tower and slated roof, stood on a low level, almost at the bottom of the valley, and quite at its centre, just between the "Castle Hill," which Leo was climbing, and George's own position. Other hills filled up the landscape, clothed in foliage, and trees grew abundantly all along the course of the little babbling river. Glows of sunshine came and went, with shady intervals between. The calm, soft repose of the valley might well strike home to any heart.

Dulcie was not greatly affected by aspects of nature; but the calm and sweetness sank deep into George

Rutherford's heart. She was only "a few yards off, keeping up a little chatter, something like the pretty babble of the water; and George was lost in thought, quite unconscious of what she said, or of whether she said anything. He woke up at length, to find her laughing at him.

"Why, Georgie, what are you thinking about?" she cried.

"Time for us to be moving," George said, standing up. "That boy ought to come back. How do you like my valley, Dulcie?"

"Too much shut in," said Dulcibel promptly. "But it is pretty—and the river is nice. I wish the poor in our towns could have such a water supply. There comes Leo. Oh, we are not going back yet, Georgie! No use to think of being in time for lunch, so we'll just eat my sandwiches here. I wish we had a bottle or two of soda-water."

Dreamy enjoyment was over, and an hour of merriment ensued, Dulcie being in high spirits, and allowing no time for enjoyment of reposeful nature. Then at length she consented to a move, and a sigh broke from her as to “that horrid bridge.”

“I see!” George began.

“Yes; I’ve been putting it off as long as possible; but I suppose we must!” and Dulcie sighed again. “I shall never come to your valley a second time, Georgie. Horrid place! I can’t endure that bridge. Is there really no other way out?”

“Not within your powers of walking, Dulcie. And if there were—” George paused, with a curious expression in his brown eyes—“I should like my wife to be not quite so readily beaten.”

“Oh, I’m not the least proud, Georgie dear! I’d give in willingly.”

But George took the empty basket, and gave her his arm; and she had to follow his lead.

The bridge reached, they came all at once to a very unexpected sight. A little girl was there, entirely alone, possibly three or four years old, seated composedly on the grass close beside the bridge, her plump hands folded. She did not give the strangers a look of welcome. A pair of black velvety eyes gazed hard as they approached, and the black brows above drew into a forbidding frown, odd on that infantine face, while the full red lips pouted in correspondence.

“Why, Georgie, who can the little thing be?”

Dulcibel knelt straight down on the grass, and asked the child’s name. No answer was vouchsafed. The black eyes glowered at Dulcie, and the black brows frowned more heavily.

“Georgie, she’s a darling,” cried the forgiving Dulcie. “Just see what

lovely eyes! She's as dark as a gypsy. And how nicely the little pet is dressed! She isn't a poor child, Georgie. She must belong to a lady. But fancy leaving her here! Why, she might have fallen into the river. What a mercy we came back this way! Now, you little dear, do tell me; what is your name?"

"Whom do you belong to, my dear?" asked George, as Dulcibel's most winning smile met only with another scowl from the rich dark eyes and brows.

"Don!" came at last solemnly.

"John?" hazarded George.

"Or—Gone," suggested Dulcibel.

"Don!" was solemnly reiterated.

"She likes you better than me, Georgie, dear. She doesn't frown at you half so fiercely," said Dulcibel.

George seemed flattered, and he bent low over the small piece of composed and sedate humanity.

“What is your name, my dear?” he asked. “Eh? Couldn’t you manage to say it? What do they call you? Not ‘Baby,’ I expect. You are too old to be baby! Come, tell your name, won’t you? Tell me!”

George looked indescribably coaxing, and the drawn brows relaxed in some degree.

“What’s your name, eh?” repeated George.

“Doan!” came at length, with clear incisive utterance.

“Joan; John and Joan! Yes, it must be that.”

“If it isn’t Gone, and Don’t,” said George. He rubbed his head, and combed out his long silky beard with perplexed fingers. “Here my little dear,” he said, stooping again, “tell me now, won’t you? Where’s mother?”

Silence.

“What on earth are we to do?” asked George.

“Take her to the hotel,” suggested Leo.

“There’s no hurry about going back,” observed Dulcibel, delighted to put off the evil moment of bridge crossing. “It won’t take us more than an hour to walk.”

“Depends on speed,” muttered George.

“And somebody is sure to come soon to find her. She must have wandered away from a party of tourists. We must just stay and keep guard till they appear. It is quite impossible to leave the little mite alone. Perhaps she will sit on my lap.”

But a touch from Dulcibel brought an immediate howl—not a tearful cry, only one loud, distinct shout of protest, with an accompanying scowl.

“I’m afraid she has a temper,” said Dulcie, rather alarmed.

Delay being decided upon, Dulcibel sat down, and George

wandered about near at hand, repeatedly coming back to observe with curious eyes the solemn, black-eyed infant, seated pompously apart, with folded hands and calm demeanor. Leo tried his hand next, very cautiously. He drew near, and made funny grimaces, and snapped his fingers, and tossed leaves into her lap. She flung the leaves back at him, frowning still; but presently a dimple appeared in the rounded red-brown cheek, and the beautiful black eyes lighted up with a smile. Leo offered a biscuit, only to have it thrown back in his face with a renewed scowl. George meanwhile crossed the bridge, and vainly explored the neighborhood for tracks or traces of somebody. Presently, finding Leo still baffled by the little creature's resolute unfriendliness, he came near himself, and with a quick movement lifted her straight up into his strong arms. One indignant shout rose, and then she

seemed to submit—nay, seemed rather to like her new position.

“Poor wee mite!” said George. “Now, my little dear, tell me, where’s mother?”

“Don!” was this time very distinct.

“When will she come back? Did she tell you to wait here?” A nod. “Come that’s better. Did mother go to speak to somebody?” No response. “Did mother say she would be back soon?” No response. “How soon is mother coming. Don’t you know? Ah, I thought not!” as the black head was decisively shaken. “Dear me, how strange of mother to leave you here, all alone! And your name is Joan, isn’t it?” Another nod. “I thought so. Joan will have to come home with us, and be taken care of, till mother can be found.”

No answer; but Joan seemed extremely comfortable in his arms. A drowsy look was creeping into the

black eyes, as if the poor little mind had been long on the stretch and needed rest. While George stood holding her, she laid her head down on his broad shoulder, and went to sleep.

“Poor wee lamb!” murmured George, quite touched.

“But where can the mother be?” asked Dulcibel.

“I hope nothing has happened to her. A most extraordinary proceeding, anyhow, to leave the child alone here. If it were not such a canny little being it might have fallen into the river and been drowned—nothing more likely! I cannot understand any mother acting in such a way, and why she has not come back.”

“I don’t suppose she intends to come back,” pronounced Dulcie. “Well, I call this quite an adventure—quite a romance! And I shall not be the least surprised if nothing more is heard of the mother—horrid, heartless, wicked creature.”

“If it really were so. But we do not know yet, Dulcie. It may be only a case of heinous thoughtlessness.”

“Or of drink.”

“No need yet to believe the worst.”

“But to think of her leaving the little pet at all—such cruelty! Ninety-nine children in a hundred would be out of their wits with fright, or would wander away and get quite lost. And she might catch her death of cold on the damp grass. Oh, you needn’t defend the woman, Georgie, dear! I have no patience with such unmotherly, heartless ways.”

George had not the slightest intention of defending a course of action which only aroused in him deeper, though quieter indignation than in Dulcie; and he held his peace.

The short frock hung loosely, and Dulcibel caught sight of a small pocket. It was a neat print frock, nicely made; and indeed the child’s whole

appearance spoke of affectionate care. Dulcibel's slim fingers dived into the pocket, bringing out thence a tiny pocket handkerchief and a minute red pencil. On the handkerchief were the initials "J. B.," and on the pencil, where a flat place had been cut for the purpose, was printed the single word "Joan."

"That is her name, then," said Leo. "What a jolly little face she has, uncle—and such black eyelashes!"

"Little lamb!" George said again, pityingly. "Well, there's nothing to be done that I can see, except to take her to the hotel. One cannot leave her here. Leo, my hands are not free. Just tear a page out of my pocket-book—you'll find it in the right hand pocket—and write—'Child Joan found: safe at hotel;' and give our address in full. Then pin it firmly to the bridge. Your aunt is sure to have plenty of pins. Or tie it—yes, that is better. Of course a boy has string. We must take back the

church key to the cottage, and we can leave word there also. Perhaps we may hear something about the mother. If not, I shall have to make inquiries to-morrow. Dulcie, my dear, you must hold on to my coat-tails crossing the bridge. Or stay—you can slip your arm in mine. Yes, she is a jolly little thing,” George added, looking down on the dark, small face, with black lashes lying on the rosy cheeks.

Joan never stirred. She slept on, peacefully at rest in her new refuge.

CHAPTER III. A SEARCH.

DINNER in the hotel was served always at six o'clock. Though now somewhat late in the season, tourists to the number of fifty still mustered around the table of horseshoe shape. Considerable sensation was caused by the late appearance of that "interesting man, Mr. Rutherford," with a dark-browed infant in his arms.

Joan was by this time exceedingly wide awake; and efforts had been made to detach her from George in time for dinner, Dulcibel proposing to remain upstairs in charge of the little creature, having a tray sent up for herself. But Joan saw matters differently. She refused to be won over under any pretence or inducement whatever. George had dressed for dinner while Joan was still asleep. The moment her black eyes opened, however, she was by his side. In vain Dulcibel petted and lectured, pleaded and scolded, offered

kisses and offered cake. Kisses were spurned, and cake was rejected, and blandishments fell unheeded. Joan would not so much as look at Dulcibel. She seemed quite content while clutching George's hand, or holding to his coat; but any serious attempt to separate the two raised shouts of such indignant remonstrance that Dulcibel's hands went to her ears.

"There's no time to fight the matter out now. She must come downstairs with us," said George, more than half gratified.

So some fifty pairs of eyes were treated to the sight of Mr. Rutherford, marching in the rear of his slim, little wife, bearing a small "new arrival" in his strong arms; her black eyes surveying the company with a certain jealous defiance, and her black hair pressed confidently against his tawny beard.

"Halloo, Mr. Rutherford! Fished up a mermaid in your day's

wanderings?" asked a friendly clergyman, Mr. Meredith, George's opposite companion at table.

"Something like it," responded George. "Another chair here, please! We shall have to break through the rules as to newcomers. This lady is too young to manage for herself."

The waiter grinned and obeyed; but Joan declined the chair. She slid to the ground, and stood there solemnly, clutching George's coat; her velvety eyes just above the level of the table. If anybody smiled at Joan, the response was an immediate frown; otherwise she seemed indifferent to her surroundings. Curiosity was evidently rife; and George briefly sketched, for the benefit of his near neighbors, the manner in which Joan had been found.

"I wasn't far wrong. It's a river-maid, not a mermaid!" said Mr. Meredith.

"It's a very odd little mortal, anyhow," the stout widow, Mrs. Tracy,

remarked. She sat on the other side of the table, a few seats lower down. “What do you think of doing with her?”

“Put her to sleep on the sofa in our room,” said George.

“I am afraid your night’s rest will be broken. And then?”

“Find out to whom she belongs.”

“And if you cannot?”

“It is well never to start in an enterprise expecting failure,” said George.

“But still—”

“And this is not London.”

“Probably the friends are at least as anxious to discover the child as you can be to discover them,” said Mr. Meredith.

“Unless,” Mrs. Tracy observed—“unless somebody meant to leave it there.”

“Oh, impossible!” cried Dulcibel, from a constitutional instinct of contradiction. She had herself made the

same suggestion, and Leo's laughing face showed recollection of hearing her do so. "Such a little darling!"

Mrs. Tracy surveyed the small subject of discussion.

"Something just a degree vixenish about her, isn't there?" she asked. "I'm not quite sure that I should care to deal with that nature by-and-by."

"Oh, but so lovable!" said Dulcibel. "Look at her now with my husband!" And indeed the upward glance of those black eyes into the face of the big fair man to whom the little creature had attached herself could hardly have been surpassed in tenderness.

"Yes, that is quite charming," assented Mrs. Tracy; "but—" and she shook her head—"but—"

Conversation drifted in other directions, and Joan was more or less forgotten. She stood so very still that forgetfulness was not difficult. George fed her now and then with scraps, as he

might have fed a pet dog; and she consented to be so treated. A basin of bread and milk had been already disposed of upstairs, therefore more was not needed. If Leo, on Joan's other side, offered anything, he met with the usual severe refusal.

Dinner over, and the move into the drawing-room made, Joan calmly climbed upon George's knee, evidently satisfied that he had nothing better in life to do than to nurse her small self. Dulcibel remonstrated, but George would not turn the child away. He read the paper, with the dark head lying placidly on his shoulder; and when it was decided that Joan must go to bed George carried her upstairs.

“Just for once,” he said, half laughing; “we shall find her people tomorrow, poor wee mite!” There was a sound of regret in his voice. Somehow he did not wish to give her up.

A bed had been made on the sofa, and a nightdress of tiny dimensions

lent by somebody. Joan was growing very sleepy once more, and made no objections to the removal of her frock, submitting so far to Dulcibel's handling, while George sat down at a table to write a letter.

There, however, Joan made a stand. She stood, pouting, in her little red petticoats, with bare arms and shoulders. Evidently something was customary next, which she could not or would not explain, every suggestion being received with an indignant "No!" Finally Joan took the matter into her own hands, knelt down, shut her eyes, and said solemnly, with distinct utterance—

"“Desuo, Dentle Shepherd, hear
me,
Bress Thy nittle lamb to-night!””

Recollection seemed to fail there, and no more words were forthcoming.

“Yes, darling—go on,” coaxed Dulcibel.

“Through the darkness be Thou near me—”

No; Joan refused to be prompted. She opened her eyes, frowned at Dulcibel, and scrambled to her feet.

“Is that all, Joan?” asked George.

“Dess,” Joan answered. She seemed to have an odd affection for the fourth letter of the alphabet.

“Did mother teach you that?” asked George.

No answer.

“Joan, did mother say good-bye when she went away from you today?” George inquired suddenly.

“Dess,” Joan replied again; and a look of unmistakable sadness came into the black eyes. “Dood-bye!”

Husband and wife looked at each other.

“That’s odd,” said Dulcibel.

“Didn’t mother mean to come back again to Joan?” asked George, bending down towards the child.

Again there was no reply.

“Joan, is mother gone?”

“Don!” Joan echoed.

“Mother—gone—where?”

inquired George.

Joan only echoed “Don!” once more, and looked very sleepy.

“You won’t find out anything in that way Georgie dear,” said his wife. “I don’t believe Joan knows much more than we do ourselves.”

“Well, the sooner she is in bed the better,” said George.

* * * * *

*

Morning come, and Joan appeared at breakfast, fresh and rosy, still as George’s devoted attendant. He could not move an inch without her. Peals of laughter were evoked when she endeavored to place herself upon the same chair with her new friend.

George laughed as heartily as any one, and Joan showed a sublime disdain of people's opinions.

Breakfast over, a battle took place. Rather fortunately for George's purposes, it had turned out a wet day. Inquiries about Joan were an immediate necessity, and there could be no doubt that they would be three times as rapid and efficient without Dulcibel to delay his steps. Rain came down in a continuous pelt, and she decided to remain indoors with Joan, while George and Leo sallied forth on their hunt.

But the parting of George from Joan was not quite an easy matter. Dulcibel coaxed and George reasoned without avail. Joan held on to his coat-tails like a vice. When at length he gently wrenched himself free from the little hands and vanished, shutting the door, Joan gave one fearful and prolonged yell of rage. Having thus let off steam, and relieved herself, she

subsided into a corner of the drawing-room, with solemn disdain of everybody present, scorning all blandishments.

Lunch-time arrived, but not George or Leo. Dulcibel had scarcely passed so wearisome a day since her marriage. Hitherto her life had been as one continued honeymoon. She could almost have shed tears at her husband's non-appearance, only she was ashamed.

Joan was by this time sufficiently hungry to consent to eat, and Dulcie found half an hour's amusement in ministering to her wants. But, hunger once satisfied, Joan retreated again to the corner, presently dropping asleep there.

The afternoon hours crept by slowly, rain still falling in a ceaseless drench, George and Leo still absent.

Walking out, even for five minutes, was not to be thought of, Dulcibel being a person who caught

cold easily. But being also a little person of restless tendencies, accustomed to a good deal of small change and excitement in everyday life, and not at all given to reading or needlework, she found it by no means easy to get through such a day. A year earlier she would have risked a wet ramble unhesitatingly, and probably would have laid herself up for a month, without much of after regret. Illness itself supplies a certain measure of satisfying excitement to some natures. But Dulcibel the wife, might not venture to do what Dulcibel the spinster could have done. The fear of her husband's disapprobation was stronger than wilfulness.

So she staid indoors, and dipped listlessly into several books, and talked about nothing in particular with divers persons, and made several vain attempts upon Joan, and tried a few stitches of knitting now and then. And at length she took to standing at the

window, gazing out forlornly upon the wet and dripping scene.

Presently she found Mr. Meredith at her side. He was a man in early middle life, pleasant-faced, and kind-mannered. Dulcibel involuntarily turned to him for sympathy.

“I can’t think why my husband does not come back,” she said.

“He will soon appear now, no doubt. Mr. Rutherford is not one to care much about weather, I should suppose.”

“If not, I suppose I may care for him,” said Dulcibel rather tartly.

“Just so. Quite right that you should,” said Mr. Meredith with intent to soothe. “No doubt, the inquiries about yonder little maid have taken longer than he expected.” Mr. Meredith glanced at Joan, coiled up still in her corner.

“I never saw such an unsociable child in my life,” said Dulcibel. “One can do nothing with her.”

“It requires patience. But the shyness will break down in time,” said Mr. Meredith, cheerfully. “That is to say, it would do so, if any delay occurred in finding her belongings.”

“Shyness! It is all pride and temper,” said Dulcibel.

Mr. Meredith thought of certain utterances at dinner the evening before.

“Perhaps not altogether,” he said. “There may have been some fault in the training.”

“I have seen plenty of spoilt children, and they are not like this,” retorted Dulcibel. “I believe she is disagreeable by nature. Think of keeping to that corner, and refusing to speak civilly to anybody all day. It is quite unnatural. I hope we shall hear that her friends are found. There is no return for kindness shown to such a child.”

“Bad bargain, in short,” mused Mr. Meredith. “We don’t object to

being repaid in full for our good deeds, do we?"

Dulcibel colored. "Now, how horrid you must have thought me, before you could say that!"

"No, indeed," Mr. Meredith answered. "I fancy you, like many people, are better than your words."

"But isn't it natural to wish for a little love and gratitude in return, when one gives out to people?"

"Quite natural, and not wrong; only sometimes one has to put aside the wish, and rise to a higher level—to 'do good, hoping for nothing again,'" Mr. Meredith said, looking towards the small person in question. He added softly—"Freely ye have received, freely give."

Dulcibel sighed.

"Well; we have not given much yet," she said. "The child's friends ought to have passed an anxious night. But I begin to think they have left her

on purpose. Children are forsaken sometimes."

"The position in which she was found hardly gives one that impression," said Mr. Meredith.

Another hour passed, and at length, not long before dinner, two dripping figures appeared within the front door. Dulcibel ran eagerly out of the drawing-room, regardless of certain smiles caused there by her impulsive movement. But Joan's rush of welcome was even quicker than Dulcibel's. George put them both off with his hands.

"No; don't touch me; I am soaked," he said in his hearty voice. "We have had a day of it, I assure you. Couldn't possibly come back to lunch, or we would have done so, Dulcie; but I knew you would understand. Well, Joan, have you been good?"

"Have you found out anything, Georgie?" asked Dulcibel with eagerness.

“Yes; I will tell you presently,” said George, in rather a grave tone. “Nothing certain yet, but very probable. No, Joan, you must stand off. I can’t be handled till I am dry.” In a lower voice George added—“Somehow it does not look as if the non-return of the mother could have been accidental.”

“I told you so!” Dulcibel averred.

George imagined that she had “told him” exactly the opposite, but he wisely entered on no discussion.

CHAPTER IV. JOAN'S MOTHER.

“NOW, Georgie, please,” Dulcibel said beseechingly, when her husband stood before her, dry-clothed once more, Joan vigorously kissing one of his hands. “Please tell me everything quickly. The dinner-bell will sound in a few minutes.”

“We may as well sit down meantime,” George said. “That will do, Joan; that’s enough. Hardly time to tell you everything now, I am afraid; but the gist of the matter is that I have found—”

“Joan’s mother!” cried Dulcibel.

“Somebody who may be her mother. A sick woman—a lady—has been lodging in a certain cottage for three weeks past, with a little child.”

“Joan, of course.”

“The child was there until yesterday—”

“Of course!” repeated Dulcibel.

“Not quite of course yet. The mother took the child away yesterday morning, and was absent some hours. When she came back she was alone, and so ill as to take to her bed. She had left the little one with friends.”

“And you believe that tale?”

“There seems no doubt about the fact of her illness. The cottager, a nice, sensible woman, spoke kindly of her, and with evident pity. She said the lady seemed poor, and in much trouble.”

“Horrid wretch!”

“My dear!” and George directed her attention to Joan’s watchful eyes.

“Oh, that mite can’t understand anything!”

“I am not so sure. And remember, we don’t know yet with certainty whether this person is the mother. And, if she is, we do not know why she left the child, or what prevented her return.”

“It is all as plain as daylight to me,” said Dulcibel. “She is a cruel,

heartless woman, and wanted to get rid of the little darling, and didn't care whether she were drowned or not."

"Women do occasionally jump by accident to a right conclusion," said George calmly. "But whether you have done so in this instance remains to be proved."

"Well, but go on. You haven't told me half," said Dulcibel. "What did you do?"

"I had a long round of inquiries to make, before, lighting on the track of this person. Her name is Brooke."

"Joan Brooke! Well, it might be worse. I like people to have nice names; but Jones or Smith would be uglier."

"The woman in whose cottage she is staying speaks of the child as handsome and affectionate, with black eyes, somewhere about three years old."

"And you can pretend to doubt still!"

“I am pretending nothing, my dear. It is well sometimes to reserve judgement.”

“Did you see Mrs. Brooke?”

“No; she was in bed and ill—too ill for an interview. I must go again to-morrow morning.”

“But didn’t you explain matters?”

“I asked first about Mrs. Brooke’s little girl, and then mentioned our having found a child of that age in the valley. The woman seemed rather bewildered, said it could not be Mrs. Brooke’s child, but advised me to call again in the morning, if I wished to make further inquiries. She said Mrs. Brooke was really in no state for an interview to-day. Things being so, I thought it wise not to go further into particulars, and I said little about Joan.”

“Ah, I see you suspect! And am I to be left alone all day to-morrow again?”

“No; I hope it might be fine enough for you to come too. If I should be denied admittance, you might get in.”

“Georgie, do you suppose that this woman is in league with Mrs. Brooke? Don’t know?—of course you don’t, but one may guess. Is the cottage near the valley?”

“Some distance off; but Mrs. Brooke seems to have gone there several times with her little girl. Tourists are so plentiful at this time of the year that the less attention has been drawn to them. I imagine also that Mrs. Brooke has shrunk a good deal from observation. The woman spoke of her loneliness, and said she had no friends.”

“What in the world can have brought her to this neighborhood?”

“I haven’t a notion. Mrs. Flint spoke also of Mrs. Brooke’s fondness for her child.”

“Fondness!” Dulcibel uttered with scorn.

“It sounded incongruous with existing facts; but we do not understand yet.”

“Quite impossible that anybody with feelings should understand such a mother,” said Dulcibel.

George’s hand found its way to Joan’s dark head, and her eyes looked up in rapturous response.

“Dulcie—” and his voice deepened in tone—“suppose things should really turn out as you expect?”

“How?”

“Suppose we should fail to find the mother.”

“We can’t fail; because she is found. And if she doesn’t want to care for the child, she must be made to do so.”

George’s hand was again stroking tenderly the dark head.

“Yes—if possible,” he said. “But there are cases—if she is entirely

unprincipled, entirely bent on eluding her duty, she may do so yet.”

“And you would encourage other mothers in the same wickedness by doing her duty for her,” Dulcibel said with sharpness.

““When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up,”” George murmured. “Joan may have to learn those words early. Dulcie there are two sides to the affair. One is the mother’s wrong-doing—folly—cruelty—call it by what terms you will. If she has forsaken the child, no words of condemnation can be too strong. Still there remains the other side of the matter. Little Joan is not to blame,—and if she should be one of the Master’s foundlings, I suppose he will wish some of his servants to give her food and shelter.”

“I knew you wanted to adopt her,” said Dulcibel resentfully. “I have known it from the first. I think philanthropy is a craze with some

people. It is just encouraging wickedness. I believe you have been hoping all along that the mother wouldn't turn up! And if you adopt this one, how do you know that half-a-dozen more stray infants won't be thrown upon your tender mercies? Any weak, silly woman, who finds a difficulty in getting along, may toss her child over into your keeping. I believe there are plenty in the world quite capable of it. And I suppose you would accept any number, and be grateful. It's perfectly ridiculous."

George was silent. Dulcibel suddenly took a seat by his side, looking up with repentant eyes from under wet, fair lashes.

"How horrid I am! I can't think how you can care for me! Georgie dear, I don't mean to be cross—I don't really. Only—don't you think—"

"I think there is a great deal of truth in what you say," George answered. "If I were advising

somebody else, I should probably feel constrained to advise non-adoption—as a matter of policy and common-sense. The woman has acted—if it be as appears—in a manner simply contemptible. She deserves no better than the workhouse for her child. That would be strict justice. But—the workhouse, Dulcie, and those little clinging arms—”

George could not continue.

“Oh, no, no, no!” cried Dulcibel.

“It may be wrong. It may be a mistake on my part. But—I don’t think I could.”

“Oh, no!” repeated Dulcibel. “I don’t really wish that. I only wish the wretched woman could have her due. But as to little Joan herself, you must just do exactly what you think best.”

“I should not think it best to go against my wife’s wishes.”

“It won’t be. I don’t mean to be selfish, and there’s room enough at the Hall, of course. I shouldn’t like her to

be always hanging about, so that I never could have you to myself; but—”

“My dear Dulcie!”

“No; of course you wouldn’t like it either. But you don’t feel the same that I do—it isn’t likely you should. I want to have you always to myself, and I know that can’t be. I do feel very naughty sometimes about going home, because I know you will be busier, and so many people will expect to have a share of you. I believe I am jealous of Leo’s share now; and Joan will be another.”

“Leo is away at school, except in the holidays, Dulcie.”

“Oh, yes, I know, Georgie, dear! Of course I ought to be wise and reasonable, and mind nothing. But I never was wise or reasonable, and I always do mind things dreadfully. Only of course you must do exactly what you think right about Joan, and I’ll try to seem good whatever I feel,” added Dulcibel, sighing.



A sick woman, Marian Brooke by name, lay tossing restlessly that night in a cottage bedroom. It was small and poorly furnished, yet superior to the ordinary run of cottage rooms. The owner thereof, a stirring widow, had lately bethought herself of lodging—letting on a very small scale, as a means of turning an extra shilling, and her second lodger was this Mrs. Brooke.

The cottager, Mrs. Flint, knew nothing of Mrs. Brooke's antecedents, nor was it likely that she should. Mrs. Brooke paid regularly, lived frugally, avoided all needless intercourse with other human beings, showed a deep and growing melancholy, and spent all her time in attendance on her one little girl. Few words passed her lips, and nobody came to see her. There was indeed about Mrs. Brooke so marked and unusual an air of reserve, and of

shrinking from her fellow creatures, that Mrs. Flint's curiosity might well have been aroused.

But Mrs. Flint, a north countrywoman by birth, though now the widow of a Welshman, living in a lonely cottage near a lonely moor, was by nature singularly devoid of the spirit of inquisitiveness. She accepted her lodger's peculiarities calmly, asking no questions; and at least her trust was not abused.

To and fro, from side to side moved Marian Brooke, incessantly, through the hours of that long night. She moaned often, as if in pain or distress, and tried every position in turn, vainly seeking rest: sleep had fled to a hopeless distance. When dawn at length appeared through the small blindless window, she sat up, with haggard, grey eyes looking towards the lattice panes.

“O, Joan, Joan, Joan, shall I ever see you again? Is it good-bye forever—forever?”

The words seemed wrung from her, breaking out in a long, low wail. No tears rose to the hot eyes. She only laid her head upon her raised knees, moaning afresh.

“O, Joan, Joan—my little Joan—my darling! But what could I do—what else could I do? Joan, you will never know how your mother loved you—never, Joan!” A tearless sob sounded, and she went on—“I didn’t know what else to do, Joan; and I have no friends. He will take care of you—I am sure he will. He is no man to turn from any in want. Am I wrong to give him no choice? Oh, how can one tell—all is so dark, and I have no hope?”

But she might have known. Marian Brooke was no stranger to right and wrong. Conscience spoke clearly, and she would not listen. She murmured on, to drown thought—

“No hope, Joan—none! I chose my way; and broke mother’s heart. Mother, if you were living and could forgive me, I think I might believe in God’s forgiveness! But not now—there is nobody now—no hope—no pardon. Better she should be away from me, or perhaps she would turn cold and hard, and break my heart, as I broke mother’s. Would mother have forgiven me, if she had lived?”

The light grew, and Marian looked mournfully towards it.

“Morning is almost come, and Mr. Rutherford will soon be here—perhaps Joan too! But I must not stay to see them. I cannot face Mr. Rutherford—he would ask to know all—he would say I must write to my father. And I promised Hubert! Oh, I cannot; I am tied on every side—bound, ashamed, wretched. And I couldn’t leave you in better hands, my Joan. You would thank me if you understood all. And he will teach you

to do right—to be different from your poor mother. O Joan, what it is to have lived without God, and to know that death is near!"

Marian Brooke pressed both hands over her face, then crept out of bed, and slowly dressed; after which she found a pencil and some paper, and sat down to write.

The making of her letter seemed to be no easy task. Once, twice, thrice, she tore up a half-finished sheet into tiny fragments, and began anew. But at length it was finished and folded. Outside she wrote simply, "For Mr. George Rutherford."

Then she went about the little room, putting her things together, packing the greater part into a large carpet-bag, and making a roll of the rest within her waterproof cloak.

This work completed, she threw herself down once more on the bed, and lay there for half an hour or more, perhaps only half-conscious. Mrs. Flint

found her thus, and brought a cup of tea. Mrs. Brooke sat up to drink it, and said briefly—

“I have to go away to-day.”

Some slight sound of astonishment escaped Mrs. Flint.

“Yes; I am afraid it takes you by surprise. Something I heard—something that happened yesterday,” Mrs. Brooke said, her eyes roving unsteadily and avoiding the other’s face. “I have had to come to a sudden decision. Please have a boy here in less than an hour, to carry my bag. I must catch an early train. And let me know all that is owing. I told you when I came that I might have to leave at short notice, and you agreed. But I will pay what you think right. If Mr. Rutherford should come again—”

“Mr.—” Mrs. Flint hesitated.

“Mr. Rutherford—the gentleman who called yesterday about a lost child.” Mrs. Brooke’s face contracted for a moment, almost convulsively. “If

he comes again, give him the letter on the table, it will explain all that he wants to know; and I should have nothing more to say. That is all. Please leave me now; and get a boy soon."

Mrs. Brooke lay back on the bed once more, and shut her eyes. Mrs. Flint withdrew obediently, making no protest.

CHAPTER V. THE LETTER.

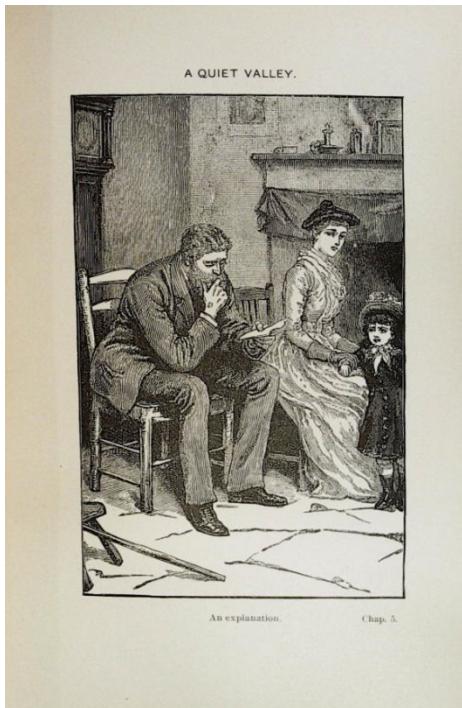
“NOW we shall see!” Dulcibel announced in a tone of much excitement, as she drew near the door of a lonely cottage, walking by her husband’s side. On his other side trotted Joan, solemn and content.

The morning had turned out a sunny contrast to the day before, and they had decided to bring Joan with them. She was very willing to come. The last few minutes there had been about her a certain air of expectancy; and when they turned from the high road into a side lane, Joan’s little hand had given the first pull in that direction. George Rutherford marked this silently.

“Now for it, Georgie, dear! Will she acknowledge the child, I wonder? What do you think?”

“Possibly the child may acknowledge her,” suggested George.

“To be sure; I didn’t think of that. What a queer place for a lady to stay in! Clean, certainly, but—. And she really is a lady, isn’t she? Didn’t you say so?”



An explanation.

“My dear, I have not the pleasure of her acquaintance yet,” said George.

“Oh, you are always so dreadfully cautious and uncertain! I like to make

up my mind one way or the other, and then if one is mistaken one can so easily change. What are you waiting for?"

A gesture checked Dulcibel's advance. She stood still wonderingly. Joan slid her little hand out of George's, walked calmly to the cottage door, and endeavored to turn the handle, with the air of one at home.

"Joan, does mother live here?" asked George.

"Muvver an' Frint," pronounced Joan.

"George!" interjected Dulcibel.

"Spartan brevity," murmured George. "Hush—wait, Dulcie!"

Joan's efforts produced an effect. The door was opened from within, and a fresh-faced, elderly woman stood there. She uttered an exclamation, put up her hands, and fell back a step. Joan offered a kiss, evidently as a matter of course. Then she returned to George, and endeavored to pull him forward.

“If it isn’t little Miss Joan—her very own self!” said Mrs. Flint.

“There!” Dulcibel said.

“This is the little girl whom we found beside the shaking bridge,” said George gravely.

“It’s Mrs. Brooke’s little girl, sir.”

“I told you so!” sounded from Dulcibel.

“Is Mrs. Brooke indoors?”

“No sir; Mrs. Brooke has left this morning quite sudden—she said she was obliged. She’s been gone two hours and more.”

Husband and wife exchanged looks, Dulcibel of course muttering once again—“I told you so!”

George Rutherford’s fair, good-humored face had taken a stern set.

“Where has Mrs. Brooke gone?”

“I don’t know, sir, indeed. But there’s a letter for you, sir, and perhaps that’ll make things clear, for I confess I don’t understand about Miss Joan, and that’s a fact, seeing Mrs. Brooke took

her away to see friends, and you found her all alone at the shaking bridge. I don't understand it, sir; but would you please to step in and sit down? I'm sorry things aren't straighter—it's early yet, you see. I'll get the letter, sir."

Dulcibel accepted one chair, and George another, Joan leaning against his knee. "That woman is not Welsh," Dulcibel remarked, in Flint's absence.

"No; English. She came, when her husband died, to live with his parents, and since their death this cottage has belonged to her. I believe her husband was a soldier; and she has two sons now in the army, who help to keep her." George spoke abstractedly, adding—"This seems strange."

"Just what I have expected all along," said Dulcibel.

Mrs. Flint came back, and George received the folded sheet, a slight exclamation passing his lips as he

noted the address—"How could she know my name?"

"Why, of course you gave it yesterday," said Dulcibel.

"No, I did not."

"No, sir, you didn't mention no name," chimed in Mrs. Flint. "I couldn't make out how it was the lady seemed to know, if so be that's right."

"Quite right," George said laconically.

He opened and read slowly—read more than once, with a look of growing astonishment. He seemed to forget the presence of others. Once or twice he put the letter down on his knee, gazing into the distance, rubbing his brow and combing out his beard, with gestures of perplexity peculiar to himself. Dulcibel could endure the suspense no longer.

"Georgie, what does she say? Do please tell me."

George woke up, as from a dream, and gave the paper to his wife.

“Read it,” he said; and then he suddenly caught up Joan, and folded her in both his strong arms. “Little lamb—poor little, motherless lamb!” broke from him in stirred, deep tones, while his brows were still sternly bent. Dulcibel sat looking at him.

“Then it has been done all on purpose, Georgie, dear?”

“Read the letter,” George answered; and Dulcibel obeyed. It ran as follows:—

“Sir,—Forgive a broken-hearted woman for

troubling you. I am poor, ill and friendless.”

“I have not known what to do.
The last year and

a half since my husband’s death
has been one

long misery. My money is now
almost at an end,

and I have no more coming. I am
broken-down in

health, and I cannot work.”

“The thought of dying and
leaving my little Joan
in the hands of strangers has
pressed upon me

night and day. Sometimes I have
been half

maddened by it, and by my own
helplessness.

I am alone in the world—cut off
from my own

family, and also from my
husband’s family—

no matter how. They never
forgave him for

marrying me. I cannot tell you
more.”

“It came to my knowledge that
you would be in

this part, just when I was
doubting what to do

next. And I came here, hardly
knowing why. Only

it seemed to me as if you were the
one person

in all the world who would be
willing to help!

And I am in such sore need!"

"I could not ask help of you to
your face. You

knew me once, in past days, and I
was ashamed.

Sometimes I thought I would
send you my child

with a letter, begging you to care
for her.

Then yesterday—it came all at
once—when I was

in the valley with Joan, you were
there too.

You did not see me, but I knew
your face

again—how could I help it? And
the thought

came into my head to leave Joan
beside the

bridge, where you would be sure
to pass.

I told her to sit still till a kind
gentleman

came to her, and I said good-bye
and went away

to watch, not very far, but out of
sight. I saw

you carrying her away—my
darling—asleep in your

arms. And, oh, how I blessed you
in my heart!

I think a mother's blessing must
be worth

having, even from one so
unworthy."

"You will care for her, will you
not—oh, will

you not? It will not be the first
kindness

done by you to me or mine; but
you will not

know my married name—better
than you should

not. I know you—something of
you, at least—

of your goodness, your Christian
generosity.

And I have felt that I might dare
to do with

you as I would not dare to do
with, I think

any other human being.”

“I shall never see Joan again. I am
hopelessly

ill, and have few months to live.
Joan will

soon forget me. My heart is
breaking as I

write these words; but it will be
best so.”

“I have a near relative abroad
who will take

me in—only I must go to him
alone—I could not

take Joan—could not leave her
with him when I

die. I promised my husband I would keep her

from him. And yet I have nowhere else to go—

no money—no way of supporting Joan and myself.

Now you see the straits to which I am brought.

Will you not have pity upon me?"

"I have no hope for the future. I am not fit

to pray. But, oh, if God would care for my

child,—would make you take pity on her! I do

not think you will cast her off. I have no

right to expect God's mercy. I have only

lived for myself, and years of wilfulness

are being visited on me heavily. I am reaping

now the wages of the past. It is
very terrible

to be drawing near to death, with
no friend

on earth or in heaven to help me.
But would

that my wrong-doings might not
be visited on

my child! Will you not care for
her?"

"Joan will be four years old on
the last day

of the year. She is like her
father—not like

me. She has a quick temper; but
she is so

loving where she really loves."

"You will never see or hear
anything of me

again from this day. My own
people do not

even know whether I am still
alive, except

the one to whom I am going; nor
do they know
that I have a child. My husband's
people know,
but do not care. If Joan ever came
in their
way they would only spurn her."

"I have no more to say, except to
plead again
for your pity for my little one."

"I am yours, &c., M. BROOKE."

"Georgie, what a most
extraordinary and incomprehensible
letter!" exclaimed Dulcibel with much
emphasis.

George waited a moment, then
said—"Yes."

"Who can she be?"

A shake of the head answered.

"Don't you know? Haven't you
the least idea?"

"No."

“Not the very smallest? But you must have seen her some time or other. She evidently knows you quite well.”

“The knowledge is not reciprocal, Dulcie. I have no association with the name.”

“No—with her married name—she says you won’t recognize that; and ‘M’ may mean anything. But can’t you think of anybody you have been kind to—a Mary, or Maria, or Millie—somebody whose family you have helped in some way?”

George might have recalled a good many people to whom he had been kind, and a good many families helped by himself; but there was again a negative gesture.

“Memories are treacherous sometimes, Dulcie. Mine doesn’t serve me at the present moment.”

He turned to Mrs. Flint, and put a few inquiries, eliciting from her nothing in the way of information.

Dulcibel, at George's suggestion, went into Mrs. Brooke's bedroom, to search for any letters or papers which might have been left behind. Again the result was nothing, till, at the moment when Dulcibel was about to quit the room, a small folded paper, lying on the floor in a corner, attracted her attention. She caught it up, gave one glance, and rushed into the other room.

“Georgie!”

“My dear, don't be breathless. What now?”

An old yellow half-sheet of paper, folded neatly over one short, thick lock of black hair; and on the outside was written, “Hubert Brooke: aged 21. Woodleigh.” That was all. But it might mean more than a stranger would suppose, for George's home was Woodleigh Hall of Woodleigh.

“Singular!” was George's comment.

“She must be some friend or acquaintance of yours.”

“I can’t possibly say. I am as much in the dark as you are yourself. This must have been dropped by accident. We will keep it carefully.”

Then he sank into a brown study.

“What do you mean to do next?” Dulcibel asked at length.

“Find her,” George answered with brevity.

“Find Joan’s mother! But how?”

“I don’t know yet. I am afraid you will be sorry to leave this pretty place so soon; but—”

“Sorry—I should think so! Leave it on her account! I think that woman has treated you atrociously,” Dulcibel said in her most indignant tone.

George did not gainsay the remark.

“Giving over her child to you in this cool fashion, and absolutely leaving you no choice! I don’t know which is worst—the wrong to you, or the wrong to Joan. How does she know that you won’t refuse altogether to

have to do with Joan; and what would become of the poor little thing then? I think I never heard of such utter heartlessness. I don't wonder at her feeling miserable. She ought to be miserable."

"True enough," George said quietly. "She has acted very wrongly; and therefore I am the more anxious to find her."

"Of course she ought to be found, and to be made to work for the child. But I thought we were to have another fortnight here."

"I could leave you at the hotel, Dulcie, with Leo and Joan, and come back to you all."

"As if I should care for that! Oh, dear, no, Georgie! I don't want Wales without you. How soon must we start? This evening? It really is too bad!"

"It is disappointing for you," her husband said kindly.

"Oh, I don't mind so much about that! What I do hate is seeing you

imposed upon. Ninety-nine men in a hundred would send that child to the workhouse; and serve the mother right too!"

"But you don't really wish it, Dulcie?"

"I don't know what I wish," Dulcibel answered, half crying. "Only I am out of patience with the whole affair; and I don't like to see wickedness successful; and I haven't a notion how to get my things packed in time, and I hate travelling all night. But I suppose it has to be."

* * * * *

*

The search for Joan's mother, carried on with a vigorous disregard of expenditure of time and money, proved futile. She had managed her retreat cleverly. Joan became from that time a permanent *protégé* of George and Dulcibel.

CHAPTER VI. DAUGHTER OF THE HOUSE.

SEVENTEEN years had passed away, bringing and leaving changes with them as they came and went. But the changes had at Woodleigh Hall been gentle and gradual in kind. George Rutherford dwelt there still as master, and Dulcibel as mistress. No earthquake had shaken the foundation of Dulcibel's being. They had lived on year after year, feeling themselves and things around to be always much the same; only of course everybody was growing a little older. And Joan was a daughter of the house—not the daughter, since they had a child of their own. Somehow Joan Brooke always took her stand as the eldest daughter, although of course the position belonged by right to her junior in years, Nessie Rutherford. But Nessie was not self-asserting, and Joan

undoubtedly was. Nessie did not mind being second, and Joan did. Dulcibel might object for Nessie; but that was a different matter.

Joan never seemed to realize her own true condition in life, as a forsaken waif, disowned or unknown by her own relations, and dependent on strangers. She no more thought of George Rutherford as a stranger, or of herself as his dependent, than if he and she had been veritable father and daughter.

George Rutherford was the best of husbands, the kindest of fathers. But there were sides to his nature which had no chance of expanding towards Dulcibel or Nessie; and in those directions the companionship of Joan proved especially satisfying.

Joan habitually called George and Dulcibel “father” and “mother.” She had been brought up to do so; and nothing pleased her better than being taken for “Miss Rutherford.” The very

word “Brooke” called a frown to her face.

Within the spacious drawing-room of Woodleigh Hall sat three silent people, one afternoon in the early autumn.

Of the three silent individuals one was George himself. Seventeen years had brought a few grey lines into the tawny beard; but they had not detracted from his vigorous strength of frame. At fifty-three he was almost as fine a specimen of manhood as he had been at thirty-six—some said finer. There was a mellowed, softened calmness about the lion-like face not often to be seen. He seemed deeply interested in his book.

These years had not dealt quite so kindly with Dulcibel as with her husband. Instead of rounding and softening, she had grown thinner and more angular. While the fair hair showed as yet small signs of turning color, the features had become rather

sharp, the two eyebrows were lifted into permanent arches of anxiety, and troubled lines were stamped around eyes and mouth.

Not that Dulcibel had undergone any unusual amount of trial in the seventeen years of her married life. Facial lines have more to do with inside than outside circumstances. And, after all, it is quite as wearying to be perpetually expecting trouble as to be perpetually enduring it.

The third person was a girl, very young, for she could not have been more than sixteen, and singular in appearance. Nobody except her mother counted Nessie pretty, and Dulcibel thought her lovely, but Dulcibel stood alone in her opinion, as mothers are apt to do sometimes. If George Rutherford was fair in coloring, and Dulcibel fairer still, Nessie supplied a superlative to her parents' degrees of comparison.

She was rather small, of slender make and colorless complexion; with eyes of the lightest blue, lashes and eyebrows of almost invisible paleness, and limp, long hair of dull flaxen-white. The beauty of which Dulcibel loved to discourse lay in the delicate features, the pure, transparent skin, and the tiny snow white hands. But the cheeks had no tinting; the lips had only a faint hue of pink; the eyes did not sparkle; the face as a whole was devoid of animation. It was tender and refined, perhaps capable of sweetness, but too statuesque. Nessie seemed to have inherited nought of her father's energy or of her mother's restlessness.

“Dulcie, I have been thinking—”

“Just in a moment, Georgie dear. I must finish this note. It is almost post-time.”

George was silent, and the pen scratched on vehemently.

“Believe me, yours sincerely, D. Rutherford,” murmured Dulcibel, half

aloud, as she wrote the concluding words. “There, that is done! What a bother; I have blotted the last page! Well, it must do.”

“Hurry doesn’t save time in the end, Dulcie.”

“I know what does save time,” retorted Dulcibel, ringing the bell, “and that is, not being interrupted. Take these at once, please.”—as the servant appeared.

“Anything important?” asked George.

“Yes; you wouldn’t think it so, but I do. What were you going to say to me just now?”

“Leo is coming home, for one thing.”

“When?”

“Almost immediately.”

“What for?”

“Various reasons. Indian fever for one. I have a long letter from him by this mail.”

“Was that what you wanted to tell me just now?”

“No,” George answered, smiling, “it was not, Dulcie. I have been thinking that Nessie looks pale; and I should like to take you all a little trip into Wales.”

“Why Wales?”

“I have a fancy for revisiting sometimes old scenes.”

Dulcibel faced round upon him.

“You mean that you want to go to the valley where we found Joan?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you may as well know one thing beforehand,” said Dulcibel, in a resolute voice—“and that is that I will not walk over the shaking bridge, and Nessie shall not either.”

George’s moustache twitched slightly, and he smoothed out his beard.

“The terrors of that bridge seem to have made a strong impression on you, my dear.”

“I wouldn’t cross it again for anything—not for anything you could mention—or let Nessie. What makes you want to go there?”

“I think a little change would do you and Nessie good before the winter; and I should like to show the said bridge to Joan. I have a fancy that it might recall something more of her early days than she can remember now.”

“Has Joan been asking—”

“No, dear. I have evolved the idea entirely out of my own inner consciousness.”

“It seems to me rather absurd. Of course if you mean to do it, we shall do it, though I would rather take a trip into Scotland. But, anyhow, Nessie and I will not walk over the bridge; and if I could have my way, you would not either.”

“You and Nessie shall only stand and look on at our perilous feat.”

“It is all very well to laugh, but bridges do break down sometimes,” retorted Dulcibel, with the least touch of tartness. “What makes you think Nessie unwell?”

“I don’t; I only think her pale.”

“She never is anything else. And she has had no walk to-day. Why don’t you go out, Nessie?”

“Joan promised to go out with me, mother. I would rather wait for Joan.”

The very voice was colorless and languid, like the face and figure. Dulcibel sat looking at Nessie. Then the door opened to admit as complete a contrast as could well be conceived.

Joan at twenty-one was not greatly altered from Joan at four. There were the same rich eyes of black velvet, under restless brows ever in motion, and the same dark, clear skin, flushed in checks and lips with a healthy red. Perhaps the features were not so regular as might have been

expected in her childhood; but the upright, well-made figure showed off her good looks to the best advantage. People sometimes said it mattered little what her features were, for there was no getting beyond those eyes. Her manner was swift, direct, eager, full of readiness and impulse; and when she smiled her whole face lighted up into real beauty. Joan was a warm-blooded, warm-handed, warm-hearted creature—no lack of animation in that quarter.

“Ready to go out, Nessie? Why, you are not dressed.”

“I didn’t know when you meant to come back,” responded Nessie, not stirring.

“Three o’clock, I told you; and it is past three. You had better make haste—though of course you won’t,” added Joan, laughing, as Nessie slowly found her feet. “It’s a lovely afternoon. Father, don’t you want a little turn in

the garden? Nessie always takes half an hour to put on her hat.”

“To be sure I do,” George answered promptly; and the book was forsaken at once. Dulcibel sat looking after the two, as they passed out through the low French window.

“Come to the copse,” Joan suggested, clinging to George Rutherford’s arm. “It is delicious there. Oh, I wish I had not offered to take out Nessie to-day!”

“My dear, why?” asked George.

“I’d rather be with you, father; and I thought you had an engagement.”

“So I had, but it has fallen through. We can’t always have our own way in everything, Joan.”

“But I like to have mine—always,” responded Joan. “And I do want to have a walk or a read with you to-day. Only I have promised to take out Nessie—so I must.”

“It gives Nessie enjoyment.”

“Poor Nessie! We shall just plod, plod, along the high roads in a sort of indefinite way, and everything will be ‘nice’ and ‘pretty.’ Nessie is so provokingly good and dear and tiresome and fond of me. Of course I am glad she is fond of me; but I do wish I could shake her up into something different. If only she were like you.”

“Everybody can’t be that, Joan.”

“No, indeed. I wish everybody could. It would be a different sort of world. Not that it isn’t a nice enough world now. I haven’t anything to complain of—anything really to trouble me.”

“If you can say so much, you are better off than most people,” George observed musingly.

“Yes; most people seem to be always wanting something more than they have. But then I have you, and that makes all the difference. I have you, father!”

The black eyes looked up with a suppressed rapture of affection, and a sudden keen pain shot through George Rutherford's heart, he could not have told why.

"Joan, that is not enough," he said.

"Not enough to have you? Yes, it is, father dear. I don't want anything else besides in the world."

"Or—in heaven?"

Joan's eyes fell.

"Father, I hope I shall be in heaven some day—because—because you will be there."

"Because Christ your Lord will be there, Joan darling."

A little pause, and then "No, father!" came distinctly.

"You do not love him, Joan?"
The pain sounded in George's voice this time. They had reached the copse, and were walking in a path amid young trees, all tinted with their autumn coloring.

“I don’t know,” Joan said, after a pause. “Yes, I think I love him, because he has made me your child. I always thank him for that—every day.”

“But you don’t love to think much of him?”

“Father, I’m always thinking of you,” Joan answered calmly. “Always—all day long. And when I’m not with you I only want to come back to you again. I do love God for giving you to me; and I always shall. But I don’t keep thinking of him, because I keep thinking so of you. How can I possibly help it?”

“God can teach you how, my dear,” he answered. “There is no other way.”

A QUIET VALLEY.



"Your name is Rutherford, then?"

Chap. 7.

**"Your name is Rutherford,
then?"**

CHAPTER VII. THE RED HOUSE.

WOODLEIGH was a very scattered village, numbering about one thousand inhabitants all told, yet containing only one double row of straggling houses, which might by courtesy be termed a street.

Woodleigh Hall stood well apart from this little central cluster, in its own grounds, on something of an eminence, from which views could be had of pretty and undulating country around.

George Rutherford's father had inherited the place from a distant relative. Left at twenty-one, by his father's death, in possession of the property, George had steered marvellously clear of the perils sure to assail a young man in such a position, owing much of his safety, under a higher Power, to the companionship of a wise and loving mother. Not until her death, in his thirty-third year, did

George Rutherford begin to think seriously of finding a wife.

After considerable hesitation he had found one in Dulcibel Lloyd; not at all the kind of wife that any one would have expected him to choose, the very last person that anybody else would have chosen for him. But this was almost a matter of course. Men usually go contrary to expectations in such matters.[?]

And whether or no Dulcibel was able to give him all that he required, either in the way of heart or of intellect, he and she had been very happy together. The last seventeen years had gone by with smooth rapidity.

George Rutherford was a busy man; he always had been so, ever since he emerged from boyhood. Property brings responsibility with it, and George felt those responsibilities with all seriousness. Alike generous and tender-hearted, no case of need came

within his ken to be passed over or put aside. Investigation was followed invariably by such assistance as seemed wise.

In these matters Dulcibel was a very meet help to her husband. She dearly loved to have half-a-dozen interesting “cases” on hand, and to be running hither and thither after them.

Joan’s inclinations lay in a different line. Books were her prime interest, and parish work was distasteful. With “father” she would go anywhere, but in a cottage she always became shy and curt, and left all the talking to him. George tried in vain to awaken wider sympathies. All the outflow of Joan’s affections seemed to be at present towards him, and him alone. Still she was very kind to Nessie, and Nessie was very fond of Joan, in a gentle, colorless style.

A stranger would have been oddly struck with the contrast between the two, as they walked side by side

that afternoon, along a high road, according to Joan's prediction. Nessie could not endure wet grass or stiles; but she liked walking, and could manage a very considerable distance at a good pace. Naturally her tendency would have been to lounge languidly onward, but Joan never would permit this.

"I do love autumn," Joan broke out, when they had plodded steadily for half an hour in silence—"next best to spring."

"I don't, because winter is coming," said Nessie.

"Well—and spring comes after winter. One may enjoy each in turn. Nessie, suppose we turn down this lane, and go around by that queer old red house, with any amount of chimneys."

"Mrs. St. John's house."

"I don't know who lives there. We should just have time to do the

round before dark, if we are quick. It is not too far for you?"

"Oh, no!" and Nessie turned obediently. "I thought you called there once with father."

"No; he went in, and I didn't. I hate calls. I can't bear being introduced to people as Miss Brooke, and having remarks made on my name."

"Well, you seem like one of us," said Nessie placidly. "Is that why you never will call on anybody, if you can help it?"

"That's principally why," said Joan.

"Mother doesn't much care for Mrs. St. John," said Nessie. "She thinks her proud and cold. But sometimes people are called so when they are shy."

"At all events we don't mean to call on Mrs. St. John now," said Joan, with a slight shrug of her shoulders, and a rapid movement of her eyebrows. "I'd rather be excused, and

so I dare say would you. Come, we shall have to step out well, Nessie. It is a good way round—seven or eight miles altogether. What a pity father didn't come with us?"

"Why didn't he?"

"Mother wanted him for something. Those clouds look rather suspicious for by-and-by; but it won't rain yet. I'd have brought my umbrella if I had noticed them."

The red house of which Joan had spoken was well shaded with tall trees. A rather small drawing-room stood on one side of the front door, and in this drawing-room sat two ladies, working or making believe to work, and talking without any make-believe. Both were well advanced in years: the elder, Mrs. St. John, about seventy-five, the other only some ten or twelve years her junior. And while Mrs. St. John, a slender, upright little body, with white hair, and sharp eyes, and mitten hands, expressed her thoughts with a

clear and resolute utterance, the other lady seemed too listless and depressed for ought but deliberation, and even slowness. She was very sweet-faced, this second occupant of the room, but there was a look of premature age about her stooping figure and faded complexion. A careless observer might almost have mistaken her for the senior of the two.

“The fact is my dear Amelia,” Mrs. St. John was saying—“the fact is, you always were given to rather distorted views of your duty. And this is a case in point.”

She spoke with the freedom of a sister, yet the ladies were not sisters, or even relatives, but only old school-friends.

“I do not feel any doubt as to what my duty would be, if it were not for my husband’s wishes,” the other answered in her spiritless manner.
“But, feeling as he does—”

“Knowing him to feel as he does, your course of action is quite clear,” said Mrs. St. John decisively.

“I am not sure. If I could persuade him—”

“My dear Amelia, have you ever once, in all your married life, succeeded in persuading your good husband that you were a better judge than himself on any single question?”

A flickering smile crossed the other’s face.

“Hubert is very decided, certainly,” she said—“very decided, when once he has made up his mind.”

Then the smile was quenched in sudden tears.

“No, that is it—never, never! If I ever could have touched him, it would have been for our boy—my boy!”

“Then you see the uselessness now. But I did not mean to distress you, Amelia. Take some eau-de-cologne—or, stay, an early cup of tea will do you good.”

“No, thanks.”

“Well, you must not be in such low spirits—positively you must not. I begin to think we have made a mistake in letting you come here; but you seemed to wish it. And after about twenty years—”

“Over twenty,” breathed the other.

“About twenty, I said. After twenty years, I do think, my dear Amelia, that for one professing to be so religious as yourself there is a singular want of resignation to Providence, in fretting still, year after year. You ought by this time to have learnt a spirit of submission. Other people have their sorrows too. I have lost my dear husband, I hope I know how to bear my loss with fortitude.”

“It is very wrong of me—very wrong, I am afraid,” the other lady said, with a meek tremulousness. “I do hope it is not want of submission to God’s will. He knows what is best—I

know—I am sure. But still, people do suffer so differently; and some troubles seem to cut away the very ground from under one's feet. If I could have seen my boy again before he died, or if I might have watched his child growing up—have held the little thing in my arms.”

“Quite impossible, Amelia. Your husband would never have consented. And if the child is alive now, she is a woman. Perhaps you would have wished to welcome her mother also to your home and heart?”

“As Hubert’s wife—yes.”

“But as the milkman’s daughter—no!”

“He was—quite a respectable farmer,” faltered the lady; “and she I believe, was well educated.”

Mrs. St. John made an indescribable gesture.

“Perhaps, my dear Amelia, you would like to call upon Cairns the next time my butter and milk bill has to be

paid. You might take a message from me that his butter has been very poor lately, at the same time that you announce yourself as his daughter's mother-in-law!"

"I don't think you need talk like this to me. It is not quite kind," remonstrated her friend.

Mrs. St. John rose and walked to the window.

"Dear me, what a change in the weather! It is coming on to rain—quite a pelt. I hope your husband is not out-of-doors."

There was no answer to this. The other lady seemed struggling to control her emotion; and, failing to do so, she left the room. Mrs. St. John stood looking towards the door, tapping a small table with the long pointed fingers of one mitten hand.

"Poor dear Amelia! She is sadly weak still—the same good creature as always, but with such a want of mental stamina. I must do my best to brace her

up while she is here. This perpetual fretting has gone on long enough. It is just a habit of mind now—hardly genuine. Quite out of the question that she should hold any communication with the Cairns family; and if there is a child of Hubert's still living, the less Amelia knows of her the better. Dear me, what a drench! I hope nobody is out in it."

Her face showed satisfaction as a comely, courtly old gentleman, with flowing white locks; entered the room.

"Mr. Brooke! I am delighted to see you indoors. What tremendous rain."

"Coming down in bucketsful!" said Mr. Brooke. "Very sudden change; but the glass showed a tendency to fall this morning. Can you tell me where Amelia is?"

"She will be back, I think, directly. We happened to touch upon the old subject, and she was overcome."

“As usual,” said Mr. Brooke, his features taking a grim set.

“Yes; but I hope it will not last. Dear Amelia is evidently in rather a low state just now; and associations in this neighborhood are trying.”

“Amelia has never been here before.”

“No,” said Mrs. St. John slowly—“no, certainly; but somebody was here. And if Amelia does not know many particulars, imagination supplies material to fill up gaps.”

“No doubt,” said Mr. Brooke. “Ha, two young ladies out in the rain!”

“Where?”

Mrs. St. John gazed through the panes, speedily descrying a couple of girlish figures. They seemed to be taking shelter under a small elm, just outside the garden gate; but the shelter was evidently very partial.

“Foolish young things. No umbrella, of course,” said Mr. Brooke.

Mrs. St. John was putting up her eye-glass.

“I know who they are,” she said. “One of them is a daughter of Mr. Rutherford, and the other, no doubt, is her sister. The youngest came to call on me once with her mother—a washed-out, uninteresting little thing—not two ideas in her head.”

“She is likely to be washed-out now, in good earnest. Ha, ha!” laughed Mr. Brooke, pleased with his own joke. “Who is this Mr. Rutherford?”

“He has property at Woodleigh. A very philanthropic sort of individual, I believe;” and a sneer was apparent. “He came in once on business, about a needy person whom he wished to help. His wife has taken the trouble to call on me twice during the three years and a half that I have lived here. I do not think it incumbent on me, at my age, to pay return calls, beyond leaving my card; and people ought to understand this; but probably Mrs. Rutherford

does not. She certainly has not given herself much trouble about me. As it happens, her calling or non-calling makes little difference to me; for she did not at all take my fancy."

"Nevertheless, it might be a charity to offer her daughters a shelter in the storm," suggested Mr. Brooke, getting rather tired of Mrs. St. John's utterances. "There is lightning—pretty near too. One of those girls is frightened; and standing under a tree is not particularly safe."

"Perhaps they would come in if we beckoned," suggested Mrs. St. John.

Mr. Brooke threw up the window, and signs of invitation were freely made, not at once to be responded to. The girls seemed very slow to hear or heed, Joan being extremely reluctant to enter the house. But Nessie was timid in a storm, and her fears overruled Joan's unwillingness. They crossed the

open space at a run, and stood under the porch.

Mr. Brooke himself opened the door.

“Come in, pray,” he said. “Mrs. St. John thought you might be glad of shelter.”

“I don’t mind it, but Nessie does. Thank you,” Joan said, not very graciously, as she preceded Nessie into the drawing-room.

Mrs. St. John’s hand was extended to Nessie first. “How do you do?” she said, rather distantly. “You and I have met before, I believe. Is this your sister?”

“It is—Joan,” Nessie answered, with a slight break, recalling Joan’s words as to introductions.

“My friend, Mr. Brooke. The two Misses Rutherford,” Mrs. St. John said, by way of introduction. “Pray come to the fire, and dry yourselves.”

Joan’s black eyes had given one startled flash at the sound of the

gentleman's name. A Brooke was not necessarily a connection of her own, but she never liked to hear the word. She said nothing, however, placing herself in front of the fire. Nessie followed tamely, being much given when with Joan to act as Joan's shadow.

CHAPTER VIII. OLD MR. BROOKE.

"HAVE you really walked all the way from Woodleigh?" asked Mrs. St. John.

"That is nothing," averred Joan.

She was conscious of Mr. Brooke's eyes upon her—fine black eyes still, remarkable in contrast with his snowy hair—and she raised her own to meet them. His gaze was searching and perplexed. Joan's brows bent angrily.

“How far off is Woodleigh?” asked Mr. Brooke.

“Four or five miles, I believe,” Mrs. St John said. “I have only driven round there once or twice. Not keeping my own carriage, I cannot manage distances often.”

“And you do not think anything of an eight miles’ walk, or more?” said Mr. Brooke, directing his remark to Joan.

“No,” Joan said, with sufficient brevity.

Mr. Brooke’s eyes were on her still in a persistent gaze much to her indignation and discomfiture. She turned round with her face to the fire, and her back to him, ostensibly for the better drying of her wet skirts. Nessie at once did the same.

“Sisters are not always alike in face,” Mr. Brooke remarked deliberately. “But I do not think I ever witnessed so remarkable a dissimilarity

as in the case of these two young ladies. It is quite extraordinary."

Nessie said nothing, leaving Joan to speak for herself; and Joan's spirit of truthfulness forced an unwilling confession.

"We are not sisters," she said curtly.

"Not—ah, only cousins?"

Joan counted him interfering as well as disagreeable.

"We are not sisters really," she repeated; "but it is just the same as if we were. Nessie, I don't believe it is any use our waiting for the rain to stop."

"No," assented Nessie.

"You cannot possibly walk home in this downpour," objected Mrs. St. John.

"Yes, we can. It doesn't matter," said Joan. "And father would not like us to be out so far-away, after dark."

"Your father?" queried Mr. Brooke. "I suppose—Mr. Rutherford?"

Joan's eyes flashed an accompaniment to her "Yes."

"I presume this to be a second case of 'not really,'" Mr. Brooke said in a cynical manner.

"No, it is not. He is my father," Joan retorted, her black brows drawing together over the dark eyes with a look of positive fury for an instant. Little knew Joan how familiar that look was to the white-haired old gentleman in front of her. A strange expression came into his face—of pain, of wrath, of positive fear. His lips were livid, and the full snowy eyebrows above his black eyes contracted into one straight line, after the manner of Joan herself.

"Your name is Rutherford, then?" he said hoarsely, as if not quite able to control himself.

Joan's face too had become colorless, but she suddenly grew cool and self-controlled.

"I am Mr. Rutherford's child," she said slowly. "I belong to him, and

to no one else. He is my own dear, dearest father. Nothing else matters—to me or to anybody. I do not see that it concerns strangers; and I did not come here to be catechised. Nessie, if you like to stay, you may; but I am going home at once. The carriage can be sent for you.”

Nessie looked frightened, and Mrs. St. John came forward, with an appealing—

“My dear Mr. Brooke.”

“Stay! One moment;” and Mr. Brooke laid on the girl’s arm a detaining hand, which she indignantly shook off—“one moment, pray! You need not fear that I shall trouble you after to-day. But I have a wish—an impertinent curiosity if you like to term it so—I have a wish to know whether Rutherford is your name.”

A pause and then—

“No, it is not,” said Joan.

Mr. Brooke seemed inclined to say more, but he did not. His pale

features writhed with suppressed agitation. Then a light footfall outside became audible, and he abruptly quitted the room. A lady's voice could be heard alternating with his in the passage, and both receded.

Joan held out her hand to Mrs. St. John, with a brief "Good-bye."

"You must not think too much of Mr. Brooke's ways. He is rather a singular character," said Mrs. St. John, half apologetically. "Must you really leave? Well, I can lend you cloaks and umbrellas; and the rain is not quite so heavy."

Joan would have spurned the offered wraps, but for Nessie's sake. It was with difficulty that she could be persuaded to take a waterproof for herself, and she was in an agony of impatience to be off, hardly able to endure Nessie's slow fumbling over buttons. Mr. Brooke remained absent, and Mrs. St. John no longer pressed for a lengthened stay.

The two set off at express train speed, Joan racing Nessie almost out of breath. Nessie submitted for a while, and then had to protest. Joan went a little more slowly, but kept grim silence all the way, till within the garden of Woodleigh Hall.

“That dreadful old man!” broke from her at length.

“Mr. Brooke? He was rather funny,” said Nessie. “I couldn’t understand quite what he meant. But do you know, Joan I thought him a little like you—in face, I mean. He has just your—”

“Nessie—if you dare!” cried Joan furiously.

Nessie gazed sideways at her companion in astonishment.

“Why, Joan!”

“He is not like me, and I am not like him,” cried Joan. “Mind, you are never to say so, Nessie; and least of all to mother. I can’t bear Mr. Brooke, and

I hope we shall never, never, never see him again."

"It's odd, though, his being a Mr. Brooke," said Nessie. "Oh, I suppose—" as the idea dawned slowly on her intellect—"I suppose that was why you would not tell him your name!"

"It was no business of his. Why must he meddle?" asked Joan hotly.

Nessie took refuge in puzzled silence, and the front door was reached without more words. Dulcibel came out to meet them, exclaiming at the condition of Nessie's boots and skirts. Joan rushed off to her own room, flung aside her wet clothes, and hurried downstairs again, straight to the study.

George Rutherford was writing letters, and merely gave a half-glance up as Joan burst in.

"I am busy, my dear," he said, expecting her to take a book and sit down, after her wont.

But Joan stood still by his side, and George looked at her a second time—to lay aside his pen. He saw immediately that letters for the next post were not the most pressing matter just then.

“Why, Joan—my dear little girl,” he said tenderly.

Joan dropped down in a careless heap by his side, laying her white face against his knee, and clinging convulsively to the hand which he held out.

“O, father—father—don’t let them take me from you!” she cried, in a tearless, unsobbing anguish of terror.

“What has happened, my dear?” asked George, trying to raise her; but she only crouched lower, and grasped him more tightly. “Where have you been?”

“Father, you wouldn’t give me up—father, dear. Say you never, never, never will!” implored Joan.

“Never, if the choice rests with me.”

“No, no, no—say never—without that,” moaned the girl. “Father dear, please, please!”

“Joan, you will make yourself ill; look up at me,” commanded George, with a kind of gentle sternness.

She obeyed at once, lifting a face absolutely colorless, except for the dark hues of eyes and brows. He had never seen her thus before.

“Now tell me what has occurred—quietly. You must not excite yourself.”

Joan restrained herself so far as to speak steadily, but her voice was hoarse, and she trembled like an aspen-leaf.

“My dear child, you seem to me to be making a great deal of what is perhaps little or nothing. Brooke is no uncommon name—and for a Brooke to have black eyes is nothing unusual either. Nessie noticing a likeness is

perhaps rather a strong point. But I don't think much of his curiosity. That is a quality not at all confined to the female sex; and you did your best to rouse it."

"I did not mean—Father, what shall you do?" asked the girl, growing quieter, though her face had still a scared look.

"Nothing at present!"

"You won't try to find anything out?"

"I do not think that necessary. If the old gentleman's suspicions were raised—if he has any reason for wishing to know more—he can very easily make inquiries."

"And if he did; and if—if—somebody should want to have me?"

"I don't think anybody could well come forward now with a stronger right than mine over you, Joan. And, remember, your twenty-first birthday is passed."

Joan's face lightened up.

“Oh, I am glad! I didn’t think of that. Then nobody could take me from you now, dear; dear father!”

“No, I do not think you could be forced away, my Joan,” he said. “And I could never ask or wish you to go—unless at the call of duty.”

“It never could be my duty to leave you for anybody—never!” said Joan emphatically.

“I cannot say, my dear. That will be as God chooses,” George Rutherford answered. And then he said wistfully—“Joan, don’t love me too much.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Joan, with a startled look up.

“Don’t let it be the reigning love in your heart. Christ must be first.”

“But he is not,” said Joan calmly “I know that quite well, father dear, and I have told you so before. I hope I shall learn to love him some day—enough to go to heaven. I want that, of course.”

“And that is to be all, in return for the love which made him die for you!”

Something of the ardent devotion which had glowed in Joan’s face, as she looked up, glowed now in George Rutherford’s face as he lifted his eyes towards the gray sky. An awed feeling came over Joan.

“Father, do you love Christ really—truly—so as to be always thinking of him?” she asked.

“Yes, Joan.” There was no hesitation in the answer.

“But if you could choose—if you might go to him—or stay with us—mother and Nessie and me—father dear, you do love me very, very much—if you had to choose—”

“I have not to choose. But if I had—that would be the ‘far better.’”

Joan’s face clouded over, and two or three large tears fell.

“It will not seem strange to you some day,” George Rutherford said, stroking the dark head. “Wait till you

know him, darling. He is so fair—the ‘chiefest among ten thousand!’ That has all to come to you by-and-by. Only he must be sought before he will show himself; and it isn’t a happy thing for us to be content apart from him. Remember, the more love I give to him, the more love I have for you.”

“Oh, father, it all seems so far-away; and I don’t care for anything or anybody except you!” murmured Joan.

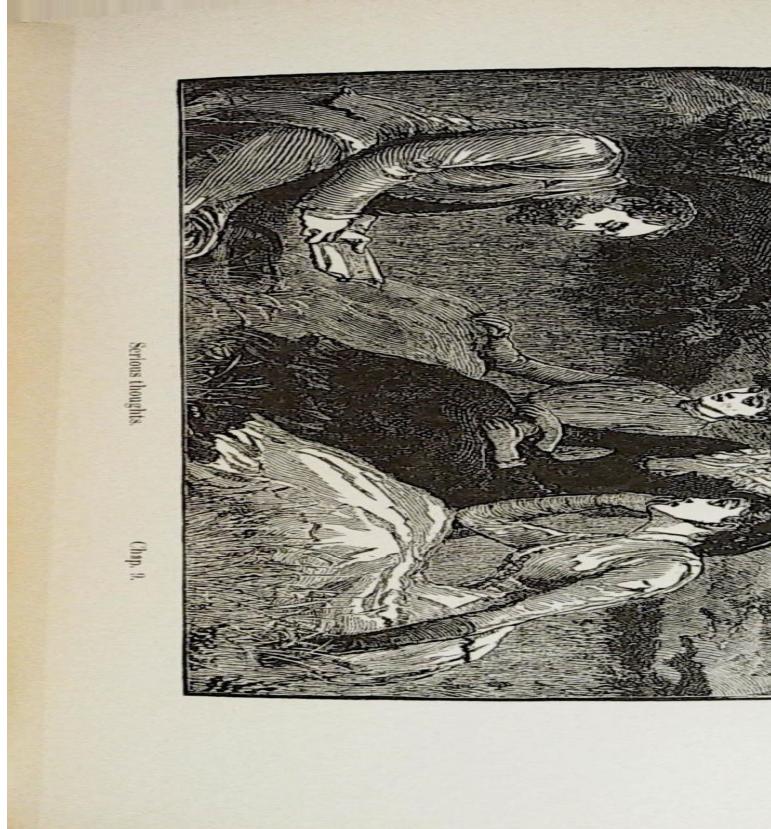
CHAPTER IX. “GEORGE’S VALLEY.”

“GEORGIE, I can’t believe it is seventeen years since we were here last. Why, it seems exactly like yesterday,” said Dulcibel.

She did not so often now call him “Georgie” as “George,” which name indeed better befitted his fine presence. But associations of early married life were strong in this place, and Dulcibel

reverted to the term naturally; for they were back once more in the old Welsh hotel, close upon the wide Welsh moor, with its grounds and its avenue, and its fair surrounding hilly landscapes. The hotel had made some advances in refinement with advancing years: otherwise things were little changed.

Only people were changed. George and Dulcibel were bridegroom and bride no longer, but middle-aged man and wife; and the infant Joan had become a finished young lady; and Nessie took the place of the absent Leo.



Serious thoughts.

Moreover, of all the faces around the horseshoe table at dinner the evening before, not one could be recognized as identical with a boarder in the hotel at a certain date seventeen years earlier. The tide of life had swept

them elsewhere, bringing back only the Rutherfords and Joan.

Morning having come, and everybody feeling refreshed after a goad night, George Rutherford suggested an excursion somewhere. Nessie waited passively for other folk's opinions. Joan's face glowed an assent. Dulcibel, standing at the front window of the drawing-room, and gazing out with a pensive air, gave utterance to the remark with which the chapter begins.

"Joan has grown a good deal since yesterday," George observed rather drily.

"But seventeen years. Can you believe it? Seventeen years! And it all comes back so strongly. I can remember Joan crouching in that corner for almost a whole day, refusing to say a word to anybody. And there was a clergyman, Mr. Meredith, standing just here with me, talking

about her—such an odd child she was!"

"Mother, we are wasting our time," said Joan, disposed to frown.

"You two girls may go and get your boots on," George said. "Mother and I will settle plans meantime." And as they vanished he came a step nearer. A few people were at the other end of the room, talking, but none stood within easy earshot. "Well, Dulcie, where shall we go?"

Dulcibel looked up rather defiantly.

"The valley, of course, George; but Nessie and I will not cross the bridge."

"No?" George uttered the word half-questioningly.

"Certainly not," Dulcibel answered. Then a pause; and Dulcibel lifted her eyes anew to meet his. "What do you mean?" she asked involuntarily.

“I had you with me, Dulcie, the last time I was there; and I shall want you this time.”

“You’ll have Joan. I don’t mean to cross that bridge.”

“I should like my wife not to be a slave to causeless fears. Failure in such little battles means loss to one’s self.”

“We’ll get ready, George, as soon as you like. But I shall not cross the bridge.”

George smiled, and seemed to yield. Dulcibel thereupon went off to her dressing-room. She kept all the rest waiting for her, as a matter of course. After the lapse of seventeen years, buttons had still to be sewn on her boots at the last moment.

“I wish Leo were here. Well, it will not be long,” was George’s remark on starting.

The walk to the valley was full of recollections for him and Dulcibel. They paced it together most of the way, the two girls keeping in front,

except where there was space for four abreast. Then Joan always fell back immediately to her father's side, and Nessie to her mother's.

George had a book of poetry in his pocket—Trench's Poems once more. But he had not brought it this time at Dulcibel's suggestion. Seventeen years of married life had quite convinced Dulcibel that an unpoetical wife could not become poetical for her husband's sake. She often asserted decisively now that he must take her as she was; and George most wisely did so, expecting no unreasonable things.

The Shaking Bridge was reached at last; hanging still upon its wires and chains, vibrating at a touch. And the stream flowed below, and the trees hung lovingly over, and the banks were rich with luxuriant, dewy moss.

Dulcibel stood still, and beckoned Nessie to her side.

“We are going to wait here,” she said resolutely.

George was looking at Joan. She seemed to have forgotten her companions, and was stepping on the bridge, with heightened color and intent eyes. He followed her half over, his steady tread making the whole structure heave and swing. There he remained, while Joan walked to the other side, and stood still, looking about dreamily.

“Can you remember it, Joan?” he asked.

She turned her face towards him.

“Not well, father. It is not in the least like what I have fancied—except grass and trees—and people. I have a picture in my mind of a little girl sitting on the ground, and somebody taking her up in his arms. But I don’t know how much is really recollection, and how much is imagination.”

“A difficult question to settle. Can you recall your mother leaving you here?”

“No,” Joan said slowly. “No, father.”

She walked on a few paces, and stood still again, absorbed in thought. George went back to his wife.

“Now Dulcie.”

“I’m not going over, George.”

George smiled and held out his hand. Dulcibel hesitated, unable to refuse an answering smile, and then accepted the offered grasp, with a reiterated, “I don’t mean to go.”

“If you thought there was real danger you would not be content to let me cross.”

Dulcibel found this unanswerable.

“But if I would rather not,” she said, relenting.

“Then you will come to please me, and not yourself.”

“You are the most tiresome, provoking, tyrannical man I ever

knew,” Dulcibel answered; after which her eyes fell, and the lashes grew moist, and she clung to his arm. “Georgie, dear, I’m very horrid, I know, but I’ll come. Only Nessie is not to walk over alone.”

“I will go back for her,” said George, marvelling at the illogical nervousness which professed to doubt the strength of the bridge, and yet insisted on a double weight.

Once across, Dulcibel’s spirits rose, even while she was declaring that she should not have a moment’s peace until the return crossing was effected. George smiled again, brought Nessie across, sent her on to Joan, and said softly—

“The old lesson, Dulcie.”

“What old lesson?”

““I will fear no evil.””

“David must have been a very different sort of person from me,” responded Dulcibel rather combatively.

“Peter was not so different.”

“Peter! Why?”

“O thou of little faith!”” quoted George; not the first time he had quoted the words in this valley, whether or no he remembered the fact.

“I can’t help being what I am,” said Dulcibel.

“You don’t really mean what that would seem to imply.”

“No,” Dulcibel said at once honestly, “I suppose not. At least if I were talking to somebody else, I should say that one has to trust, and that God can do all for us. But practically I don’t find that I am different from what I used to be. I suppose I don’t trust enough. Of course it is very easy for you, always strong, and always expecting the best, and never afraid. I am afraid of things. It gives me such a dreadful feeling now to think of seventeen years having gone by since we were here last. And one never can tell what will happen next, or how long things will still go on

so. Every year makes changes more likely. But don't talk about changes now—there's no need. We'll sit down soon and have some biscuits. Girls, you can hunt out a cosy corner, somewhere near the river."

Dulcibel had of course brought her luncheon basket, and a waterproof cloak for emergencies. The latter was spread out to form a seat for herself and Nessie, George and Joan being close by. Biscuits were disposed of with relish, and talk flowed merrily. Each item of the former visit was recalled, together with divers reminiscences of Joan in childish days, till the black brows showed her objection to the subject. Then George produced a green volume.

"Do you remember this, Dulcie?"

"Trench's Poems? Why, I do believe that is the book I brought here last time, when I used to think I ought to like everything that you liked. And

you read aloud a doleful poem that made me cry.”

“Father, do read the same again!” begged Joan.

“That you may see mother cry?”

“I should not be so silly now,” said Dulcibel. “It was a thing in short stanzas, three lines to each; I remember that, though I have forgotten all the rest. And you know, George, I detest poetry.”

George said “Yes,” as he turned over the leaves.

“But you would like father to read it again now, wouldn’t you?” asked Joan.

Dulcibel’s “Well, perhaps—yes,” was not very enthusiastic.

“If I can find it,” George said dubiously. “My recollections are rather vague. Ha, here it is, I believe!”

“Do skip a little, if it is very long,” pleaded Dulcibel, peering over at the page. “A few verses will do.”

“Very well, my dear. I’ll skip some, on condition that you hear the rest patiently.”

Dulcibel gave a little gape behind her hand, and assumed an air of resignation, as George began—

“Thou inevitable day,
When a voice to me shall say—
‘Thou must rise and come
away;’”

“All thine other journeys past:
Gird thee, and make ready fast
For thy longest and thy last.””

“Day deep hidden from our sight
In impenetrable night,
Who may guess of thee aright?

“Art thou distant, art thou near?
Wilt thou seem more dark or
clear?
Day with more of hope or fear?””

“Wilt thou come, unseen before
Thou art standing at the door,
Saying, Light and life are o'er?"

“Or with such a gradual pace,
As shall leave me largest space
To regard thee face to face?"

* * * * *

“Will there yet be things to leave,
Hearts to which this heart must
cleave,
From which parting it must
grieve!"

“Or shall life's best ties be o'er,
And all loved ones gone before
To that other happier shore?"

“Shall I gently fall on sleep—
Death, like slumber, o'er me
creep,
Like a slumber sweet and deep?"

“Or the soul long strive in vain
To escape, with toil and pain,
From its half-divided chain?”

“Little skills it where or how,
If thou comest then or now,
With a smooth or angry brow;”

“Come thou must, and we must
die
Jesus, Saviour, stand thou by
When that last sleep seals our
eye.”

The rich, sweet utterance of the last verse was indescribable, and Joan's face was turned away, while Dulcibel found her own eyes suddenly moist. A short silence followed before she said—

“I don't believe you left out a single line.”

“Yes, dear; I left out two verses.”

“Well I don't believe it is the same you read to me last time, though

it is dismal enough for that or anything.”

“Not dismal, Dulcie.”

“Dreadfully dismal,” asserted Dulcibel. “What is it called?”

“The Day of Death.”

“And it’s about nothing but dying all through.”

Joan looked round with a quick movement.

“I like it,” she said. “If only one could feel so.”

“Very few people do,” observed Dulcibel.

“Except—” said George.

“No, not ‘except.’ Very few of even really and truly good people do, George. I am sure most of them are afraid, if they would confess it.”

“You must have better means of knowing the condition of ‘most people’ than I have. But no doubt a good many people are ‘all their lifetime subject to bondage’ on this

account. One may be absolutely safe, without fully realizing one's safety."

"It is not only that," said Dulcibel. "I think it is the feeling of the 'must' that is so dreadful—knowing that things must go on, and we all must grow older, and changes and death must come. That is the worst."

"Thou inevitable day," George quoted in answer to this—

"Come thou must, and we must die:

Jesus, Saviour, stand thou by
When that last sleep seals our eye."

"Dulcie, you speak as if it were a going down into darkness, instead of going up into light. It will be out of night into day."

"Not for all," said Dulcibel.

"For all who are the Master's own."

"But still—"

“And the very inevitableness of the change is matter for rejoicing, not dread.”

“You may feel so. Other people don’t,” murmured Dulcibel.

“Father, after all it is giving up everything—going from every one,” said Joan.

“No, no, Joan; it is gaining, not losing—going to, not from,” said George.

“But the strangeness,” said Dulcibel.

“The land of light can be no strange country to us, with Jesus our Master there,” George answered.

“If one could feel it all real,” said Dulcibel.

“Father does,” Joan uttered looking up in his face.

Nessie took no part in the discussion.

CHAPTER X.

LIFE AND DEATH.

TEN days of unshaded brightness followed. Joan ever after looked back upon that time as one of the fairest seasons in her life. She could not see then how dark a cloud was gathering over her sunshine.

Joan was full of glee, frolicsome as a kitten, with boundless enjoyment of hill and dale, tree and flower. Each ramble or excursion proved more delightful than the last; and even Nessie's colorless serenity seemed to catch a little glow and warmth from Joan's exuberant happiness. At home Dulcibel and Joan were apt to rub and fret one another a good deal. Here however there seemed no place for petty jealousies and irritations.

They made some pleasant acquaintances in the hotel; but generally the four went out together, having no strangers with them. Occasionally Joan had the supreme

pleasure of a walk with her father, when Dulcibel and Nessie were unequal to further exertions. George and Joan seemed never to reach that condition. No further visits were paid to “George’s Valley” until the afternoon of the last day.

A long morning ramble, and the necessity of packing up for an early start next morning, decided Dulcibel to remain indoors after luncheon, keeping Nessie with her. So George and Joan went off alone together, and by mutual consent directed their steps towards the valley.

Clouds looked threatening on their way, and some fine effects of light and shade were to be seen in crossing the moor. Then came a sharp shower; but the two pressed on determinately, and by the time the valley was reached there was sunshine again.

This time no Dulcibel was at hand to cause delay in bridge crossing, yet

they lingered—George scanning with interest the spot where Joan had once sat in baby disdain of would-be comforters, and Joan as earnestly scanning his face.

“Father, if ever my real mother came forward, I should be yours, not hers,” Joan broke out.

“That is not likely, my dear. She was in broken-down health, and believed herself dying, seventeen years ago.”

“But if she did?” Joan’s voice and restless brows said together.

“Time enough then for consideration of your duty.”

“I am very glad I am twenty-one,” said Joan. She slipped her arm through George Rutherford’s, and looked up with loving eyes. “And you know she gave me to you, father, to be your very own.”

“Yes. Even if she were living, which seems most improbable, she

would hardly demand you again as a right, until I grow tired of you."

"And you'll never, never do that, father!"

"Hardly," George said, with a little smile.

"Only there was that old man—it frightened me seeing him. But he hasn't written or said anything, so perhaps, even if he does think we may be related, he doesn't want me. If he did I would not go to him. I couldn't live without you, father!"

George hardly knew whether to answer this lightly or seriously. He said at length only—

"Until—"

"No, not 'until' anything, father. I shall never want to leave you; and I shall never marry. I only want to live with you, and be your child and friend always—always—always."

"But, Joan, life does not last always."

“But I don’t want to think of that,” Joan answered quickly. “Mother often makes herself miserable, thinking how the years are going, and how one’s happiness has to come to an end by-and-by. But I don’t see the use. It only makes one wretched, like those beautiful sad lines you read to us here, the other day. I wish you had not, for I can’t forget them.”

“Ay,” George said—

“Come thou must, and we must die:

Jesus, Saviour, stand thou by
When that last sleep seals our
eye.””

“Still, one needn’t be always thinking about it,” said Joan. “What must be, must, but I would rather enjoy things as they are. And I like to feel that life will go on a long, long while yet. By-and-by, of course—but when

one gets old and tired, perhaps one wouldn't mind so much—”

“The call doesn't always wait till we are very old and tired, my Joan,” George said quietly, as they began to walk towards the old gray church. “If one may have to take a sudden journey, at any hour or moment of one's life, it is well to have things in readiness.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Joan said, in a calm uninterested voice. “But somehow it never seems as if one really might die at any time. I suppose I know it, but I don't believe it; I always do expect to live long. People are very different in that way. Nessie often expects something to happen to her; and if she is ill she thinks of danger directly. I never do. And mother counts the years, and fancies coming changes, and dreads losing every one that she loves. It is odd how unlike we all are to one another—especially you and mother. I suppose mother really loves God, doesn't

she?—but she does not at all want to go to him. She has such a dread of life coming to end. And you never seem to think of death as sad at all; and you don't mind about little fidgets and worries in this world, as most people do. Sometimes I feel as if you had had a little peep into heaven, which had made you quite different from everybody else for all the rest of your life."

No disclaimer came, as Joan half expected, George only said—

"Would not you like such a peep, Joan?"

"I should like to go anywhere with you, father. Even to—" and a pause.

"Even to heaven? Was that it?"

"Father, I don't think of heaven as you do," said Joan, tears springing to her eyes.

"Loving me will not take you to heaven, my child," said George, very tenderly.

“No, father; but—”

“If I were called away, would you come after me?”

No answer came to this, and the ungloved brown hand, lying within his arm, trembled uneasily. Joan’s face was turned away.

“Joan.”

“Yes, father,” came in smothered tones.

“If I were called away to the land of my hopes, would you come after me, darling?”

“Father, I do think you needn’t make me so miserable the very last day here,” sobbed Joan.

“I did not mean to make you cry. But, Joan, my dear—there, don’t sob. Sit down here for a moment. What has grieved you so? Did you think me unkind?”

“Oh, no, no,” said Joan, with a kind of indignant energy. “Only, please, please don’t talk of that. Anything but that, please.”

“What—of my having to leave you some day?”

“Yes;” and another flow of tears.

George’s strong hand came over hers.

“And yet it has to be,” he said—“it has to be. One or the other may go first, but the good-bye will have to be spoken—unless indeed the King comes first to earth in his glory. Joan, would that be good-bye between you and me? Or if the good-bye is spoken in death, must it be for ever?”

Joan shook with sobs, and George bent towards her pityingly.

“Think it over, dear one, and pray it over. Don’t let there be any doubt on that matter. Now we are not going to talk any longer about sad subjects. I am sure you will not forget. Have I been very cruel?”

Joan murmured something about “Never are.”

“That’s right. You and I always understand each other, don’t we?

Come—we take a quick walk up to the top of Castle Hill, before going home."

Tears were hastily dried, and Joan seemed very glad to put aside an unwelcome subject. She was soon talking and laughing with her usual freedom, almost—but not quite. An undercurrent of grave thought showed now and then; and George Rutherford would not have had it otherwise. He did not wish to depress her spirits, and a brisk hill-climbing, followed by a rapid walk back to the hotel, brought her into good tune for the evening.

But Joan was not a girl to thrust lightly aside the words he had spoken, more especially as such words of personal appeal were very rare from him. There was nothing morbid about George Rutherford; indeed his equable cheeriness of temperament was something remarkable. Not less remarkable, however, were his calm trust in God, and his happy realization of things unseen. While using and

enjoying the good gifts of this world, his heart did not rest upon them. Joan's heart did.

An early start had to be made next morning, and Dulcibel was in one of her usual agonies of unreadiness. Some people never are in time for anything, no matter how early they begin to prepare; and Dulcibel's supremest efforts after punctuality came always to the same impotent conclusion.

“Nessie, do make haste! Put those things into the portmanteau—no, not there—the other pile. Oh, dear, you have upset them all! Never mind—stuff them in. Where's Joan? Not gone down stairs yet! She might have come to help me first.”

“Mother, here is Joan,” said Nessie, as the door opened two inches.

“Father wants you to come down to breakfast, mother.”

“I thought so!” responded Dulcibel, in despair. “Well, he must

wait, that's all. Do help Nessie lock the portmanteau, Joan. She is so slow, she will never get things done. Is your packing finished?"

"Quite," said Joan.

"I've just found three great holes in my gloves; the wrong pair left out, of course. You haven't a needle and thread, have you, Joan—or Nessie? Thanks, Joan—what a handy girl you are! When the portmanteau is locked you had better both go down, and begin breakfast with your father."

"Let me mend the holes," said Joan, when a vehement struggle had brought together the bulging sides of the portmanteau, and Nessie sat upon the floor, panting rather dolefully.

"Oh, well, I don't mind—thank you, Joan! I must pin up the braid on my skirt. It ought to have been mended last night, and I forgot it. Nessie, you are quite tired. Really, I think we must bring a maid with us next time we go out. I don't feel as if I could eat a

morsel of breakfast. You had better both go down without me.”

“Father said he should not begin till you came,” observed Joan, stitching diligently.

“Well—if I must. But it’s of no use. I can’t eat in a bustle; and we haven’t a moment to spare. There he comes. I knew he would.”

“Breakfast, my dear,” said George, looking in.

“But we shall be late. We shall miss our train,” gasped Dulcibel.

“No harm if we do; but I don’t think we shall,” said George calmly.

And they did not, though he allowed no more flurrying haste, and breakfast was eaten in quietness.

CHAPTER XI. CAIRNS FARM.

JOHN CAIRNS was, as Mrs. Brooke had said of him, “quite a

respectable farmer.” Nobody except disdainful Mrs. St. John would have thought of applying the term “milkman” to that gray-headed well-to-do old man, owner of many broad acres, even though he did largely supply the “gentry” of the neighborhood with butter and milk.

The farm occupied a position about equally distant from Woodleigh Hall and Mr. St. John’s residence, being within three miles of either. It was an aged, ivy-grown house, with divers sheds and out-buildings hard by, and several hay ricks in the near background.

A smart little drawing-room, swathed in brown holland and yellow gauze, was so seldom employed as to be practically useless. There was, however, a small cosy parlor, close to the big kitchen, where the farmer permitted himself to sit and smoke. Occasionally his son did the same; but Jervis was more of a reader than a

smoker. The daughter, Hannah, might also be found there, darning stockings, once in a while; not often, since she had no great love for sitting still, and was commonly busy about the house and farm.

Hannah Cairns was not the old farmer's only daughter, and Jervis Cairns was not the only son. Many years back there had been, twice over, times of great trouble at the farm—trouble of a kind which tends either to break the heart or to harden the nature.

First, the eldest son, William Cairns, the pride and hope of his parents, went wrong. Up to the age of twenty all seemed well. He had always had an aversion to farming; but he was rising to a position of trust in the employ of a neighboring gentleman of property—no other than George Rutherford, himself in those days a young man. Then William was led astray by bad companions, ran into

debt, and fell under temptation into dire and deliberate dishonesty.

The generous kindness of George Rutherford averted the more terrible disgrace of open trial and condemnation; but remorse in his case did not mean reformation, and from that day to this, his face had never been shown in his own land. John Cairns never wrote to him or invited his return.

The eldest daughter, Marian, commonly known as “Polly,” was an unusually pretty girl, her father’s especial darling, and not a little spoilt by him. When William so disgraced himself at the age of twenty-one, Polly was only seventeen, while Hannah and Jervis were not more than twelve and six years old.

Five years passed, and the second great family trouble came. Polly went to pay a long visit to a farmer-uncle in the next county. While she was there a young Cantab,* Hubert Brooke by

name, who was spending part of his long vacation at a large country house near, fell in with her accidentally, and speedily lost his heart and head. Polly was very taking, no doubt, and Hubert was very young—more than a year her junior. Polly went home, and Hubert followed her, taking up his abode for a week at an inn, not far off. He did not show himself to Polly's parents, but contrived to meet her two or three times; and a runaway marriage was an early ending to the brief, foolish affair. Hubert's family immediately cut all connection with him, and Hubert insisted on the entire separation of his wife from her family. He had friends who helped him to find work, and while her husband lived Polly knew no lack of tolerable comfort.

* Undergraduate in Cambridge University

Had Hubert openly sought Marian as his wife from her parents they might not have objected. But that she should

marry without leave, and should give them to understand that all intercourse between herself and them must thenceforth cease—this did come with a terribly heavy blow. The farmer grew hard and cold in his hurt pride, and forbade the mention of Marian's name; and Hannah, young as she was, sternly followed suit. The mother said little, but quietly drooped and died. Only Jervis still cherished loving recollections of the sister who had always been kind to him.

Strange as it may seem, George Rutherford had never heard the details of this story. From the time of William's disgrace—the facts of which had oozed out in some measure, though not through George Rutherford, the Cairns family had lived as far as possible in strict seclusion. No neighbors were admitted to intimacy at the farm, and few among their few acquaintances knew how Marian left

her home, or conjectured the cause of her absence.

When Marian wrote to George Rutherford, “You will not know my married name,” she was rather making a happy shot than asserting what she knew to be a fact. It really was so, however. The Cairnses, as a family, were grateful to George Rutherford for his forbearance, but the very sight of him was by association painful, and they had quietly dropped themselves as far as possible out of his ken. The farm lay beyond Woodleigh parish limits; and while they often heard of him, he did not hear of them. In a passing way it came to his ears that the eldest daughter of old Cairns had married and gone away, but that was all. If her “married name” was ever mentioned to him, it made no impression. He could recall “Polly” as a pretty sweet-mannered girl, overwhelmed with grief, at the time of her brother’s wrong-doing; but he had not

exchanged a word with her since; and he could not guess the deep girlish admiration and gratitude with which she had ever regarded him for William's sake.

During all the seventeen years that Joan, the granddaughter of old John Cairns, had lived at Woodleigh Hall, no passing breeze had ever brought to light the fact of this unsuspected connection. Perhaps it was not surprising. Intercourse between George Rutherford and the Cairns family had become absolutely nothing in amount. John Cairns did not know that he had a granddaughter. When he or his met Joan—as doubtless they did in the country lanes—they could have seen nothing in her face or manner to recall the vanished Marian.

The Brooke family did know of the probable existence of a grandchild, and of her relationship to the Cairnses of Cairns farm. But they had not the slightest wish to know more, always

excepting Hubert's mother, whose desires were overborne by her husband's determination. They were under no anxiety to rake up the smouldering ashes of a past fire. Until their old friend Mrs. St. John had come to live near Woodleigh none of them had ever wished to visit the neighborhood. Thus it had come to pass, both easily and naturally, that the matter had slumbered all these long years.

John Cairns at seventy-five was a fine old man still, tall and massive, with strong features, and unsmiling expression. He overlooked everything on the farm himself, trusting to nobody's memory except his own, and tramping about in all weathers, with a hardy disdain of cold and wet not often to be surpassed by younger men.

Hannah Cairns resembled her father, alike in appearance and in character. She too was tall and big-boned, with harsh mouth and cold

eyes. Within a few months of forty in age, she might have been taken for ten years older, judging from the marked features and deep intervening hollows.

Jervis Cairns, her brother, six years her junior in reality, and fifteen years her junior in look, was a widely different subject from the other two. Delicate in health from babyhood; always more or less a sufferer from alternations of asthma and bronchitis; an intelligent reader and thinker, and a man of warm affections; he seemed to be singularly planted in the unsympathetic companionship of a silent father and a morose sister. He would have enjoyed the kindly warmth of real family life; but from this he had been debarred ever since the loss of his sister Marian, and the death of his mother. The farm servants all loved Jervis Cairns; but their affection could not make up for the lack of loving-kindness from his own people.

They did not mean to be otherwise than good to him. Cairns and Hannah would alike have been amazed at any complaint on his part. All his bodily wants were attended to; and in illness no expense was spared. Nevertheless, Jervis was keenly conscious of a want.

“It’s going to be a boisterous night,” old Cairns said, coming in late one evening. A lamp was on the little parlor table, and he sat down, pulling off a woollen comforter, and drawing out a short pipe, which he proceeded to light. “Have up the shutters, Hannah. The wind blows in cold.”

“Winter seems coming before its time,” remarked Jervis. “I never knew it turn suddenly cold like this, quite so early. Well, we’ve had a lovely autumn till to-day, so we needn’t complain.”

“At your books for ever,” said Cairns discontentedly. “And whatever in the world is the use?”

“Hannah wouldn’t let me go out, and one can’t sit idle. Reading keeps me happy, father, if there’s no other use.”

“I should just think I wouldn’t,” responded Hannah.

“It’s a sharp wind. Best take care,” said old Cairns. He seemed to fall into a musing fit; his brows knitted. Hannah presently moved out of the room, and he said then—“Met old Elton just now; and he couldn’t let me pass without stopping.”

“Elton?” said Jervis.

“You don’t remember him, of course. Used to be butler at Woodleigh Hall—time our troubles began. You were a little chap then. He broke down in his health after, and Mr. Rutherford pensioned him off. That’s some eighteen years ago, I should reckon. I didn’t know but he might be dead before this; but he isn’t. I shouldn’t have known him, but he knew me.”

“Staying near here?” asked Jervis.

“Yes; he’s got a daughter married and come lately to live in Woodleigh. I met him near there.”

“Have you been so far? And did he tell you any news?” Jervis, in his secluded, sickly life, liked an occasional voice from the outside world.

“Not much. Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford’s been away, he said—to Wales, I think—and they’re expected back this evening. I told him I hadn’t spoken to Mr. Rutherford for years, and he said he could hardly believe it. He asked why I didn’t go to the Hall; and I said I’d no wish. I cut it short, and got away as soon as I could.”

Jervis bent his head, looking on the ground. “Elton—yes, I remember him now. Polly took me once to the Hall, when I was a little fellow, and I saw him there. Did he ask after Polly?”

“Yes,” the old man said shortly.

“And you told him—?”

“The truth, of course—that she was married and gone off more than twenty years ago, and I’d never seen her since. He asked if she had any children. I said I didn’t know—Polly hadn’t thought it worth her while to write and tell us. He said he was sorry to hear it. He’s been to stay at the Hall two or three times, and always thought of us, but he couldn’t walk so far as here, and nobody seemed to know how we were getting on. I said—so much the better; we didn’t want to be talked about; and then I went away.”

Hannah had not come back. Jervis lifted his face, speaking quietly. “Sometimes I have a downright craving for Polly come over me,” he said—“as if I’d do anything to get hold of her again. She was more like mother in her ways than any.”

“Your mother was a good woman, if ever there was one,” said the old farmer, with an accent which

seemed to imply that he counted Polly the reverse.

“They were like in their ways,” repeated Jervis.

John Cairns made no answer. He only smoked vigorously, till a deepening blue mist began to pervade the room. Father and son sank into their usual evening silence.

This day it was not to remain uninterrupted. Perhaps an hour had passed, when a ring sounded faintly. After a pause it was heard again, and Hannah’s voice called—

“Do see what’s wanted, Jervis. My hands are in the flour, and that girl’s loitering somewhere upstairs.”

Jervis obeyed. It afterwards seemed singular that he should have been the one to respond to the bell on this particular occasion, for he was very seldom called upon to do so.

CHAPTER XII.

“POLLY.”

WHEN Jervis opened the door, he found a woman standing there—a stranger, he supposed.

She wore a neat, though shabby, bonnet and cloak, and her thin, careworn face was turned full towards the light. It was a face which had been pretty once, though all traces of beauty had vanished now. The features were sharpened as if by prolonged illness, and the gray eyes were set in deep hollows; but a certain strong content shone through the eyes and hovered round the mouth. She stood very still, looking straight before her, with both hands clasped over the handle of a travelling bag.

“Do you want something or somebody?” asked Jervis, after waiting two or three seconds for speech.

“Yes,” she said, and gazed at him questioningly. “Can you tell me, please—”

“Jervis, shut that door—you’ll catch your death of cold,” called Hannah.

“Are you Jervis? Do you have asthma still?” asked the new-comer; and she stepped inside, closing the door herself. “Jervis! I shouldn’t have known you.”

He stood in perplexity, not understanding, and she placed her bag on the ground.

“May I put that down?—it’s heavy. You are Jervis, aren’t you?—little Jervis! He used to be so fond of me.”

“Polly!” Jervis said with an accent of utter amazement.

“Yes, I am Polly. I have come back at last. Is father alive still? Will he be pleased or angry?”

“Polly!” he said again. “Why, we have just been speaking of you, and the wish I had to see your face again. I never could think you weren’t living still—though you didn’t write a word.”

“I couldn’t write, Jervis. I didn’t seem able. I have lived with William, and father would have been vexed at that. It was my husband’s wish first that I should keep away from you all—he has been dead now many, many years; but I always felt ashamed to write. Only just of late I’ve learnt to feel differently about many things, and I began to see it was wrong. And William is going on worse and worse. I couldn’t stand it any longer, and I did long for a sight of home again. Jervis, it really is you?—so altered!”

He kissed her kindly, gravely, in answer, accepting at once the returned wanderer.

“You are altered too, Polly; but I couldn’t be mistaken,” he said. “We must tell father.”

“What’s it all about?” called Hannah, sharply. “Who have you there?”

“One moment,” Jervis said. He was breathing hard, with a touch of his

old enemy, asthma, brought on by the shock of Marian's sudden appearance, and the reply failed to reach Hannah.

"Who have you got out there?" was called again, impatiently.

"You haven't grown strong yet, Jervis," said Marian.

"Stronger than I was—only for this. Polly, you'd better come straight in. Come to father." He walked before her, slowly and with audible panting, leading the way into the little parlor. Old Cairns was alone there still, smoking as before. Jervis sat down, with so violent a fit of coughing that he could not speak. Marian stood still in one doorway, upright and composed, with her hands drooping before her; Hannah appeared in the other, frowning and disturbed.

"Now that just comes of going and standing in a draught. You might as well have had the sense to shut the door at once. A nice bother it'll be to-

night. There, don't speak, or you'll bring it on worse. Who's this?"

Marian came a few steps forward, moving quietly, and wearing the same look of settled calm upon her thin, worn features. She did not seem agitated by this return to her childhood's home. John Cairns was gazing hard.

"Why, it's—it's—our—Polly—I do believe!" he said.

"Yes, I'm Polly. I have come home again, father," she said.

"It's Polly herself; I do believe," repeated the old man. He seemed, very much surprised—more surprised than either gratified or displeased. "Polly, her very own self—after all these years—and grown into a middle-aged woman. Lost all her good looks, too. But it's really Polly."

"I'm so glad you know me, father," she said.

“It’s easy to know you. It isn’t so easy to know what you’ve come back for now,” Hannah’s harsh voice said.

“I’m come because I thought it was right for me to do so,” Marian answered, with slow utterance. “I’ve been taught that I was wrong to go away and wrong to stay away. That brought me home.”

Hannah was so astonished that she could only stare.

“Where have you been, Polly?” asked old Cairns, after a pause.

“I’ve been abroad for years, father—living with William,” said Marian.

Jervis’ paroxysm of breathlessness was severe, and she came close, standing by his side, and giving him support with her hands. The old farmer paid no attention to her mention of William.

“Father, may I stay and nurse Jervis?” she asked, when the coughing

grew less. “I’m a good nurse, and I’ve done a great deal in that way.”

“He doesn’t need nursing. He only needs common-sense about himself,” said Hannah, sharply. “We’ve done well enough all the years without you.”

“May I, father?” repeated Marian.

“Stay! Yes, you may stay,” said old Cairns. “I’m not the man to turn away one of my own children that wants a shelter. It wasn’t by my wish you ever went, Polly.”

“No; it was my own doing,” said Marian. “I did wrongly in leaving you all, father, and I’ve had long punishment. My life has been a sad one, and the worst of all has been the knowing I brought my troubles on myself. It’s only of late that I’ve begun to hope there might be forgiveness for me too—and there’s comfort in the thought. But the consequences of evil-doing do cling like a leech to one through life.”

Her three companions heard in silence; the old farmer seeming a little bewildered; Hannah wearing a look of grim contempt; Jervis resting against her still.

“What’s become of him?” asked John Cairns, suddenly.

“Hubert died years and years ago, father.”

“And you never had any children?” asked the old farmer, with interest.

“One I had, and I—lost her.” Marian paused, seeming to consider. “Yes, it’s true—I lost her. But she didn’t die. I’d best be open with you all. I gave her away.”

“Gave her away?” Jervis roused himself to utter. “Your own child?”

“Yes—my own child! I don’t know how ever I could,” Marian said mournfully. “You can’t despise me more than I despise myself; Jervis—so you may say what you will. I knew it was wrong then, and I know it better

now. But I'd been in bad health, and a quack doctor, who was said to be clever, told me I was soon to die; and I had nowhere to leave my child. I couldn't take her to William, and let him bring her up. I loved her too well for that—and Hubert had made me promise faithfully that I'd keep her from my own relations. I had no business to make the promise, but I did. So I couldn't bring her here either."

"Ay, ay, he had plenty of pride, if he had nought else to boast of," said John Cairns.

"Yes it was pride, of course. But I suppose we are all proud, one way and another. I was proud of him, and proud of his grand relations, even though they wouldn't have anything to do with me. I thought perhaps they might some day, and that's why I was willing to give the promise."

"And you gave your child away?" Jervis repeated, incredulously.

Marian dropped her head, in utter shamefacedness. "It's true," she said. "I would cut off my right hand, now, to live that time over again; but the past can't be undone. I left her in the way of one who I thought would have pity, and I wrote a letter and took myself off. I knew I was doing wrongly; but it wasn't till later that the evil and meanness of it all came back to me."

"What I went through after, I couldn't tell you, nor any one. It wasn't as if God had taken my child from me. I had given her up myself; and when I found I was getting better instead of dying, and knew what I had done, the thoughts I had pretty near drove me mad. It was ever so long before I knew what had become of her. She might have been living or dead, or brought up as a pauper, for all I could learn. And when I did hear, in a roundabout way, it was only to know that she was more lost to me than ever I had pictured. It's been bitter, bitter

work, Jervis—hard, as the way of transgressors is said to be.”

“And you are better in health now, Polly?” her brother asked, half grave, half pitying in manner. Much as he loved the returned sister, he could not put aside the recollection of a mother’s forsaken child. It seemed to him too terrible, almost beyond belief.

“Yes, I’m better.” she answered listlessly. “The doctors say I may live a good while yet—perhaps as long as most people. I went into a hospital seven years ago, and was put to a deal of pain, and I’ve been better ever since. And now I hope I’m willing to live or not to live, as God chooses. I’m glad I didn’t die then. I’ve learnt a deal lately: and if my sins look blacker than ever, and my shame and sorrow are greater, I know there may be pardon for the worst, through the dying of the Son of God—and hope has come to me at length, though I know I can never undo

the past, and must bear to the end what he appoints."

Ease of expression had always been a characteristic of Marian, even in her girlish days; and she could speak without effort about such feelings as another in her place would have been scarcely able to allude to. The frankness was not new; but a certain religious element in her talk took them all by surprise. Perhaps Jervis marvelled the most, as he listened. He was of a reserved temperament, having its deep under-flow of thought and faith, but with tardy and limited powers of utterance.

"What was your child named? Who was it you gave the child to?" asked Cairns.

A red spot rose to Marian's cheek. "I think I'd best answer no questions about her," she said. "I don't seem to feel myself free. I promised Hubert to keep her away from you all; and in a sort of way I promised never

to come forward and claim her. I mustn't count that she is mine still—and that's the bitter thought of all to me. If she was unhappy—but she isn't, and it would be no pleasure to her to know she had a mother living. I'll manage to see her some day, for I must—I can't stand the craving much longer, if I don't. But that'll be my own concern."

Marian removed her bonnet and cloak slowly. No one would have guessed from her looks that she was older than Hannah.

"It's so natural to be at home again," she said. "I shall begin to think I've been asleep, and just woke up. Only mother isn't here. But mother has forgiven me—I'm sure of that. There's no unforgiveness or thinking hard thoughts of people in heaven. Can I have my old bedroom, Hannah? I should like that best."

"It doesn't make any difference," said Hannah coldly. "Nobody's

sleeping there now, and you may as well have that as any other."

"Then I will." She stood looking at her sister. "Hannah, can't you find it in your heart to forgive me yet? I think you might. I think you would, if you knew half I've gone through. It's an awful thought for a child to have helped to shorten a mother's life; and it's an awful thought for a mother to have given up her own child. Can't you pity me yet?"

She did not wait for an answer, but went away to see after her room, moving with a quiet step, which contrasted with Hannah's abrupt dashes to and fro. The old farmer watched her then, and on her return, with a curious interest. The old half-dead affections for his eldest daughter seemed to be slowly returning. "Yes, it's good to have our Polly back," he muttered now and then.

Marian appeared to have strangely little to say about her long

absence. Perhaps the fact that she could tell few particulars without bringing in William's name was a restraint. One matter after another came up, and events were mentioned at intervals, but there was no outpouring. She seemed placidly happy to be at home again, and her eyes continually strayed in the direction of Jervis. Hannah's brusqueness glanced harmlessly off the shield of her calm content.

Supper, usually a meal partaken of in dead silence, was broken thus by fitful conversation. Marian took her position at once as daughter of the house—not as eldest daughter. Hannah could not after these years be dispossessed of her leading place in the household.

When supper was over, Hannah disappeared, and John Cairns gradually nodded himself off into profound slumber. The little parlor was very hot, but not too hot for Jervis. He had

placed himself on the other side of the fire, and Marian came near him, taking a seat slightly in the shade. She did not wish to have the light full upon her face, while putting one or two questions of which her mind was full.

“How did you get here from the station?” Jervis asked.

“I walked. My box is there, till we send for it.” Jervis was about to answer, but Marian could endure no farther delay.

“I want to know about the people in the neighborhood,” she said before he could speak. “The friends we used to have.”

“We have no friends now, Polly. Father and Hannah have sheered off from everybody.”

“Because of William?”

“Yes; and—since mother’s death.”

“Mr. Rutherford of the Hall was a good friend to father once,” said Marian.

“We never see him now. Father took to snubbing everybody—and Mr. Rutherford is busy man. He wasn’t likely to come after people who didn’t give him a welcome. He did bring his wife once, and I believe Hannah was downright rude.”

“And he so good to William,” said Marian, sorrowfully.

“That’s just it, Polly. He knew too much of William’s conduct.”

“Who did Mr. Rutherford marry? Has he any children?” asked Marian, her face turned slightly away.

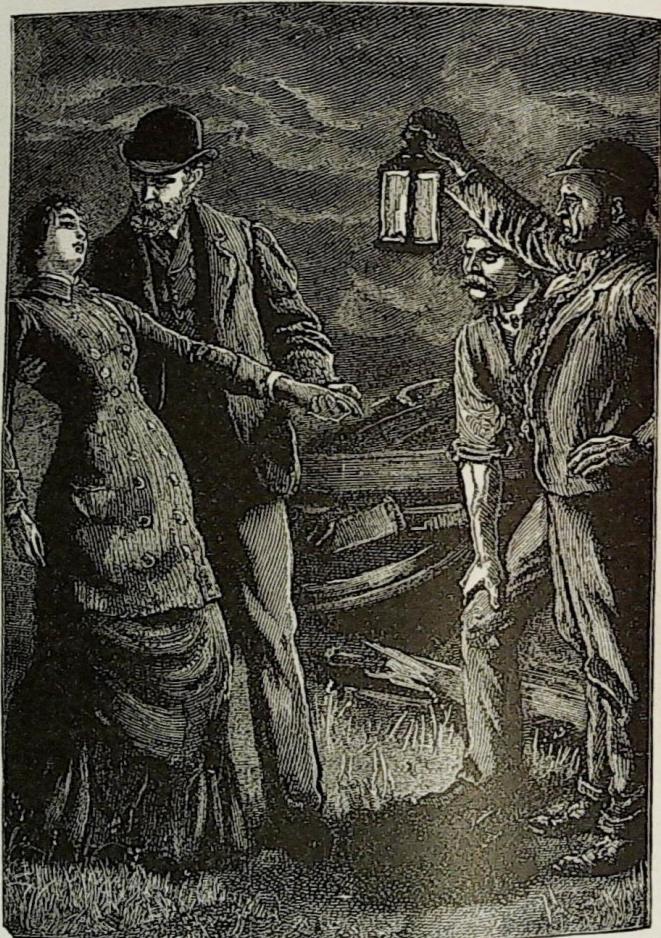
“I don’t know anything about Mrs. Rutherford. They have two daughters—at least I have seen two young ladies riding with Mr. Rutherford. Now I think of it, somebody once told me that the eldest wasn’t his own—a niece, or a friend’s child, I believe. She’s a fine-looking, handsome girl.”

“Dark or fair?”

“Dark not a bit like Mr. Rutherford or his family. Why, Polly, you seem to care a great deal about the Hall people.”

“They have to do with my young days—or at least he had,” Marian made answer.

A QUIET VALLEY.



Rescued.

Chap. 13.

Rescued.

CHAPTER XIII. A COLLISION.

THEY were nearing Woodleigh fast. The last preceding station lay in their rear, and the next stoppage would mean home.

Joan had been for some time sitting upright in her cushioned seat, trying to make out the features of the country through deepening nightshades. Ghostly white telegraph posts flashed past at regular intervals, but little else was visible. Still Joan gazed on, her brows bent with a look of intense gravity.

George Rutherford sat opposite, making believe to read a newspaper by lamplight, but in reality watching Joan. He could not decipher her thoughts. It was something unusual for her to be so absorbed as to remain unconscious of his scrutiny.

Dulcibel and Nessie, tired with the long day's journey, were comfortably ensconced in the two farther corners of the compartment, both sound asleep. The seats between were empty.

“Father,” Joan said at length abruptly, turning her face towards him, “I wonder if—”

“Yes, my dear—” as she came to a pause.

“No; I think I'll ask you by-and-by,” Joan answered, flushing.

“Afraid of me?”

“Oh, no! As if that were possible! But there are some things one can't say always and anywhere. I could ask you questions which I couldn't put to anybody else—in your study, sitting by your side on a stool, when it is nearly dark.”

“It is nearly dark now, Joan; and there is room for you by my side.”

“But this is not your study,” Joan replied archly, taking the offered position.

“We may make it so for the moment, to all intents and purposes. Shut your eyes, and picture the bookshelves around. What were you going to ask me?”

A break, and then—“I can’t now, father. Some other time.”

“My dear, if a thing has to be said or done, there is no time like the present.”

“Yes—but—”

“But my little woman is shy?”

“I suppose I am,” said Joan. “Some things are so difficult to speak about, even to the people one loves most and best. I should like to turn my heart inside out to you, if I could do it without talking. Having to put everything into words is hard. One word is too strong, and another is not strong enough, and no two people mean exactly alike by the same word.”

“Earthly language is defective,” assented George. “I suppose that want will be fully supplied in heaven.”

Joan’s face said—“How?”

“Each word having its own absolute meaning, being in exact accordance with the thing signified, and being used always in its rightful sense. There will be no misunderstandings in heaven.”

“But you never misunderstand me, father. Other people do, of course.”

“I think you must have some fear of the possibility even with me, or you would find speaking out an easier task.”

There was no direct response to this. Joan said, after a minute—“We are almost there.”

“Is that tone just a little regretful?”

“N-no, father,” said Joan slowly. “Wales has been very delightful. But I couldn’t regret going home. Only—”

“My dear, I don’t think I quite understand you this evening,” said George.

“I don’t think I quite understand myself,” Joan answered, flashing a look up at him in the lamplight; “I was going to say—‘Only there is that old Mr. Brooke.’”

“He seems rather a bugbear of your imagination at present. Did he not assure you of non-troublesome intentions?”

“Oh, yes. But people change their minds betimes.”

“They do,” George said. “Will you change yours now, Joan, and ask me the little question which you had in your thoughts a minute ago?”

Joan’s eyes fell.

“I don’t think I can,” she said.

“Not if I wish it?”

Joan fidgeted with one of her gloves. Once she looked up, and met his kind, wistful gaze. Words were hovering on her lips, yet they did not

come forth. She said at length, desperately—

“Father, I can’t.”

“Well, I won’t tease you. Some other time I hope you will be able. No need to say how glad I am to give my Joan help, whenever it is possible.”

Yes, Joan knew that well; and as the momenta sped she began slowly to wish that she had not let the opportunity slip. She could scarcely have told what she had wanted to ask, only she had a sense of need, a desire for something of spiritual help. And, after all, no time for appealing to George Rutherford could well be better than this lost time. But it was now too late. The train was rushing into Woodleigh, and the station lay close ahead. Rapid slackening of speed had already begun.

“Here we are!” George said, giving her a kind, reassuring smile, as if he feared she might think him vexed by her refusal.

“I’ll get down the umbrellas,” Joan said, moving to the other end of the compartment, where Dulcibel was slowly opening her eyes.

“Is this Woodleigh? Oh, dear, I am so tired! Nessie, you must wake up. Joan, just put—”

The sentence was cut short. A fierce jarring shock vibrated through the train, and they were at a standstill.

Joan was distinctly conscious of the shock, conscious of the shuddering thrill which shook the boards under her feet, conscious of the force with which she was flung against the side of the carriage and down upon the cushioned seat. The long grinding crash of the train, brought suddenly to a stop—happily from not half its usual speed—reached her ears vividly, mingled with shrieks of human terror. The hiss and rush of water came next, sounding close at hand, and in one instant the air was full of white, blinding steam.

Joan tried to struggle up from her prone position, and found herself held firmly down. Something seemed to be clutching her dress, but there was no painful pressure; her arms were free, and her mind was clear. “Father!” was the first involuntary cry, as she groped around with outstretched hands, and then—“Mother! Nessie! Oh, what has happened?”

But no response came, only the outside din went on continuously, and her voice rose to a scream with the terrified appeal—.

“Father, father, are you hurt?”

Silence still. Something streaming down her own face made her put up one hand, and she knew it to be blood. She could feel the outlines of a cut on her forehead, though still unconscious of pain. Bodily sensations were lost in bewilderment and dread.

A hand touched hers as if by accident, and the two closed together tightly.

“Nessie,” Joan cried.

And Nessie said hoarsely—

“Joan, mother doesn’t move.”

“I can’t either, can you?” Joan answered hurriedly. “I’m held down. There’s a weight on my dress, I think. If I could only get to father! He must be hurt, or he would come. Oh, I don’t know what to do! Nessie, are you all right?”

“Yes, I think so. But mother!” Nessie said.

“But father!” was the cry of Joan’s heart. She struggled to release herself, struggling in vain. Each effort brought a fresh flow of blood from the cut in her forehead, and Joan grew faint.

“I can touch mother, but she won’t answer or move,” Nessie said fearfully.

“Nessie, couldn’t you go to father?” asked Joan, in a voice which sounded to herself strange and far-away.

“I can’t. The sides of the carriage seem jammed in, so there’s no getting past you. If only this horrid white mist would clear! It must be from the engine, I suppose.” Nessie spoke in a tone of unwonted flurry and excitement, not surprising under the circumstances. “Some one ought to help us out. Why doesn’t any one come? I’ve tried to open the door, and I can’t.”

“Father must be hurt, or he would speak,” moaned the other. “Nessie, call for help—call loudly. They don’t know we are here, perhaps.”

She could not tell whether Nessie obeyed. Buzzing sounds filled her ears, and the dim, white mist faded into blackness. Seconds, minutes, even hours, might have passed before she revived to a consciousness of voices, faces, and lantern light. Troubled eyes were peering in through the shattered window, and the steam had partially cleared away.

“Some ladies this side,” a voice said, and Joan was vaguely conscious of a familiar sound. “Here, men.”

“Three of us,” Nessie’s small tones chimed in. “And a gentleman at the other end. We can’t get to him.”

With much exertion and difficulty the door of their compartment was forced open. Strong hands lifted Dulcibel out, and Nessie followed, an exclamation of concern in that same deep voice greeting the two. Joan did not hear it, nor did she know that the owner of the voice gave up his lantern to another, and hastened elsewhere. Her release was no quick matter; for some of the broken woodwork had closed like a vice upon her skirts, and part of the dress had to be cut away before she could be freed. She said impatiently once, “Oh, leave me—don’t mind about me! Only see to my father?” One of the men answered, “The gentleman has gone, miss,” and they worked on steadily.

Out at last upon the ground, amid the scattered debris of the collision; with a black sky above, and rain dripping on her head; a wrecked carriage in front, and an overturned engine close beyond; lanterns glimmering here and there, and men moving confusedly to and fro. A good many passengers had made their way already to the Cross Arms Hotel, a rather superior village inn, within two minutes' walk of the spot where the accident had occurred. Others preferred to wait, and give needed help.

No other carriages had suffered to the same extent as the foremost compartment, in which the Rutherfords had travelled; but many people were more or less shaken and bruised. One lady in violent hysterics sat near, filling the air with her shrieks, and declining to stir; while a poor stoker, with a broken leg, lay not far off, scarcely groaning in his pain—only

waiting to be carried away. He was not the worst among the injured. Mr. Forest, the Woodleigh doctor, and a surgeon from a distance, travelling by this same train, were both occupied elsewhere.

Joan herself looked ghastly—pallid, dizzy, and streaked with blood. One of her rescuers lifted a lantern, throwing its light full upon her; and she staggered, grasping at somebody's arm. Needed support was at once given, and the question, “Are you much hurt?” was asked in concerned, deep tones, so familiar in their articulation that Joan turned, with one sharp cry of relief—“Oh, father!”

“No, Joan; don't you know me?”

“No. Oh, I don't care—” and she snatched away her arm from that of the tall, broad built fair-haired man by her side, in bitter, almost angry disappointment. “I thought it was father's voice! Will nobody get him out? Will nobody see what is the

matter? He hasn't said a word. Oh, do make haste!"

"He has been taken out from the other door. They could not have reached him from this side." Joan had not thought of that possibility, and the words would have brought relief, only something in the speaker's manner stirred her to renewed fear. "I have been there—helping.... Joan, are you much hurt? Don't you know me?" as she stared at him. "I am Leonard Ackroyd—Leo! Are you badly hurt?"

"No, no, no. It is nothing—only a cut—nothing at all," cried Joan passionately. "If I could know about father? Nothing else matters! Where is he? I must go to him."

Leo's hand was on her arm detainingly.

"Not yet—impossible yet," he said. "The surgeons are there!"

"The surgeons?"

"Mr. Forest, and another, a friend of mine, going by this train—"

“Where?”

“They are with him.”

“Where?” repeated Joan, in agony.

Leonard would not give a direct answer. He doubted his own power to keep her back if she once knew whither to turn her steps, so wild in determination was the blanched face.

“He has been taken under shelter. They are seeing to him at once. There could be no delay.”

Joan’s colorless lips could hardly frame the word—“Hurt!”

“I am afraid so—very much.”

“Worse than others?”

“You were nearest the engine; and his end of the compartment—” Leo seemed unable to continue, yet those craving eyes would not let him off. “There was—Joan, will you not come with me? We shall know—presently.”

She almost stamped her foot.

“There was—what—what? Tell me.”

“From the engine—a rush of boiling water—that, or hot steam; I don’t know which—or how,” Leo said with difficulty. “He seemed to be severely scalded.”

“Could he speak?”

“No.”

“Not—not—dead?”

“No, Joan—” very sadly; and then a pause. “But—”

Joan’s white face grew whiter, and the ground seeming falling from under her feet. “I must go to him,” she strove to say; and then all power to move or speak died away. Leonard Ackroyd lifted her like a child in his strong arms, and bore her elsewhere.

CHAPTER XIV. MARIAN’S FEAR.

“YES; Mr. Rutherford belongs to my young days,” slowly repeated Marian Brooke, as she sat in the little smoking parlor of the old farm-house, alone with her brother, Jervis Cairns. “I can remember him first as a big boy, when his father was alive—always so sunny looking, with his auburn hair. It wasn’t often I saw him, but when I did he always had a pleasant word for me. ‘Well, Polly, how are the lessons going on?’ he used to say; and I liked him to ask, though I was shy about answering him. And then he came of age, and his father died—I forget which of the two happened first. And when I was seventeen our troubles began, with William going wrong. It was a sad time. You can’t remember that, Jervis—such a mite of a child you were, only six or seven years old.”

“I can remember how mother used to cry,” said Jervis.

“Poor mother! Yes, that half broke her heart, and my going later

broke it quite. I always feel I am rightly paid for that by my years of sorrow. I think we do get punished often by being paid back in the same coin we've paid to others. I broke her heart, and now I am nothing to my own child. Yes, I know that's my own doing—my own folly, but still—still it is my punishment, Jervis. You don't think it's presumption in me, do you, to hope for God's forgiveness? We have his word of promise, and it can't be wrong to take him at his word. I've grieved and mourned for years, but something of light has come lately. I think I needn't hold myself back from him now. If I had but known in those days how little I was to gain by my wilfulness! But I oughtn't to have needed that to keep me back from wrong-doing."

"If only you had told mother all about Mr. Brooke!" said Jervis.

"Hubert wouldn't let me. There's where it all hinged. If I had insisted on

telling mother, I should have lost Hubert, and I couldn't make up my mind to it. He was very good to me; I can say so much, though he did lead me into wrong-doing. While he lived I didn't seem to feel how ill I had acted; that all came later. And what I went through—”

“Don't you often wish for your child again, Polly?”

“‘Wish’ is no word for it,” she answered. “Sometimes it's such awful longing that I feel almost as if I could lie down and die with the heart pain. It's worst at night—the thirst to have her little arms round my neck once more. But they are not little any longer, and I'm nothing to her now. She is happy without me, and she doesn't even know she has a mother living. I've not seen her since she was that high, Jervis—under four years old—with such pretty ways, and such a loving heart! But children soon forget you know. I don't suppose she'd even

know me if she saw me. No, of course she couldn't. The trouble has been that I could so very, very seldom hear of her; and she might any time have died without my knowing. I never dared to write straight, and say I was alive, and ask. I was too ashamed and too unhappy; and there were those promises in the way."

"You'll manage to see her now," said Jervis; and Marian flushed.

"Perhaps. I shouldn't wonder. I'll try some day. A mother does crave fer a look. But I shan't tell her who I am, so long as she is happy and doesn't need me."

Voces presently sounded outside, and after a while Hannah came in.

"There's been a bad train accident," she said abruptly.

"Where?" asked Jervis.

"Near Woodleigh Station. Jim's but just got back, and I asked him whatever he had been dawdling about. He says father sent him to the station

for a parcel, and of course he wasted his time there, playing and gossiping. Anyway, there he was when the accident happened, and he stayed to see all he could—sure to do that, or he wouldn't be a boy! Some sort of blunder about the train coming in; it got upon the wrong line, and ran into another just going out of the station."

"A collision?" Marian said.

"Yes. Jim says it might have been a deal worse, if both trains had been going at the top of their speed, which they weren't. But anyway it's bad enough. One engine went right over, and a front carriage is smashed, and a lot of people are hurt. There's a stoker with his leg broken."

"That's not the train, I hope, that Mr. Rutherford was expected back by?" Jervis suddenly said.

"Mr. Rutherford!" repeated Marian; and a sudden fear shot through her—not for George Rutherford.

“Yes, it is,” Hannah answered, “and they’re worst hurt of any. Mr. Rutherford’s said to be dying.”

Every trace of color left Marian’s face. Jervis looked at her in perplexity, as she said in changed, hoarse tones—“Mr. Rutherford’s daughters!”

“I don’t know everything,” said Hannah shortly. “They’re hurt, I believe. They were all in the first carriage, and that’s pretty well smashed up.”

Marian rose slowly, a dazed look in her eyes. “What are you after? What’s the matter, Polly?” asked Jervis.

“They’ll want me, perhaps. I mean I’m going to see if I can be of any use,” she said slowly. “I’m a good nurse, and some of the poor things might be needing help.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” said Hannah. “There’s any number of people to do all that’s wanted.”

“You can’t tell. I dare say I could be useful.”

“I dare say you couldn’t. Sit down and be quiet,” said Hannah curtly. But the order was not obeyed.

“It’s too late, Polly, my dear,” said Jervis in his kindest tone. “You shall do as you like in the morning—only not to-night. It’s getting late, and the station is a long step off; and, as Hannah says, there’ll be people enough to do all that’s needed. A stranger going among them couldn’t be much good.”

“I don’t see that: and I’m not a stranger to Mr. Rutherford,” said Marian. Her look was very resolute. “You needn’t try to hinder me, Jervis, for my mind’s set on going. The walk’s nothing.”

“You always were set on anything you wanted to do,” said Hannah.

“But, Polly, it’s not needful. It would be better not,” urged Jervis. “In the morning, if you like—”

“Any one among them may be dead by the morning,” Marian answered. “I am going, Jervis. I couldn’t lie down and sleep to-night if I didn’t. Perhaps I shall come back presently but you needn’t sit up for me. More likely I’ll stay there till the morning.”

“At the hotel?” asked Jervis, giving in to what seemed inevitable.

“Yes.”

Marian moved away, not pausing at the door to hear Hannah’s very audible animadversions on her obstinacy. Presently she returned, wearing bonnet and shawl.

“I shall know my way,” she observed. “Though it’s years and years since I’ve walked those lanes I can remember every step of them, like yesterday. It’s clear moonlight, and

I'm in no fear of going wrong. Don't be anxious, Jervis."

Once out of the house, away from observers, Marian's calmness of manner forsook her. In the solitude and semi-darkness she could yield to her feelings, as she rarely permitted herself to do before the eyes of others.

A great fear was pressing on the mother's heart. What if Joan—her child—were among the severely injured? What if Joan should die?

She hurried on with fevered and troubled steps, picturing to herself every possible kind of hurt which Joan might have received. Proximity to Joan seemed to waken into active life all the motherly dreads and desires and passionate affection which for long years had lain half dormant. Abroad she had been able to wait month after month, never hearing a whisper of Joan, only content in a quiet belief that her child was happy. Now every

moment of uncertainty and delay seemed intolerable.

Visions of Joan hovered perpetually before her as she pressed forward—not of George Rutherford's handsome adopted daughter, but of a little willful, loving child, with velvety, dark eyes and marked, black brows, and sweet, clinging arms. She could almost hear again the prattling utterance so frequent in those days—“Doan wants muvver! Doan does 'ove muvver so.” Did Joan love mother now?

“O, Joan, Joan, my darling!” sobbed Marian, pausing once to lean against a tree trunk. “To think that I could have ever given you up! But I was so alone, so friendless; I didn't know what to do. If I had known God then I could have kept you, darling—I could have trusted him, and he would have cared for us both. O, Joan, I wish I had. How could I ever leave you?”

Then she was hurrying onward again, passing lane after lane, turn after turn, with never a moment's hesitation as to the way.

Outside Woodleigh she paused once more, not this time to indulge in tears, but to master herself and subdue all signs of agitation. Calmness was an absolute necessity if she would not betray herself. She would perhaps see Joan, and she must see her as a stranger, manifesting no especial interest in her more than in others. If Joan might ever know her as a mother, this was not the time. So hard did Marian foresee her self-imposed task likely to prove that she could at this moment have turned and fled. Only she would not, and did not.

CHAPTER XV.

DULCIBEL'S NURSE.

“I WANT to speak to Mrs. Blogg, if you please.”

Marian made the request with no sort of preface, standing within the

door of the Cross Arms Hotel. The flurried waiter whom she had accosted stood still for an instant.

“Mrs. Blogg! I don’t know as you can.”

“There has been an accident, and people hurt,” said Marian.

The waiter pricked up his ears, noting her pale and strained look.

“Anybody as you are interested in travelling by the train?” he demanded.

“Yes,” said Marian.

“And you want to know about them, eh? What name?”

“I must speak to Mrs. Blogg,” said Marian.

“You’ll have to wait, then,” responded the waiter, his sympathy lessening. He ran over Marian with a pair of sharp eyes, a little puzzled as to her social status. “There’s people in the parlor; but you can sit there—or here.”

“I can wait here,” Marian answered quietly.

“What name am I to give Mrs. Blogg?”

“You needn’t give any. Tell her I have just come from a distance, and she will know me.”

The waiter looked dubious, but vanished. Marian remained in the shabby, gas-lighted hall, silently awaiting the advent of the landlady. Many people came and went, some staring curiously at Marian; but none of them would do for Mrs. Blogg, even allowing for any amount of change through lapse of years.

Then with a sudden sense of shock, she saw a tall, fair-bearded man pass out of the dining-room. There was an extraordinary familiarity in look and gesture. “Mr. Rutherford!” faltered on her lips. For a moment she forgot George Rutherford’s present condition, and the years that had passed since her last sight of him. Almost instantly it dawned upon her that he was far too young; but the faint utterance had

reached his ears. He turned back, and asked—

“Did you speak? Do you want anything?”

The opportunity was not to be lost. Marian stood up respectfully, and said—

“I beg your pardon, sir; I took you for Mr. Rutherford.”

“No; my name is Ackroyd, but we are counted alike. Mr. Rutherford is my uncle.”

Marian lifted a pleading face to his.

“Then perhaps, sir, you won’t mind telling me how Mr. Rutherford is, and Mrs. Rutherford, and the young ladies. I’m only just come back from foreign parts, but years ago Mr. Rutherford was good to me and mine. They told me of the accident, and I couldn’t rest till I knew more.”

“Mr. Rutherford is most seriously injured,” said Leonard Ackroyd sadly.

“The doctors have very little hope that he can pull through.”

“Poor Mr. Rutherford!” murmured Marian, moved for him, yet overwhelmingly full of another dread “And the ladies, sir?”

“Mrs. Rutherford is ill with the shock. I do not know that there is actual bodily hurt, but she has been in a frightfully hysterical state. One of the young ladies has a cut on the forehead and a strained arm. The marvel is that matters are not worse—with them. Mr. Rutherford is as bad as he can be.” A deep sigh, as of unspeakable relief, had escaped Marian.

“Sir, could I be of any use? I am a good nurse,” she said.

Leonard hesitated, scanning her face.

“I cannot say we are not in need of one,” he said. “But I must know your name, and more about you.”

“Mr. Cairns of the farm is my father. I married long ago, sir, without

his leave; and I've only just come home after years and years away. I am a widow. Mr. Rutherford would know all about Polly Cairns, if he could listen."

"But you are not Polly Cairns now."

"No, sir; I'm only 'Marian.'" She lifted deprecating eyes to his face. "'Polly Cairns' is what Mr. Rutherford would know me by. I don't suppose he ever heard my married name—and I've no wish to bring it forward. I've no reason to be proud of it. If people will just call me 'Marian,' it's all I want. Sir, I couldn't tell you how good he has been to me and mine—one way and another. I owe him my life, if I could give it for his. And if I might just help a little—any way—nursing or watching by him—there's nothing would make me more glad."

Leonard demurred still.

"I am grateful for the kind thought on your part," he said; "still,

you are a perfect stranger to me. Does anybody here know you?"

"Yes, sir, the landlady. At least, she knew me as a girl. I've asked to speak to Mrs. Blogg, and it's that I was waiting for when you came by." Marian looked wistfully again into Mr. Ackroyd's face. "Sir, you may trust me."

"I am sure I may. Still I must have a word with Mrs. Blogg. Wait here for me."

Another five minutes, and Leonard reappeared with Mrs. Blogg. The comely little woman of Marian's recollection had developed into redness and rotundity, but the kindness of tone and manner were unchanged. Mrs. Blogg advanced, beaming.

"What, Polly Cairns—Polly Cairns! you don't tell me! It is Polly Cairns, too! Yes, yes, no mistake about that! Dear, dear me, what a time you've been away—near a quarter of a century, I do believe! Ah, my dear, it

was sad work, going as you did! But you've repented since, I don't doubt. That is the way things come about—marrying in haste and repenting at leisure. And you're changed from the lass I used to know. Life hasn't gone too smooth with you; I can see it in your face. And to come back now, of all days! Dear, dear me! Such a good friend as Mr. Rutherford was to you all; and now he to be dying under my roof, and you turned up all of a sudden! And you want to help in the nursing? Well, sir, if I was you, I'd just take Polly at her word, for she comes of a capable stock, and she'll do her best. But I don't ought to call you Polly Cairns, my dear—a married woman and a widow—and I don't know as I ever was told your surname."

Marian heard all this as in a dream, awaiting Leonard Ackroyd's decision.

“My surname! Call me ‘Marian,’ please,” she said, with a slight start. “The rest doesn’t matter. I’d sooner be ‘Marian’ or ‘Polly’ than anything else.”

“Well, if you’d rather,” said Mrs. Blogg, not quite satisfied. “As you say, it doesn’t matter.”

“Thanks; then I think we may make use of you,” were the next words which reached Marian’s understanding; and she found herself following Mr. Ackroyd upstairs.

“Am I to attend to Mr. Rutherford, sir?” she asked, with a composure which seemed strange to herself.

“Not to-night. He is in good hands. The difficulty has been about the ladies.”

Marian’s heart gave one hard throb. Was he going to place Joan in her charge?

“Mrs. Rutherford is sleeping now, from the effects of an opiate, and you

must watch her carefully. If she should seem in any way worse, call me at once. I shall be in this room, close at hand. Miss Rutherford will be able now to go to her sister."

"Miss Rutherford!" Did that mean Joan, or was Joan the "sister"?

"Sir, are both the young ladies hurt?" asked Marian in a low voice.

"No; only Miss Brooke."

She knew the truth at last, but no more could be said. No especial interest might be displayed in Joan; and Mr. Ackroyd was turning the handle of Mrs. Rutherford's door. A slim, pallid girl came softly to meet them.

"Mother is quite sound still, and not so restless," she whispered.

"That is right, Nessie. I have found some one to watch by her. You must go and lie down in Joan's room."

"Oh, I would rather stay here! Mother needs me most."

“No, I think not. Joan is feverish, and ought not to be alone; and you want rest.”

Nessie yielded at once. She murmured a few directions to Marian, telling her what the doctor had said and ordered; then moved away with her cousin. Marian held the door open behind them for two seconds, and watched them cross the passage to a door on the other side, within which Nessie disappeared. Joan must be there!

Calm as Marian had seemed, she was by no means calm at heart. For Joan was so close—her only child—so close after all these years of separation, and Marian could not go to her—might not venture to say—“Joan is my own!” Rashly she had given away that right, and mother and child were apart still, though so near, parted by the mother’s own deed.

Dulcibel slept heavily hour after hour, sometimes muttering a little in

the early part of the night, but gradually becoming more reposeful. Marian watched beside her dutifully, but all the while her thoughts were on the other side of the passage.

Now and then she crept to the door, opened it softly, and listened with beating heart. Three times this was done fruitlessly. The fourth a broken murmur of sobs reached her ears.

Was it Joan's voice? Marian clasped her hands together, and moved slowly towards that other shut door, drawn as by invisible cords. For the moment she forgot Dulcibel, forgot her own responsibility as a nurse, forgot everything except the wild longing to comfort Joan.

“What is the matter?” spoken low and somewhat sternly by her side, took sharp effect. Marian stood suddenly upright from her bending attitude of attention.

“Sir, I thought something was wrong in the young ladies’ room. I thought perhaps—”

“Mrs. Rutherford is in your charge, not the young ladies; and she must not be left. Can I depend upon you, Marian? If Mrs. Rutherford woke and found herself alone, the consequences might be injurious, after such a shock.”

She sighed quietly, and said—

“I was wrong, sir. I will not leave the room again.”

“Miss Rutherford will come to me if anything is needed. But the less said to Miss Brooke to-night about her father’s state, the better for her,” Leonard breathed.

“Sir, how is he?” asked Marian.

“Mercifully unconscious still. The suffering from the scalds would be terrible, otherwise.”

“If Mrs. Rutherford wakes, sir—?”

“I do not suppose she will at present. When she does, try to evade giving particulars. The doctor will come again early. He did not leave Mr. Rutherford until past two.”

And Marian went back to her vigil, not to break it again until the slow hours of night were over.

About six o’clock Dulcibel first opened her eyes. She dozed off again without a word; and two or three more partial awakings followed, before any distinct consciousness of her whereabouts was shown. But at length the light blue eyes examined Marian in rather mystified fashion, and Dulcibel asked—

“What is the matter?”

“Would you like a cup of tea?” asked Marian.

“Tea? Yes, if you please.” Dulcibel shut her eyes, sighed, and seemed dozing off again, Marian stood like a statue, fearing to rouse her, but she soon looked up again, with an

impatient—"Why don't you make haste, and bring me my tea?"

"The water won't be long boiling," said Marian, lifting the kettle. "It's hot now."

"I don't know you. What is your name?" asked Dulcibel suspiciously.

"Marian, if you please, ma'am."

"Marian what?"

"My father is Mr. Cairns of Cairns farm?"

"Cairns! Yes, I know. Where is my husband?"

"Lying down in another room," Marian said, cautiously.

"Lying down! What do you mean?" asked Dulcibel, with considerable sharpness. "What nonsense! Gone to bed, I suppose."

"Yes, ma'am," said Marian.

"Why is he in another room?"

Marian was sorely puzzled how to answer. "You had hysterics, ma'am," she said at length.

“Hysterics. Yes, I remember.” Recollection seemed to flash back in a moment, and Dulcibel started to a sitting posture. “Oh, I know; I am forgetting! That fearful train—I know it all now. And they would not bring George to me, or let me go to him. But I must go now, and see if he is hurt. Quick—my slippers and dressing-gown!”

She threw herself impulsively out of bed, shaking off Marian’s hand.

“Let me alone. What have you to do with it? I must go to my husband directly. And the girls too! Is Nessie hurt?”

“No, ma’am.”

No particular inquiry as to Joan followed, and the mother’s heart gave a vexed throb at the omission.

“The slippers—make haste! I can’t wait a moment, or I shall not be able to go. I fed so giddy and strange. Make haste. Is my husband in the next room?”

“No, ma’am; I believe he is downstairs somewhere. I do not know where, but Mr. Ackroyd knows. Indeed you are not fit to go,” urged Marian. “I am sure the doctor would not allow it, or Mr. Ackroyd.”

“Mr. Ackroyd? Oh, I remember! I saw him yesterday evening. But he has nothing to do with the matter.” Dulcibel paused, and sank down on the bed. “I don’t think I can go after all,” she murmured. “I do feel so ill. Tell my husband to come to me, if you please.”

CHAPTER XVI. MOTHER AND CHILD.

JOAN, not much more fit than Dulcibel to leave her bed, was a good deal more resolute in carrying out her own will. She would not permit any appeal to Leonard.

“But if you would only just wait till Mr. Forest has been!” pleaded Nessie.

“That is exactly what I don’t want to do,” Joan answered. “He might keep me prisoner, and I want to be free. It is no use talking, Nessie. I must go to father.”

She dressed herself with few words, accepting help from Nessie. A black ribbon tied over the plastered cut on her forehead gave her a somewhat nun-like appearance, not lessened by the white cheeks and heavy, sad eyes below. All sparkle had vanished from Joan’s face.

“I didn’t know I could look so uninteresting,” she said, turning away from the glass. “Well it doesn’t matter.”

“Joan, do you feel very ill?” asked Nessie, wistfully.

“I don’t know. If I find there isn’t much wrong with father, I shall be all right. I am only stupid. I can’t think

why you did not find out more last night.”

Nessie attempted no direct answer.

“Leo said I should have breakfast with him at nine; and it is just nine now,” she said.

“Where? In the coffee-room?”

“Oh, no! He has taken the little private sitting-room. Leo seems to think of everything, and it is such a comfort to have him to arrange for us. Wasn’t it strange, his arriving when he did just in time to come and meet us at the station? You will let me send up a tray to you here, Joan?”

“No,” Joan said resolutely. “I am going down.”

She took the lead as usual, passing first through the door. Leo met them on the stairs, his vigorous frame and tawny beard showing even more marked resemblance to those of George Rutherford in full daylight than in the dimness of the evening before.

Joan's black eyes looked up into his brown ones defiantly, as she read there surprise and disapproval.

"Mr. Forest has not been in yet. You were wrong to get up, Joan," he said, with a brotherly frankness which she resented.

"I didn't choose to lie in bed," she answered.

"Where is breakfast to be?"

Nessie pointed to a door just below the flight.

"And where is father?"

Leo drew a little aside, for Joan to pass him.

"Breakfast first," he said.

"No; I must see father first."

"Not till Mr. Forest has seen you both."

Joan stood still, and almost stamped her foot, frowning at him, much as the dignified infant beside the bridge had frowned at the good-humored school-boy.

“I must go to father. I will go to him,” she said passionately. “No one has a right to keep me away.”

“You will not question Mr. Forest’s authority. He has forbidden it.”

“Then I shall speak to Mr. Forest! I am not going to be treated like a child.”

Joan reined up her head and marched before the other two into a shabby little sitting-room, where breakfast lay on the round table.

“Shall I pour out tea?” she asked stiffly.

“Nessie will do that. You must sit here,” Leonard said, drawing forward an easy-chair.

Joan rejected it immediately, and placed herself bolt upright on an ordinary cane-backed chair, trying to ignore certain hazy and floating sensations, akin to those experienced on board ship.

“I think the sooner Joan has a cup of tea the better,” said Leo.

“I am not going to touch anything till I know the truth about father.”

Leonard was silent for a few seconds, and he brought a cup to her side.

“Now, Joan, a little toast, and a scrap of chicken?” he asked kindly.

Joan was fighting against an overwhelming grasp of sickness and exhaustion. She sat bolt upright still, but her lips were the color of the white table-cloth.

“No,” she said—“nothing yet. I will hear about father first.”

“Joan, be reasonable,” urged Leo. “You are fit for nothing till you have taken some food. I promise to tell you presently; and you shall see him so soon as Mr. Forest consents.”

“You are to tell me now,” Joan retorted imperiously. “I don’t want to be reasonable. I only want to know about father.”

“Just a little tea first,” pleaded Nessie.

“No!”

Joan spoke with a sharp ungraciousness, and then she rose and walked to the window, which she flung open, as if in craving for air. The others could hear a gasp. Nessie looked at Leonard and whispered—

“Hadn’t you better give way?”

“You are wrong, Joan; but if you are determined, you shall have your will,” Leo said at length. “Come and sit down.”

“No; I can’t sit down! I can’t eat! Why will you torture me so?” Joan said, with a look of anguish. “Oh, I know it must be something so terribly bad, or you could not keep me waiting! And I don’t know how to wait—I don’t know how to bear it!”

The slight displeasure in Leonard’s manner vanished, and he went to the window.

“You will take cold,” he said; “the air is so sharp. Joan, come and sit down, and you shall ask what you like.”

The look of those black eyes, with their dread and pain and gratitude, touched him keenly. She allowed him to lead her to the arm-chair, and leaning back in it, she shivered violently.

“Yes,” she said—“yes. Oh, go on, please!”

“He seems about the same this morning as last night—not conscious yet. Yes, very much hurt”—as the blanched lips moved questioningly,—“I cannot tell you how much. The scalds are terribly severe. There would be great suffering if he were conscious. The immediate danger is from them, but there are other injuries also. The insensibility arises from a very bad blow on the head. A good nurse is in attendance, and Mr. Forest was there a long while. You could do nothing, and

he would not know you. Better that you should take care of yourself now, so as to be able to help when your help is needed, if—when—Yes, I was going to say, when he begins to come to himself. He will want you then.”

“If!” was the only word which passed Joan’s lips.

“Yes, surely we must say that—if it is God’s will that your dear father should recover. We must pray for him,” Leo said, earnestly.

A tap at the door, and Nessie answered—“Come in.” Marian opened it and entered.

“If you please, sir,” she said, “I cannot manage any longer to pacify—”

Marian came to a dead pause, and stood as if suddenly turned to stone, her hands wrung together, her gray eyes fixed on that white girl face in the arm-chair. Joan seemed to dislike the scrutiny. Her drooping eyes opened widely for an instant, and the brows above drew into a frown.

“Who is that woman? Take her away!” she said distinctly, with a touch of pettishness. “I want to hear more about father. Don’t let anybody come in.”

Nessie went to Marian’s side, and asked—

“Shall I come to my mother? Does she want me?”

But Marian did not seem to hear—certainly did not heed. Leo began to think there was something about her uncomfortably peculiar.

“Marian, you must not leave Mrs. Rutherford alone,” he said.

Marian seemed to wake up with a start.

“No—yes, sir,” she said. “I beg your pardon.” Instead of walking out of the room, she drew nearer to Joan, gazing earnestly still. “The—the young lady—looks faint,” she said, with a manifest effort for self-control. “Could I do anything?”

“Go away—I don’t want you here,” said Joan, impatiently. “I am asking about my father, and you interrupt us.”

Marian’s face fell like the face of one who has received a heavy blow. Joan, intent on other thoughts, did not notice this; but Leo did, and was perplexed. Nessie glided from the room, beckoning Marian to follow.

“Do you want anything? How is mother?”

Marian had difficulty in collecting herself, so as to answer rationally.

“Mrs. Rutherford was very anxious to get up,” she faltered—“very impatient to hear more about Mr. Rutherford. It might, perhaps, be best to—to—” and Marian came to a confused pause.

“I think you must be tired with sitting up all night,” Nessie said kindly. “You look quite pale. After breakfast

you shall go for a walk. That will refresh you more than anything."

Marian murmured a grateful response, but one voice rang incessantly in her ears—"Who is that woman? Take her away! Go away—I don't want you!" And "that woman" was Joan's own mother—the girl who did not want Marian was her own child!

Alone at last! Hurrying out of the village, away to the old churchyard, unseen by any human eye, alone in her grief, Marian sat upon a flat gravestone, heedless of cold or damp, rocking herself to and fro with smothered sobs.

"O Joan, Joan, my darling! And you do not know me—do not want me—do not love me! O, God, is there any comfort for such pain as this! Canst even thou help me? For I gave her away—my child—my only one! And I need not—ought not. If I had known thee! Thou wouldst have cared

for us. If I had but known thee—trusted thee! Joan, my child—my baby—will God ever bring us together again—ever make me dear to you again? How can I hope it? I don't deserve that he should. For it was my own doing—my own folly! And I dare not tell Joan who I am! I think it would kill me if she had no love to give! It is such heart-breaking work; and none to help—none to comfort! I thought some light had come, and now all is darkness again! Oh, the madness of having given her up; left her when she was mine—altogether mine; and now mine no longer! The madness—the sin! Does Joan see that—the wrong to her—and does she hate her mother for it? Wrong to Joan—wrong to others—how evil done comes home to one in later years! But, O Joan, your mother is bitterly punished!”

CHAPTER XVII.

TROUBLE STILL.

NEARLY a month had passed since the day of the collision, and George Rutherford still lay in the Cross Arms Hotel. It had been impossible to move him to his own home.

He had gone very near to the gates of death. Had the scalds alone been in question, it would have been, as Mr. Forest said, a hard fight to pull him through; but there were severe injuries in addition to these. A less vigorous constitution must have succumbed.

For three weeks there came no glimmer of consciousness. He escaped much suffering thereby, and the surface wounds healed, as they hardly could have healed if he had been awake to pain, and restless under it. Danger from the scalds was not now talked of, but the doctors still looked serious, and spoke with increasing gravity of the blow to the head. Some

signs of his awaking to life had shown themselves, only they were faint and feeble signs; and when he spoke it was like a little child speaking.

A QUIET VALLEY.



"What do you mean? What do you want?" demanded Joan.
Chap. 17.

“What do you mean? What do you want?” demanded Joan.

All through this month Marian Brooke had not seen Joan a second time. For Joan was in close attendance upon her father at the hotel, and Marian was in attendance upon Dulcibel at the Hall.

Almost immediately after the accident Dulcibel had been ordered home by Mr. Forest; and she continued from day to day so weak and shaken as to be still quite an invalid, able to sit up only for an hour or two in the day, and strictly forbidden to see her husband. Indeed, the mention of his name, or the slightest hint of peril to his life, brought on violent hysterical attacks.

Nessie devoted herself to Dulcibel, and Marian became gradually a necessity to them both. Dulcibel took a fancy to this stranger from the first, and waywardly refused attendance from anybody else, thereby

giving no little offence to the Hall servants. Marian showed calm indifference to their displeasure, and quietly submitted to Dulcibel's will, never revealing her ceaseless desire for one more glimpse of Joan. Thus far she was known at the Hall only as "Marian," or "Nurse."

Leonard Ackroyd had taken up his abode in Woodleigh, though it would be hard to say whether the Hall or the hotel was more strictly his headquarters; he was constantly backwards and forwards between the two. Indeed, had he been George Rutherford's own son he could not possibly have acted with more kind thought and helpfulness.

Two London trained nurses undertook the actual care of George Rutherford, but Joan was constantly present also. From the first there had been no withholding her.

She did not look well, though the cut on her forehead was healed. The

long and terrible anxiety about her adopted father had told upon her severely. Even Mr. Forest's authority did not suffice to make her take enough sleep and exercise. Appetite and energy were alike gone, and she seemed to care for nothing but to sit hour after hour, day after day, in the semi-darkness of the sick-room, gazing on the loved features, for the first time in her life irresponsible to her voice.

“Joan, you cannot go on like this,” Leo said one day.

He had called at the hotel, as usual, for news of his uncle, and Joan came downstairs to see him. He was struck with the change in her appearance, the fixed pallor, and the spiritless, sad droop of the black eyes. She shook hands, saying, “Good-morning,” and then sat down in an easy-chair, leaning back with a worn-out, strengthless air.

“Joan, you cannot go on like this. We must make a change. It is too much for you to be constantly in the room.”

“Oh, no—I could not be anywhere else,” said Joan. She raised her eyes to meet his, with a mournful smile. “It is nothing,” she said. “If only father were himself again I should be all right: I can’t be well while he is ill.”

“He is better,” Leo began, and then paused. “But—”

“Yes, I know,” Joan responded. “Mr. Forest says ‘But’ so often. I suppose it isn’t cruel of you both. I suppose one ought to understand.”

Leonard was silent, his eyes bent pityingly upon Joan from beneath the full brows; and he passed the fingers of one hand slowly through his tawny beard with a puzzled gesture. Joan looked up, and an expression of sharp pain crossed her face.

“Don’t, Lee—oh, don’t!” she cried. “Oh, please don’t! I can’t bear it.”

“Don’t—what?” he asked, in surprise.

“That! Father does it. Oh, don’t, please! If only you were not so like him!”

She held both hands over her eyes, shivering. “Joan, you are quite overwrought,” he said gravely. “We shall have you ill next.”

“I’m not ill. I am not going to be ill. I am only—only—wretched.”

“But things are a little better than they were, dear Joan,” he said in soothing tones, which thrilled her again.

“Yes, I know. I wish you wouldn’t speak in that voice—like his! Yes, I know he is better from the burns; but it is so dreadful to see him like this, day after day the same, just knowing all of us, and not seeming to care—like himself speaking from behind a great thick curtain; and I can’t get at him—I can’t touch him. It isn’t he that speaks, and it isn’t me that he

hears. I never thought illness could be so dreadful—could change a person so. And he isn't changed really. It is his own dear self that is there, only one can't reach him, one can't touch him. And nobody seems able to do anything. Mr. Forest only says we are to wait—wait. I wonder how long! It's enough to kill one."

Her hands went over her eyes again, with a moan.

"Call upon me in the day of trouble!" Leo said quietly.

"Yes. Father would tell me to think of that; but I can't," said Joan, looking up again, with inexpressible dreariness in her black eyes. "How can I? I can't think of anything except father. I have tried to pray, and it is no use—there seems nobody to hear. God is so far-away; and now father seems far-away too; even when I am close beside him there is that dreadful far-away feeling, as if a black cloud were wrapping him all round, and keeping

us off. Do you know the feeling? I always have it when I try to pray, and that keeps me from praying. But I never had it with dear, dear father before. I have always had him, and it was all I wanted; and now he can't understand or answer, and nobody else is of any use. All the world is nothing to me except father."

Joan did not know that she had given Leo pain, perhaps she would not have cared if she had known it. Sorrow makes some people selfish, and Joan was selfish in this grief. There seemed no room in her oppressed and burdened heart for sympathy with others. She could not have told why she turned now to Leonard in her trouble, only it was a relief to speak freely to somebody, and he had always stood in the position of brother to herself and Nessie. The years of his absence in India had modified that position, perhaps much more than any of them were aware. It might have been that the

very resemblance to George Rutherford, from which she shrank with positive suffering, yet helped to draw her out.

“What does Mr. Forest say to you about father?” she asked suddenly.

He was thinking of Joan’s last words, and did not at once take in the meaning of the question.

“Mr. Forest? About your father?”
Leo repeated dreamily.

“Yea, of course—about father,” said Joan with impatience.

“Much the same, I suspect, as he says to you.”

“He says nothing to me—about what we may expect, I mean. He only talks of waiting, and being patient, and taking each day as it comes. But I am tired of waiting, and I never was patient; and I like to look on. And then he lectures me about going out; and I hate to go out. The sunshine seems such a mockery, when father is lying like this. I can’t enjoy anything if he

can't enjoy it too. I only want to sit in a dark room till he is well."

"But is that right, Joan?"

"Right I don't know. And I am sure I don't know why I should talk to you like this," continued Joan, lifting her eyes once more, with a perplexed look. "It seems so foolish, only one must speak out a little now and then, and nobody else can understand. I don't know whether you can—but you look a little as if you could. Nessie can say nothing, except 'I'm sorry;' and mother and I never do understand each other the very least."

"I think you and I do, Joan," said Leo.

"Oh, I don't know!" repeated Joan, falling into a languid tone. "Only, as I say, one must speak to some one. But I am going back to father now, unless you will tell me first what Mr. Forest really thinks. I do want to know."

"It is hardly possible that he should say anything decided at present," said Leo.

"Of course. Everybody knows that," responded Joan, listlessly, yet with a touch of petulance. "But I suppose he says a good deal more to you than he does to me. He thinks I can't stand hearing the truth. And he doesn't guess how much worse it is not hearing, only being left to think and imagine, and—Leo, won't you tell me?"

"Yes," Leo said in his gentlest voice. "If you will put your bonnet on and come for a little walk, Joan, I will tell you all Mr. Forest has said to me?"

"And not without?"

"No."

"It is cruel," Joan said, rising. "I am so tired, and the sunshine makes me miserable. But I suppose you will keep to what you say."

"For your sake, Joan," he said, apologetically. "You must have air,

and you have not been out for three days.”

“I don’t want to go out.”

Yet he did not withdraw his condition, and she moved away, returning presently in hat and jacket.

“Where are you going to take me?” she asked, as they left the hotel together.

Leo was watching anxiously her faltering steps. “Do you think that you can walk, Joan?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I must,” she said, with a faint smile. “It is only the glare of the light and the fresh air that make me so dizzy. Oh, yes, I’ll manage, if I may take your arm for a moment!”

Leonard gave her his arm, but stood still, sending a boy round the corner for a carriage. Another minute, and Joan was leaning back against the cushions, with shut eyes, and a strange sensation of being whirled through space. She made no attempt to rouse herself; and Leo said not a word; but

presently the keen air, at first too strong, proved reviving, and Joan sat up.

They were by this time in a country lane, flanked by hedges, dressed in a sparkling veil of hoarfrost. Though a cold day, it was entirely still, and the sun shone from a blue sky.

“Better?” her companion asked.

“Yes. It is nothing—I am only stupid! What are you going to tell me about father?”

“We have not had our walk yet. No, I am not going to be unreasonable—” as she exclaimed indignantly. “But I don’t wish you to look again as you did ten minutes ago.”

She gave him a terrified glance.

“Then it is to be bad news?”

“Nothing definite; only uncertainties and possibilities.”

Joan sighed heavily.

“Try not to think for a little while. Look at that coating of hoar-frost on the trees. Cannot you enjoy this?”

There was no enjoyment in Joan’s face. She looked from side to side with a weary indifference, and at last said—

“Are you taking me home?”

“I had not made up my mind whether to turn that way. Would you like to see Aunt Dulcibel and Nessie?”

“I don’t care.”

Leo seemed to be debating the point. When they reached a certain turn, which would have led them round by the Hall, he said nothing to the driver, and they went straight on. Something of relief appeared in Joan’s face; but presently she said—

“There’s another turning that would do as well.”

“Yes. Better for you to have a good round first,” Leo replied.

“Then you mean to stop at home on the way back?”

“Not if you decide against it.”

A pause; and then—

“No; perhaps we may as well—just for five minutes. I needn’t stay longer than that. Perhaps we may as well—before you tell me more exactly what Mr. Forest thinks about father.”

The same thought had occurred to Leo, though he by no means expected to hear it from Joan’s lips.

“Mother is sure to question me,” added Joan. “I had better be able to say that I really don’t know. But please don’t make me stay long, Leo. I do want to get back to father quickly.”

CHAPTER XVIII. ANOTHER MEETING.

“I CAN’T think why Leo does not come back,” said Dulcibel complainingly.

“Perhaps he had somewhere else to go on his way,” suggested Nessie.

She was knitting a vague little mat with her small, limp, white hands, seated in Dulcibel's bedroom, near the sofa on which Dulcibel lay. At the farthest of the three windows sat Marian, busily working, and still more busily thinking. Dulcibel never seemed content now unless Marian were within call.

"He had no business to go anywhere else. Leo knows how terribly anxious I am—how I cannot rest till I hear about the night. I do think he might come back, and tell me about your father, before attending to other business. It is not as if he were obliged. He is quite a man of leisure. And he has never been as late as this before. I am quite sure something must be detaining him—something seriously wrong. Nessie, do go and watch at the side window in the dining-room, and let me know directly you see him coming."

Dulcibel spoke in a high, flurried tone, her cheeks flushing. Nessie obeyed, and Marian came nearer.

“I wouldn’t worry, if I were you,” she said soothingly. “It’ll be all right.”

“Not worry! How do you know it will be all right?” asked Dulcibel. “Oh, dear—if only Leo would make haste! I don’t know how to stand this suspense. My pillows are so uncomfortable, Marian; please shake them up. No; that is worse. I am aching all over to-day, and I feel so restless. I shall ask Mr. Forest if I can’t have a drive to-morrow, and see my husband perhaps. It seems so absurd to go on being ill like this, without any particular illness. If only Leo would come! I am quite sure something must be wrong—my husband is worse—or—”

Dulcibel was beginning to sob.

“But he may be better,” said Marian. “Perhaps he’s able to take more notice to-day, and likes to have Mr. Ackroyd with him.”

"I know it is not that—I am quite sure!" said Dulcibel. "Things always turn out wrongly with me."

"If I was the one to say that to Mrs. Rutherford, I suppose I should be told that I showed a want of trust in God," Marian said quietly.

Dulcibel almost smiled, then sighed.

"It's easier to preach than to practice. If Leo would but come! Hush—is that the front door? Why doesn't Nessie tell me she has seen him? Yes, it certainly is; and I can hear Leo's voice. Something is wrong! Marian, go at once, please, and send him to me as quickly as possible. Don't let him wait a moment."

Marian obeyed, hastening down the wide oak staircase. At the foot of it she encountered Leonard Ackroyd alone.

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Rutherford is anxious to see you at once," Marian said. "She is very much

afraid Mr. Rutherford must be worse, from your coming later."

"No; he is just about the same. Is Miss Rutherford with her mother? I'll go upstairs to them?"

"Miss Rutherford is in the dining-room, I believe, sir. I will send her to you."

Leonard went upstairs lightly, yet three steps at a time, in long strides; and Marian walked across the hall to the dining-room. She felt some surprise that Nessie had not come out, but entered, with a light tap.

No Nessie appeared within. One glance revealed that fact; and then all thought of Nessie faded out of Marian's mind. For somebody else stood there beside the massive dining-table—stood facing her calmly, with lady-like composure and indifference.

Marian knew again these velvet-black eyes, with the marked, dark brows above—would have known them anywhere in the world. And the

likeness to the little child of Marian's recollections was more striking now than on a former occasion. The cold air had freshened Joan, and brought quite a color to her cheeks. Not only that, but, as she met Marian's intense gaze, her dark brows drew together into the old petulant, childish frown of displeasure.

"What do you want?" Joan asked.

Marian scarcely understood the question. Her mind was possessed by one thought, and for the moment she quite lost sight of the need for self-control. With fixed, hungry eyes, and clasped hands she drew slowly nearer. Joan retreated two or three steps, but Marian followed as if unconsciously.

"What do you mean? What do you want?" demanded Joan, with considerable sharpness.

"Joan—my dear!" Marian spoke the words as if they were wrenched from her, not in the least knowing what she said. "O, my dear Joan—darling!"

“I am Miss Brooke, if you please!” Joan grew as white as pasteboard, standing haughtily upright. “Are you out of your mind, Marian? How dare you speak to me like that?”

“She doesn’t know! O, God, help me!” cried Marian, in thick, broken tones, staggering back against the sideboard. “I’m wrong—wrong—oh, help me!”

Joan stood looking, as deep sobs burst from Marian’s laboring chest. Two long minutes of silence were broken by no other sounds.

“I don’t understand what is the matter with you to-day—” Joan said this coldly and distinctly. “You seem to me to be talking nonsense. I don’t wish to say anything to give you pain, for I know you have been good to Mrs. Rutherford all through her illness. But of course I cannot be spoken to in such a way.”

“No, no; I was wrong,” moaned Marian, in a tone of such anguish that

Joan could not turn away, could not walk out of the room and leave her. "I didn't mean to say anything—I didn't think I could be so weak!" Then the passionate sobs came back, and Marian leaned over the corner of the sideboard, wringing her hands again. "But, oh, I don't know how to bear it—I don't know how to bear it—now I've seen your face again! If you can't say one kind word to me, I almost think—I shall die."

"I do not understand. What difference can it make to you how I choose to speak?" asked Joan.

What difference—and Joan was her own child! But the words that quivered on Marian's lips were not uttered.

"It is quite an absurd fancy. I never knew anybody behave in such a way," said Joan, refusing to face certain wild conjectures springing up in her mind. "Do leave off crying, and be sensible. Mrs. Rutherford may want

you at any moment. Of course I feel kindly towards you, and so we all do, for your care of mother, but I do not in the least know what you mean by all this. Please have no more scenes."

Marian drew herself upright, and gave Joan one look of unspeakable pain and reproach, then slowly left the room, just as Leo entered it. Joan sat down, suddenly finding herself unable to stand.

"Aunt Dulcibel would like to see you," he began; and then stopped. "Why, Joan—"

She could hardly utter the words, "I can't."

"Joan, what has happened?"

"I don't know—only—" Joan was shivering like an aspen, and as white as when she had first left the hotel. "Don't ask, please. I can't see mother. I'm going back to father."

"Has Marian said anything to you about him?"

"No, nothing!"

“But she must have said something. You were not like this when I left you.”

“Oh, no; she is only—odd!”

“How? I don’t understand.”

Joan took the most efficacious possible step for putting an end to further questions, for she nearly fainted away. Leo, much distressed, laid her on the sofa, and summoned the old housekeeper to his aid. Nessie presently stole in, to ask why nobody came upstairs, and was greatly concerned to find the state of affairs.

Leo and Nessie would gladly have kept Joan at the Hall for a few hours, but Joan would not hear of it. She offered no explanation of her sudden illness, and made nothing of it, seeming only desirous to get back as quickly as possible to George Rutherford. Before she was quite well enough for the drive Leo went once more for a few words with Dulcibel,

whom he found in a very fractious state.

“It was too bad of Joan,” she said—“after promising to come and see her, and now to be going away without a word. But Joan never did care for her, and it was most ungrateful. Of course Joan couldn’t help fainting; but surely she could stay a little while, till well enough to walk upstairs. And where was Marian all this time? Nobody had seen Marian; and everything was upside down; and it was all extremely trying.”

Leo did his best to sympathize, and then went off in search of Marian. Quite by accident he met her outside, coming towards Dulcibel’s room. She looked inexpressibly wan and wretched, with drooping air, and heavy, reddened eyes. Leo paused, and gave her one searching glance.

“Come here, Marian,” he said, opening a door; and she followed him meekly into the little boudoir. “I want

to know what has passed between you and Miss Brooke."

"Sir?" Marian said.

"What passed between you and Miss Brooke? Something, surely—" as no answer came—"if it could cause her to faint, and you—"

Marian's regretful start was very perceptible.

"Sir, I acted wrongly," she said. "I acted wrongly, and I am sorry for it. But it wouldn't make matters any better if I was to explain things to you, and I'd better hold my tongue."

"Did you say anything about the doctor's opinion of Mr. Rutherford?"

"No, sir. We did not mention Mr. Rutherford," Marian answered, hanging her head patiently. "I behaved with what Miss Brooke counted too much freedom. She rebuked me, and I—I was much upset. I do not defend myself, but—"

Leo was considerably perplexed.

“Miss Brooke has not complained of you,” he said.

“No, sir. The less spoken the better,” Marian said, calmly and sadly. “I didn’t expect to be so easily overcome. I thought I was stronger. But we’re often most weak where we count ourselves strong; and so it’s proved with me.”

“Why should you be ‘weak,’ as you call it, in connection with Miss Brooke?” asked Leo.

Marian murmured something about a “likeness.”

“Are you speaking the truth to me?” asked Leonard, with some severity.

She raised her saddened, dim eyes to his.

“Yes, sir, the truth, but not all the truth. Miss Brooke does bear a likeness to one in the past, and it upsets me to see her. But there’s more behind, which I’d best not tell, and you’d best

not ask. If Mr. Rutherford was up and well—”

Leo sighed.

“We must hope for that,” he said. “I suppose I ought not to insist on a fuller explanation just now. But I cannot risk any repetition of such scenes, for Miss Brooke’s own sake.”

“No, sir. You shall not have to blame me again.”

“How if you prove weak and easily overcome a second time, Marian?”

She straightened herself, and smiled dimly.

“There’s strength for the weak, and I’m safer now I don’t count myself to be strong,” she said. “No, I shall not be overcome again. I know now what I have to bear, and the sorrow I’ve brought on myself has to be borne with patience. It’s no easy matter, but it must be done. I’d offer to leave, and go back to my father’s, but I do think Mrs. Rutherford would feel it. She seems to

depend on me so. It would be easier for me to go than to stay; only I can't think it right. But you must decide, sir. They all look to you now."

"I think we must not make any sudden changes," said Leo gravely.

CHAPTER XIX. ABOUT THE FUTURE.

JOAN did not go upstairs to see Dulcibel. Nessie and Leonard would fain have persuaded her, but entreaties were thrown away. Joan seemed to be in the overmastering grasp of one desire—to get away from the Hall and back to George Rutherford with all possible expedition.

"No, no, no—not to-day," she said impatiently, when Leo suggested Dulcibel's disappointment. "Mother will not really care; and I can't—I can't. I might come across that woman again. Some other time I can see

mother—not now—not to-day. Do let me go.”

She was so tremulous and unlike herself that Leo ventured on no further opposition. Once more in the open carriage, with only the cloudless sky overhead, a sigh of relief escaped Joan. “Dear, dear father!” Leonard heard her murmur; and the black eyes were soft with unshed tears.

“I am afraid our little outing has not done you as much good as I had hoped it would,” said Leo kindly.

“It doesn’t matter! I shall be all right now; and I don’t mean to leave father again. Leo the man is going the longer way round. Tell him not, please.”

“No; I want time for a few words with you.”

“About father—yes, you were going to tell me—I have not forgotten that,” she said.

“And about Marian, Joan. Would you mind telling me what she said or did that upset you so much?”

“She was rude,” Joan answered, a crimson flush mounting in her pale cheeks. “I could not allow that, of course; and when I spoke to her she cried, and seemed quite absurd. It was very foolish of me to care; but I am always so inclined to fancy that things mean more than they really do. I would rather not talk about it now, if you don’t mind. I would rather try to forget.”

“I think I ought to know all,” said Leonard. “There is the question whether she should be allowed still to wait on your mother?”

“You must settle that; I don’t know anything about it,” said Joan dejectedly. “Only I can’t see her again. If I go to see mother, Marian will have to be out of the way. I should not like to meet her a second time. I don’t think she meant any harm, only she was so

queer and excited; and when she was rude it made me angry.”

“Marian told me she had behaved with what Miss Brooke counted too much freedom,” said Leo.

“What I counted!” Joan turned towards Leo, with a flash of her eyes. “She called me by my name—‘Joan’ outright, and said ‘dear’ and ‘darling.’ Was that only what I counted freedom? The impertinence of the woman!”

Joan’s drawn brows were for a moment furious, and Leo seemed startled.

“Not really?” he said.

“Yes—really and truly. You don’t think I am making up?”

“No, no; but it is extraordinary,” remarked Leo. “She has always been so singularly quiet and respectful in manner! I cannot understand the sudden change, except—Yes, she spoke of your likeness to some one.”

“Everybody is like everybody. I hate likenesses, and I am always being

bothered about them," said Joan pettishly. "I wish I had not told you so much. Please don't tell mother, or I shall never hear the end of it. I don't want to say another word about Marian's absurdities. You promised to tell me exactly what the doctors think of father, and I am sure I have waited long enough."

Leo said "Yes" thoughtfully.

"Go on. 'Yes'?" said Joan. "Make haste, please."

"It is not easy to know exactly what to say," Leo answered. "Their opinion at the last consultation was not very favorable."

She forced herself to speak composedly.

"Not favorable—how?"

"As to entire recovery. The injury to the head seems to be of a more serious nature than was at first thought. We all hoped that the long unconsciousness was due, at least in a measure, to the shock of the accident

and the burns, and that when he once began to rally the mind would be clear. But it is not so."

"He is so weak," murmured Joan.

"Still it is something beyond mere weakness. Have you not noticed?"

Joan's face was turned away, and Leo kept silence. She looked round at length with a sudden impatience and distress.

"Go on—oh, go on!" she said. "It is no use putting off. The worst can't be worse than I often think. You have promised to tell me all—everything—not to hide a single word. I want to know the very worst;" and she clenched one hand over the carriage door. "Quick, please. It is dreadful having to wait like this."

But Leo was unable to go on. Strong man that he was, not easily overcome at any time, the sight of that pleading girl face, with its quivering lips and dark, troubled eyes, proved too much even for him. His own bronzed

cheeks lost coloring with the intensity of pity within—not pity alone, though that at the moment was the main feeling; for George Rutherford was very dear to his heart—and his frank, brown eyes were absolutely full of tears. When he would have answered, his voice failed.

“Leo, I am so sorry.” Joan spoke suddenly in a soft, low tone, more changed in one instant than he would have thought possible. “I am so very sorry. I forgot that dear father is your father as well as mine—as much, I suppose; I don’t know—it seems to me always that nobody can love him as I do. But that must be absurd. I’m afraid I have been selfish, thinking only of my own part in the trouble. But of course it is your trouble too. Would you rather not tell me any more? I’ll try to bear on a little longer.”

Leo was already recovering himself.

“No, no,” he said, huskily; “you have a right to know all.” They were approaching the hotel, and he leant forward to say to the driver—“Go straight on till I tell you to turn.”

“I did not mean to be unkind,” Joan repeated then wistfully. “I quite forgot, Leo.”

Leonard made no attempt to explain the nature of his own feelings. He said only—“Any questions you like.”

“Is there any hope that father will ever—ever be quite the same again—quite the same that he has been?”

“I am afraid—very little hope.”

“Will he recover, Leo?”

A pause, and then—

“We cannot be sure yet. He does not get on as he should. Still on the whole—”

“And if he does—if—if—Leo, I don’t know how to get it out!” cried Joan, with extreme bitterness. “Will—will there—will there be a change in

him always? Will this go on? Don't you understand? Will he—will he—his dear, dear mind—Oh, can't you answer?"

"Dear Joan, that is the fear," Leo answered very low.

Joan had no more to say. She looked like one crushed.

"I don't mean that we can speak with any certainty yet, but that is the fear," repeated Leo.

"Can nothing be done—nothing?" asked Joan, despairingly.

Leo's answer was in two words only.

"Yes—prayer."

"Prayer doesn't always bring the thing one wants," murmured Joan.

"It—or something better."

"There can't be anything better. There could not be. Oh, you don't know what he is!" half-sobbed Joan. "There is nobody like him in all the world. Please tell the man to turn. I want to go back to father."

Leo obeyed, and she sat leaning forward, with a look of eager longing and sorrow.

“Remember, Joan, things are not hopeless,” he said.

Joan was silent till they had almost reached the hotel. Then she said, with downcast eyes—“Thank you very much. You have been very good to me. And I think it is just a little comfort to know how much you feel it all too. Leo, please do pray that father may soon be perfectly well.”

Leo said only—“Yes.”

“I want you to pray hard—hard,” she reiterated. “I know there is the sort of prayer that must bring an answer. Couldn’t you pray that kind of prayer for father? I would if I knew how; but all seems stony and cold. If only I had asked father when I could! Nobody else can help me. And my prayers wouldn’t bring an answer; but perhaps yours, will.”

“Why not yours, Joan?”

“Because I love father more than Christ,” she answered very low. “Father is everything to me. But I want other people to pray—hard—hard!”

The hotel was reached, and no more could be said. Leo thought of the “effectual fervent prayer” which “availeth much.” But also he knew that Joan was leaving out of sight the one great condition on which all answers to prayer must hang, the—“if it be according to his will.” No petition which runs counter to God can be ever that kind of prayer which does avail much and which brings a full reply.

“I’ve got right down into darkness.”

CHAPTER XX. HALL AND FARM.

WINTER had fairly set in at last, with what, in the uncertain English climate, they call “unusual severity.”

All around Cairns farm a coating of snow lay over the fields, whitening hedges and outhouse roofs, and making tree-trunks look darker by contrast. The snow was not deep, but it was accompanied by a hard frost and an icy wind. Robins hovered tamely about the back door, on the lookout for crumbs; and human beings kept as much as possible under shelter.

Close to the great kitchen fire, well muffled-up in wraps, sat Jervis, coughing and half breathless with one of his asthmatic attacks. He was entirely a prisoner in such weather as

this. Hannah stood beside the table, peeling potatoes with quick and capable hands. Her movements were always capable, however ungraceful. The deeply lined, austere face did not wear a pleasant expression; but that was by no means an uncommon event. Hannah scarcely knew how to smile.

“Well, I call it unnatural,” she was saying in a harsh voice. “After more than twenty years away—why, it was nearer twenty-five—to come home, and then, after just an hour’s talk, to leave her own flesh and blood, and go and take up with strangers. I call it unnatural. Never been near us again, from that day to this. Can’t be spared? Oh, I know better! I know what it is to be in a house full of servants, all of them with pretty near nothing to do. Polly don’t want to be spared. She likes everything that makes her important—always did. Spending her time and strength for them that have got no sort of claim on her, as if

we were never in want of a helping hand here? I'm sure I don't know which way to turn sometimes, among you all. I call it a shame. But Polly never had any heart to spare for her own folks."

"Polly's not wanting in heart, only she's too easily led," protested Jervis, coughing as he spoke. "There's warmth of heart enough. She never can forget Mr. Rutherford's kindness to William."

"It's a pity she forgets so soon any sort of kindness from them that belong to her," sourly observed Hannah. "But that's the way of the world. If a stranger says a soft word, everybody's dying with gratitude; while a woman that slaves night and day for her own people don't get so much as a civil 'thank you' for it all."

"I suppose the one comes naturally as a right, and the other doesn't," said Jervis. "But perhaps if there were more soft words spoken in

our homes there'd be more 'thank you's' too."

The remark struck home with greater keenness than he had intended. Hannah tossed her head, and went on peeling with disdainful vigor.

Then the kitchen-door, standing ajar, was pushed quietly open; and Marian herself; in bonnet and shawl, stood before them.

She looked cold and wan and sorrowful; and the light of peace seemed to have died out of her gray eyes, which were full only of a nameless pain. Hannah said—"Well, here you are at last!" and Jervis gazed anxiously at the haggard face. Marian uttered not a word. She came forward slowly, took a seat on the other side of the fireplace, and sighed.

"Why, Polly my dear," Jervis said, with a kind of protest—"Polly!"

Marian lifted her eyes to his.

"I'm come home, Jervis," she said.

“To stay, Polly?”

“I don’t know. Yes, I suppose so. I’ve nowhere else to go, and nothing else to do.” The words were spoken drearily.

“If I’d been you, I’d have come sooner, or I’d have stayed away altogether,” said Hannah.

“I couldn’t come sooner, for I was wanted; and I can’t stay longer now, for they’ve done with me,” Marian answered.

“Well, you can get out of my way, I hope, for you’re just in it, sitting there. I’ve got to go to and fro.”

Marian dejectedly rose, and went to another seat.

“Hannah, don’t worry the poor thing,” said Jervis very low.

“Worry! What—asking her to get out of my way! It wouldn’t be so very surprising if I asked her to help me, instead of dawdling there idle,” Hannah said sharply.

Marian looked up again at her brother's troubled face.

"It doesn't matter, Jervis," she said, with a faint smile. "Nothing matters now. Hannah's words can't touch me."

Hannah whirled away out of the kitchen, giving vent to her feelings in an inarticulate growl, and leaving the other two alone together.

"Something's wrong, Polly," her brother said.

"You're not like yourself. What is it, my dear? Are you over-tired?"

"It's not bodily tiredness," she answered listlessly. "I'm a stronger woman than you'd count me. But I don't seem to have any spirit left in me. I thought nothing could ever shake my new hope in God; and now that's gone too. There's nothing left."

Jervis gazed pityingly at her, and after a slight pause she went on—

"They are taking Mr. Rutherford home to-day. He has been at the Cross

Arms till now. And I found yesterday—it was said to me—Mr. Ackroyd thought I had better leave. There were reasons—and after all it's my own fault. Mr. Ackroyd is Mr. Rutherford's nephew, and pretty much like his own son—wonderfully like him too in face. He's pretty well managing everything now. Miss Rutherford and all of them turn to him. He would have sent me back in a fly to-day, only I settled to walk."

"And your box, my dear—the things we had to send to you."

"They'll be sent. I didn't ask how. I promised Mr. Ackroyd I'd leave before they arrived. That was all he asked."

"They?" Jervis seemed puzzled.

"Mr. Rutherford and—" a quiver passed over Marian's face—"and—" But she did not seem able to say more.

"And—" repeated Jervis.

"And—the young lady."

"His daughter?"

“Not really,” murmured Marian.
“He calls her his.”

“Ah, yes!” assented Jervis. “The handsome young lady who rides about with Mr. Rutherford. That’s it, I suppose. How is Mr. Rutherford getting on, Polly?”

“I haven’t seen him. He don’t come round as he ought. There’s a sort of weakness of mind. But I haven’t seen him once.”

“And you’ve been happy there, Polly—kindly treated?”

“Kindly? Yes—Mrs. Rutherford’s been as good as possible. She didn’t like me coming away to-day, but it was settled so. She’s better now, and don’t really need me—only she gets low and hysterical still. They haven’t been able to let her go to her husband yet; but she’ll see him now.”

“And they wished you to leave?”
Jervis said wonderingly.

“Yes; it’s right I should. It’s quite right,” repeated Marian. “I’m not

wanted longer. If I would have taken money they would have given me plenty; but I couldn't—couldn't."

Hannah had not yet returned. Jervis leaned a little forward, and said softly—

"Polly, you've not seen or heard anything of your own child all these weeks?"

Marian was taken by surprise. She breathed hard, staring at Jervis.

"My child—Joan!" she panted.

"Is the name Joan? You wouldn't tell me that. Only you hoped to see her some time or other, now you're in England. I thought perhaps you'd have had the chance."

Marian passed one hand with a hasty nervous motion over her mouth, a curious sound—half sob, half laugh—escaping her lips.

"I've seen her. Yes, you're guessing rightly. I told you I couldn't wait much longer, didn't I? But it was a queer meeting. She didn't know me,

or love me, or want me. And that's all over!"

"What is over, Polly?"

"Everything. I'm dead to her, and there's nothing left."

Marian rocked herself to and fro, the same strange sound breaking out once and again.

"It's hard to give up one's own child," she moaned; "hard—hard to lose her altogether. I didn't know I had before—not like this. But it's my own doing. I've brought it on myself. She doesn't want me—doesn't want me! O, my Joan!"

Jervis drew his chair a pace or two nearer, and laid a hand on Marian's arm.

"Polly, my dear, don't give way like this," he said. "Tell me what you mean. Tell me what's gone wrong."

Marian looked in his face with another sob.

“I’ve lost my child,” she said; “and nothing in the world is left to me!”

There was a short pause, broken only by Jervis’ audible breathing. Then he spoke—

“But, Polly, my dear sister, heaven is left. God loves you still.”

“Does he? But if I can’t believe it, after all I’ve done?” she said, with haggard eyes.

“He knows it all. There’s nothing new for him to learn about you. I can’t talk of such things, and I’m the last person in the world to be a help to anybody,” Jervis went on humbly. “But, my dear, didn’t the Lord Jesus Christ die for you long before you ever thought of him?”

“Yes, he did,” Marian answered.

“And you don’t think he’ll turn from you now, just when you’re needing him most?”

She looked up strangely.

“But I forsook my child! I left my Joan!” she said.

“Yes, you did, Polly,” Jervis answered, with a sorrowful intonation. “It’s one of the saddest things I ever heard—a thing I don’t know how to believe yet. But, my dear, God’s ways are not like man’s ways. He never forsakes any that put their trust in him.”

“And if I can’t trust?” she whispered.

“Then I’d go and tell him so, and confess again the past, and wait on him for new help.”

Marian stood up, drawing her shawl round her.

“Yes, you’re right,” she murmured. “Tell him! Of course; there’s nothing better to be done. And he’ll understand—no fear about that—and he’ll have pity. It’s been sore work, Jervis—sorer than any one knows—and I’ve got right down into darkness. But he’s sure to help me out

again, isn't he? I didn't think before of just telling him all about it. I think I'll go to my room for a while. Oh, no; I shan't be cold! It's better not to put off, Jervis."

"Poor Polly," murmured Jervis, as Marian disappeared. "I hope it wasn't presumptuous of me to say that. I shouldn't like Polly to think me a better man than I am. But she seemed so low; and the words came to me—so I don't think I could have been wrong. I should like to help the poor dear."

Hannah came suddenly back into the kitchen, walking with an extra heaviness of gait which showed ill-humor.

"Where's Polly?"

"Gone upstairs."

"What for?"

Jervis was silent.

"Well—she'll find her room all upside down. And if she wants to sleep there to-night she'll have to get it ready for herself."

Jervis still offered no response. Hannah hauled a huge kettle off the fire with her muscular right hand, and then met her brother's reproachful eyes.

"What now?" she demanded sharply.

"Hannah, if mother were here, she'd give Polly a different sort of welcome from what you do," Jervis said in a sorrowful tone.

"I dare say!" Hannah answered, with curtness. "She always did follow the spoiling dodge with Polly."

"It is not a question of spoiling now; but she does need a kind word or two," said Jervis.

Hannah walked away, offering no further response.

* * * * *

*

About that same hour Joan stood in the Hall drawing-room—stood under the central chandelier, with clasped hands and bent head. Nobody

else was present. Joan's attitude seemed to be one of listening only. Her fixed eyes evidently saw nothing. She had thrown off her hat and furs on her first arrival, and they lay in a little heap on one of the chairs. A step outside made her start forward, and Leo came in.

"Well, Joan?" he said cheerfully.

"Mother and Nessie are with father still," Joan said in a strained voice. "I thought I had better leave them alone, just for a few minutes."

"Did Aunt Dulcibel wish that?"

"I don't know. She didn't say so—but I thought perhaps she might."

"How did the first meeting go off? You were there then."

"Just like everything else!" sighed Joan. "Father spoke to mother just as if he had seen her yesterday. I don't think he has the least idea they have been apart. Mother talked of it, and tried to make him understand, and he smiled

and patted her hand, but didn't take it in—one could see that."

"Poor Joan!" Leo said pityingly.
"It has been a trying day for you."

"The move is best over, I suppose," said Joan, with an effort.
"But I think I am disappointed. I think I hoped more from the old surroundings. He doesn't seem the least bit roused, and he takes everything exactly in the same way. Don't say anything to make me cry, please. I must go back to father in a few minutes, and he doesn't like to see tears. We told mother she must be sure not to cry, and she was keeping up wonderfully when I came away. I didn't know mother had so much self-command. But I must not leave her alone with him too long."

"Isn't Nessie there?"

"Yes. Oh, Nessie is no use!"

"And Marian has gone?"

"You told me she should," said Joan. "Did mother mind?"

“Rather; but I managed it without reference to you. It would have been difficult, if Marian had not taken the matter into her own hands. She behaved exceedingly well. I was sorry to have to dismiss her, she seemed so grieved. I never came across a more perplexing individual.”

“I only hope I shall never see her again,” said Joan.

Another step approached, hasty and irregular. Dulcibel came into the room, with a scared look.

“I can’t stand it any longer,” she said, gazing from one to the other. “Somebody else must go. I can’t stand it. He is not himself, not the very least—so changed. Leo, I can’t understand—will he be always like this? It would be too terrible.”

“Mother, he was pleased to see you?” said Joan, as Dulcibel sank on a sofa.

“Pleased! He just knows me. Oh, it is much worse than I expected! Why

was I never told more? Call Marian—quickly please.”

But Marian was gone. Leo began to question whether he had been in the right to yield to Joan’s strong wish, when he found how helpless she was to control Dulcibel in the fit of violent hysterics which followed. “Only Marian knew how,” Nessie said in reproachful accents. “It would not be possible to get on without Marian, if mother were often like this.”

A call from Mr. Brooke.

**CHAPTER XXI.
AN UNLOOKED-FOR
VISITOR.**

THE wintry months were at an end, and all over England spring was breaking out into its ever-new beauty.

Banks of primroses and beds of violets might be found within easy distance of Woodleigh and the garden was gay with crocuses.

George Rutherford loved to pace the paths, leaning on Joan's young arm, and inhaling the soft breezes. That was about as much as he was equal to now.

Through the winter months he had crept back slowly to a certain stage of half-recovery, and there he stood still. In some respects he seemed almost like his old self—not quite, even to strangers; and scarcely “almost,” to those who knew him best. A certain indefinable lack of mental power was apparent about all he said and did. He was kind and genial as ever: but he could not carry on sustained conversation, could not recollect what had been told him an

hour before, could not fix his thoughts on any one subject. All business arrangements had passed into the hands of Dulcibel and Leo, and he seemed content to have things so. He was plainly aware of his own incapacity, and he accepted the same with a grave, sweet resignation, very touching to those around.

Nothing pleased him more than Joan's reading aloud; but the books chosen had to be simple in kind. He could not grasp deep arguments, and mental efforts always brought suffering. He had to be guarded from strain and worry, almost like a child.

Yet he was very happy—placidly, calmly happy. Nobody could see him and question that fact. Bouts of depression were not infrequent, but they never lasted long.

Bodily strength had not come back, as was once hoped; and of late especially every exertion wearied him. The soft airs of spring seemed to take

away all the little power he had; and often he would lie for hours on the study sofa, hardly caring to speak, only now and then looking to see if Joan were near.

Joan was his unwearied attendant. She never cared to leave him, never seemed to want rest or change. Dulcibel, shaken and unhinged by the railway accident, was in a state of semi-invalidism all the winter, easily upset, and able to do little for her husband; but Joan never failed him.

Leo proposed spending two years in England before returning to India, and Woodleigh Hall was always his home. Dulcibel indulged privately in many hopes that he might some day become her son in reality, and she did her best in a transparent fashion to throw the cousins Leo and Nessie, much together. It was no fault of Joan's that Leo's hopes became fixed elsewhere, for she had no thoughts to spare for him or any one except her

father. Leo knew this, and he waited in patience and silence.

Marian had been to the Hall two or three times for an interview with Dulcibel; but Joan had not come across her. The very recollection of Marian had almost died out of Joan's preoccupied mind.

One fair May afternoon, close to the end of the month, Joan was persuaded to go for a long walk with Leo and Nessie. She could seldom be enticed from George Rutherford's side. She was looking pale, however, and he seemed unusually well. Dulcibel too appeared brighter than on most days, and professed herself quite capable of undertaking sole charge of the invalid during two or three hours.

“I shall sit in our favorite corner, near the violet-bank,” he said, smiling; “and mother will read poetry to me. You don't mind poetry as you once did, Dulcie.”

“NO; perhaps I don’t,” Dulcibel answered uncertainly; and when the three pedestrians had departed she gave him her arm, as some little help to his languid steps.

The “favorite corner” was a shady and sheltered spot, scarcely out of view from the study window, and much frequented by George and Joan. A comfortable arm-chair was placed there for him on fine days; and Dulcibel soon had him in this chair, resting contentedly.

“Don’t feel bound to stay all the time, Dulcie,” he said.

“No; I shall just come and go,” responded Dulcibel, who was famous for never remaining long in one position. “By-and-by I can read to you, perhaps, but you had better keep quiet for a time. George dear, you really are looking so nicely to-day—positively like yourself again!”

George smiled in answer, and she moved away to the bank of violets,

filling a small basket with the purple blossoms. Then the violets had to be taken indoors and arranged, which occupied some little time; and, just as Dulcibel was about to return to her husband, a caller claimed attention. Dulcibel had intended to deny herself to callers; but, as she had forgotten to give the order, this lady was admitted.

Meanwhile George sat alone in his cosy nook, watching the movements of birch and lilac leaves, listening to the perpetual twitter of countless birds. The air was laden with violet scent. He could hardly have been in a sweeter spot for a reverie.

It brought back curiously to his mind a certain fair valley, and a little child seated solemnly beside a “shaking bridge.” George Rutherford’s memory served him far better for things which had happened many years earlier than for occurrences of a day or a week before. He could recall that scene most vividly, and he leant back,

picturing it to himself, his brown eyes closed, a smile on his lips, and a gleam of sunshine falling through the boughs overhead upon his tawny gray-streaked hair and beard.

A movement near made him look up, expecting to see Dulcibel. But a stranger stood there—an old gentleman of dignified bearing, with snowy locks, full white eyebrows, and piercing black eyes. George rose at once, with his instinctive courtesy. The appearance of a stranger fluttered him slightly, for he had seen and spoken to few people since the railway accident, and he had grown into somewhat of helpless dependence upon others. His first glance round was for Joan, then for Dulcibel; but neither was at hand. The flutter did not show in George's manner, nor would a stranger have supposed him to be in any sense an invalid.

“Mr. Rutherford, I believe?” the old gentleman said.

George signified assent.

“I trust you will pardon the liberty I have taken—indulging myself in a little ramble through your grounds. You have a pretty place. I was on my way to call at the Hall, and turned into a side path, not expecting to be so fortunate as to find you here.”

A bow responded.

“Will you allow me to give you my card, as I have not been able to send it through a servant. My name is Brooke—Hubert Brooke—” as George Rutherford received the card, only to lay it aside without a glance. His companion counted him absent, and repeated, “Hubert Brooke—a name not entirely strange to you. Thanks; I shall be glad to sit down. I have walked some distance, and I am growing old. No, not your chair. This will do. I believe you have been ill lately.”

George resumed his own seat mechanically. A troubled look had

come into his face, and he seemed to be trying to recall something.

“Hubert Brooke!” he murmured.
“Brooke—Brooke!”

“Joan Brooke is the name of the young lady you have been so good as to adopt. I believe she passes often as Miss Rutherford.”

George was gazing distressfully still, as if unable to grasp the idea. “Joan,” he said gently. “Yes. I beg your pardon. I do not quite understand.”

“You remember doubtless the name of Hubert Brooke,” said the old gentleman shortly.

George leant back with a wearied air, seeming to give up the struggle for comprehension. “I think it would be better for you to see my wife, or Joan,” he said. “No; Joan is out;” and he hesitated. “Perhaps you could kindly call another day. I am not allowed yet to enter into business matters!”

Mr. Brooke was not a man easily turned aside from his purpose. "No business details are involved—at this moment," he said. "There is not much to tell, Mr. Rutherford. Your adopted child, Joan Brooke, is my granddaughter. Her father was my only son—Hubert Brooke."

He waited to see the effect of his words. The impression produced was not apparently so great as he had anticipated. A flush came to George Rutherford's brow, and an unseeing, suffering look to his eyes. These were signs which Mr. Brooke could not read. The silence with which his assertion was met amazed him.

"My granddaughter," he repeated emphatically "I have known this fact for many months; and you would have heard from me earlier, but for the fact of certain other relatives, with whom I preferred to have nothing in common. But circumstances have determined me to speak openly to you on the subject.

My wife has been taken from me very suddenly.” A slight expression of sorrow crossed the speaker’s face. “Her dying request was that I would acknowledge my granddaughter. The dying wish of a good wife is not to be disregarded—even though my own inclinations may point in an opposite direction. I have come to carry out her will—to acknowledge Joan as my granddaughter. But I acknowledge also your right over her. I have no wish to steal your adopted child from you, after all these years.”

There was again no immediate response. George’s impassive manner had a somewhat irritating effect on the old gentleman.

“Sir, are you acquainted with these other relatives of Joan Brooke?” he demanded, raising his voice. “Are you aware that Cairns, the farmer, is her grandfather also—her other grandparent? Are you aware that her mother, Marian Brooke, my unhappy

son's widow, is now—now!—at Cairns farm, doubtless awaiting an opportunity to assert her rights? Yes, Joan's mother, Mr. Rutherford! Joan's mother, and Cairns' daughter."

He had produced impression enough at last. A strangely sunken, hollow look crept into George Rutherford's face, and his brows drew together with an expression of bewilderment and pain. "Joan's mother!" George repeated. "Joan's mother! My Joan—my poor little girl!"

"Marian Brooke, the daughter of old Cairns, married my son Hubert," said Mr. Brooke—"my only son! I leave you to judge what my feelings were. From that time my son was dead to me. I never exchanged a word with his wife, nor have I with his widow. Until lately I did not know her to be still alive. Until last autumn I never set eyes upon Hubert's daughter."

“Joan’s mother!” repeated George in a low, suffering voice. He seemed able to say nothing else.

“Joan’s mother has been for months within three miles of you, Mr. Rutherford. Why she has not yet spoken I cannot determine. Doubtless she has her own reasons. But I have fulfilled my duty in giving you warning; and I have also acknowledged my granddaughter, according to my wife’s dying request. I shall wish to see her one day. For the rest, I have only to thank you sincerely for your kindness to her through many years. Possibly, now that you are acquainted with her connections, you may be disposed to regret—”

George Rutherford so plainly neither heard nor heeded, that the old gentleman came to an abrupt pause; and Dulcibel suddenly appeared, in a state of some excitement.

“George dear, I hope you are all right. I could not possibly get away

before. Who is this? You don't mean to say—oh, you ought not to have had a visitor! It is quite wrong. I don't know what Joan will say. George, you are looking quite ill again. I am sure it has been too much for your head."

"If you will excuse me, madam—" began Mr. Brooke apologetically.

"How did you come here?" asked Dulcibel, turning upon him in anger and alarm, for the change in her husband's look terrified her. "The servants had no business to bring you. My husband sees almost nobody yet."

"Madam, I came alone. No one but myself is to blame. I am Joan Brooke's grandfather."

"I don't care whose grandfather you are; you had no right to come here!" cried impetuous Dulcibel. "Please leave us directly. I must get my husbandindoors."

Mr. Brooke would have apologized, but Dulcibel would not hear him; and he was turning away in

dudgeon, when Joan appeared, glowing with her walk.

“Leo is just behind,” she began, “and Nessie—”

One glance at Mr. Brooke, another at George Rutherford, and all light and color died out of Joan’s face. She brushed past the retreating caller, and rushed to her father’s side.

“Father, father dear, what has happened? Are you ill? What is it?”

George spoke faintly and with difficulty.

“I should like to go indoors, my darling. Leo will help me. I cannot talk—I have such pain and confusion.”

“Father, did that old man say anything to bring it on?” Joan asked in an undertone of smothered passion, dropping on her knees, and making him lean against her.

“Hush, hush, Joan! He is your grandfather.”

Joan shuddered, and clung closer.

“My darling, that is not all; but I cannot say more now. I cannot think. Only it is God’s will—God’s will for us. The worst is his will.”

“I don’t believe a word about that old man being your grandfather, Joan,” said Dulcibel, half crying. “It is all nonsense; I believe he is an old impostor.”

“Mother, don’t talk about it, please,” entreated Joan. “Father must not say another word.”

Then Leo came, and with his help George managed to walk to the house; but he had no sooner reached his room than unconsciousness set in. One of the worst head attacks that he had had since the autumn followed, and some symptoms were severe enough to cause very serious alarm.

During the full week the slightest mental exertion was absolutely forbidden, if not indeed absolutely impossible; and Joan had to wait longer still for a full detail of what had

passed. Meantime, no more was seen of Mr. Brooke.

CHAPTER XXII. WHAT MIGHT BE.

“SAY something to me, Joan.”

George Rutherford was in his study again—just able to creep down there once a day, for a few hours on the sofa. He did not rally from this attack, as from former attacks.

It was Sunday afternoon, and Joan sat by his side, a book open on her knee. She had not read much however.

“What shall I say, father dear?”

“Anything you like, my Joan.”

A pause followed. Joan did not seem able to think readily of “anything.”

“Say—‘There shall be no more death.’ I have had those words sounding in my mind to-day.”

“But that is so long, father. I don’t think your head will bear it all,” pleaded Joan, shrinking from the task. She had learnt the piece he referred to, for the purpose of giving him pleasure, in earlier and brighter days.

“A few verses then, my dear.”

Joan would not refuse. She began in a low, tremulous voice:—

“‘There shall be no more death!’
O, blessed words!

As summer winds, upon the wild
harp stealing,

Draw forth sweet music from
long voiceless chords,

They wake the heart to songs of
holiest feeling.”

“Again I hear—‘There shall be no
more death?’

What, shall the wearied eyes that
now are keeping

Their anxious vigil o’er the
failing health,

And watch life's flickering lamp,
know no more weeping?"

"Shall there be no more parting,
no more pain,

No sorrow brooding o'er the
human heart?

Shall grief's low moan be never
heard again,

No pang of suffering into
utterance start?"

"Shall we no longer, when spring
flowers have birth,

Go forth, with spirits bowed, in
deep dejection,

And in the cold embraces of the
earth

Lay the loved object of our best
affection?"

Joan struggled on so far, and then
came to a complete pause. George laid
his hand on hers.

“My poor Joan! It was too much to ask of you. I did not think—no, don’t say any more.”

“Oh, yes, I’m going on,” said Joan resolutely. “It’s no use to be foolish;” and she started huskily with a later verse:—

“It is the Saviour’s sweet yet solemn voice—

That voice that triumphed in his dying breath—

And as he speaks the hosts of heaven rejoice,

And shout aloud—‘There shall be no more death!’”

“I hear those words re-echoed by the throng

Of white robed worshippers around the throne;

I hear familiar voices, silent long,
Singing the wondrous anthem, ‘It
is done!’”

“I see among that cloud of witnesses

Loved forms, long faded from our earthly eyes,
Shining like stars—”

“Father I can’t!” sobbed Joan, breaking down in a sudden agony. “Oh, please don’t ask me—I can’t!”

George drew her nearer, saying only—“My poor little girl!” and for a minute or two neither spoke.

“What was it, Joan?” he asked at length, when she had grown calmer; and the words that burst from Joan were not what he had expected:

“O, father, if only your heaven were mine too!”

“If my Master is yours, my heaven is yours, Joan.”

Joan laid her face against his hand, and made no answer. She knew he must not be agitated, and blamed herself already for giving way.

“What keeps you back from him, my Joan?” George asked.

“I don’t know! Oh, I don’t know!” Joan answered, with a deep sigh. “Sometimes I do seem to come to him, and to love him; but it all goes again. Please don’t talk more now; you will be so tired.”

“There was something else that I had to say. I have not felt equal to it until now—about—” and he faltered—“about your grandfather, Mr. Brooke.”

“He hasn’t been to the house. I don’t want ever to see him again,” Joan said resentfully. “It was he that made you so ill.”

“Hush; you must not feel that!” George answered. “No; there was something else;” and his eyes had a strained look of perplexity. “I cannot think without confusion.”

“It is not right for you. Please don’t try to think, father.”

George closed his eyes, and she hoped he had given up the attempt at

recollection; but suddenly he looked up, almost with eagerness.

“Yes, I know now. Joan, if it is God’s will for us to part—”

“Oh, no!” broke from Joan.

“If it is his will—”

“But it isn’t—it isn’t! Please—please don’t say that!”

“It may be; you do not know yet.”

She thought he was speaking of death, and she forced a brave smile.

“You are better now, father, indeed—really better. Please don’t talk so. It does make me so wretched, and there is no need.”

“God’s will is always right, always best, always loving.” George spoke slowly, as if repeating a message or a statement, learnt with difficulty. “Joan, we must not fight against it. If ever your duty becomes plain to go to your mother—”

She thought him wandering, and was frightened.

“Please don’t say any more,” she begged anxiously. “Father, you have talked too much. Things will all come right by-and-by, only don’t talk about parting. You are going to get well now, and you know I could never leave you. Try to rest, father dear.”

“I think I must,” George said feebly; and he seemed soon to be asleep.

Joan sat by his side, thinking, in deep distress and dread. What had he meant? Was it only fancy? Had she indeed a mother? And if so, what then?

“She gave me up to father; she has no right over me now. I could never leave father for her or anybody—oh, never!” Joan murmured, almost saying the words aloud.

When George Rutherford awoke he did not again refer to the subject. It seemed indeed to have passed for the moment out of his mind. But the dread of what might be coming weighed upon Joan perpetually. She could not

shake off or lay aside the fear. It was like a sword hanging always over her head.

A mother! Had she a mother? And if she had, what then? What duty did she, in her position, owe to such a mother? What would a mother expect from her?

Leo was absent from the Hall, paying visits in Scotland, or Joan would probably have gone with her trouble to him, as to a brother. But she could not resolve to write, and there was no one else whom she might consult. Nessie was the last person in the world to appeal to. Dulcibel was nervous, unhinged, easily upset. Moreover, Joan possessed no intimate personal friends in the neighborhood. She had never cared to make any. The Rector of Woodleigh, a kind and able man, might have helped Joan, but he had recently broken-down in health, and had been ordered away from home

for a time. His temporary successor was a young man and a stranger.

Sometimes the feeling of suspense as to what might lie ahead, and the sense of loneliness in having none to whom she could appeal, were almost more than she knew how to endure.

The marvel was that this long strain of doubt and dread should not have driven Joan more readily to take refuge in prayer. For she had been brought up in a very atmosphere of prayer and of loving trust; yet still she held aloof.

It came over her suddenly one day that suspense might be ended by an interview with old Mr. Brooke.

She had not thought of such a thing before: but now the idea gained fast hold of her imagination. Mr. Brooke was probably staying at the red-brick house again. Why should she not see him there, and demand to know what he had said to trouble her father?

Why should she not, or why should she? Would the step be advisable, or would it not? Should she act, or should she wait patiently?

Joan was sorely troubled how to decide. She lay awake at night, thinking, and went about all day, thinking. It was hard to see her way. Sometimes the waiting seemed the wiser plan, but a certain wilful longing to know the worst was gaining ground upon her.

So strong was this desire that it led her into action. Joan felt almost as if she were being borne along by a strong current, irrespective of her own will.

She did not tell herself that she would see Mr. Brooke; but one day she spoke of taking a walk alone, and no difficulties arose. At starting she counted herself still undecided, yet without hesitation she bent her steps towards the red house of Mrs. St. John.

“I may as well walk in that direction. No need to go in,” murmured Joan.

But she did go in. Having moved so far under impulse, she was guided still by impulse when the house was reached. Joan rang, and asked for Mr. Brooke. He was staying there, was he not?

“Yes, Miss,” the girl answered.

“Tell him I wish to see him, please.”

She was admitted, the question being asked—“What name, please?”

A moment’s hesitation, and then “Miss Joan Brooke” came firmly.

The maid gave a surprised glance, showed Joan into a small sitting-room—a study or boudoir—and vanished.

Joan stood on the rug, trying to conquer the trembling which assailed every limb. No long time elapsed before the door opened, and a courtly, white-haired old gentleman entered.

A stranger could not have failed to be struck at that moment with the likeness between the two faces—both pale in tint, both mastering strong agitation, both with marked, full eyebrows drawn together over black eyes full of defiance.

“Good-morning, Miss Joan Brooke,” the old gentleman said distantly. He had the milk-cans of old Cairns, Joan’s other grandfather, very plainly before his mind’s eye. “I hope you are well. Very good of you to come and see me. I expressed a wish to Mr. Rutherford for one short interview. Will you be so good as to take a seat?”

“No; I would rather stand,” Joan answered, keenly aware of the condescension in his tone. “That was not my reason for coming. Father did not tell me you had said anything of the sort. He has been too ill. I have only come to ask a question.”

“Any question that Miss Joan Brooke desires to ask—” and he waved

his hand. “But perhaps Miss Joan Brooke will consent to take a seat. I am old; and a gentleman cannot well sit while a—a—lady stands.” He very nearly said “a woman,”—remembering still the milk-cans.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Joan; and she went to the nearest chair.

CHAPTER XXIII. A PRESENT HELP.

“WHAT did you say the other day to make my father ill?”

Joan put the question in abrupt point-blank fashion, with no sort of circumlocution. Mr. Brooke’s hauteur of manner increased, and so also did his aristocratic paleness. He was annoyed at her fearless manner. He would have liked to feel his own power over her, would have liked to suppress and tame her by look and word. Then too Joan’s resemblance to his long-lost

son struck a chord within him, and set it vibrating painfully.

“I was not aware that Mr. Rutherford had been ill,” he said coldly.

A QUIET VALLEY.



"Might not comfort be found here?"

Chap. 23.

“Might not comfort be found here?”

“Father was taken worse directly you left. Something you said did him harm. It was very wrong of you to force yourself upon him like that—very wrong,” repeated Joan, with troubled eyes and saddened lips. “He was just getting a little better, and now he is all thrown back again. He hasn’t been able to tell me yet what passed: and I want to know, if you please. I might be able to comfort him.”

Mr. Brooke was not accustomed to endure blame from another, and his face grew rigid. “Your opinion of my action can have very little weight,” he observed slowly. “But it would be as well that you should remember to whom you are speaking—if indeed you have yet been informed of the relationship.”

“I know that you call yourself my grandfather,” Joan answered. “I don’t know how you prove it.”

“You are at liberty to disbelieve the fact, if you wish, Joan Brooke.”

A pause; and then—“Was it that which startled father so much? I don’t think it need. I could never leave him to go to anybody else. No relatives could be to me now what he is.”

“I, at least, assert no such claim,” said Mr. Brooke.

Joan did not seem to be making way. She lifted her soft, yet defiant, eyes, and said—“How am I to know?”

“To know that you are my granddaughter?”

A curious smile passed over Mr. Brooke’s face. He felt suddenly that he had Joan in his power. “There could be no possible difficulty in proving the fact. If my word is not sufficient, you have only to go to Marian Brooke, the widow of my unhappy son, and the

daughter of old Cairns. She will supply you with all necessary information."

"Marian—Brooke!" Joan was growing white as ashes.

"Marian Brooke—your mother."

For a moment he thought Joan would have fainted dead away on the spot; but she did not. Every vestige of color left her lips, and a strong shudder of repulsion passed through her whole frame. But the next moment her dark eyes were looking him again steadily in the face.

"Marian is the name of the person from Cairns farm who nursed my mother in her illness last autumn—Mrs. Rutherford, I mean," added Joan.

"Indeed—singular, if she did! Marian Brooke!"

"No; she only called herself Marian! She seemed ashamed of her surname, and would not tell it."

"H'm! A very singular person," said Mr. Brooke. "However, that woman, Marian Brooke of Cairns

farm, is, as I say, the widow of my unhappy son, Hubert Brooke. When my son married into the Cairns family, I gave up all connection with him and his. But for the dying wish of my wife, I should not now be in connection with—with—”

“His daughter—if I really am that,” said Joan. Her eyes flashed, and her cheeks grew crimson, as she stood up, with a sudden haughtiness of manner equal to his own.

“You need not be afraid. I shall never trouble you!” she said briefly. “If I would ever leave my own dear father for anybody in the world, I would rather go to Cairns farm than live with you. But I shall not do either. Good-bye.”

Mr. Brooke had an uncomfortable sense of being worsted. He forced a smile, and said—“If my granddaughter should find herself ever in want of friends—”

“I would never come to you—never!” cried Joan, in her anger and pain. “If your story is true, you ought to have told it long ago, or else never have said anything at all.”

She went so resolutely towards the door that Mr. Brooke had no choice but to hold it open for her. Joan passed straight out, pressing her lips together, and gazing past the old gentleman with a studied indifference.

“Good-bye,” Mr. Brooke said. “Remember, if ever you should be in want—”

But Joan was gone.

Once in the road, she hurried homewards—passionately, vehemently—allowing herself no time for thought. A great blow had fallen upon her; but she crushed aside all recollections of Marian. Only to get back to the Hall, back to her beloved father, this was her one desire. Ah, if he were but still as he once had been, she would have taken her trouble to

him, and half the burden would be gone. Now she might not venture to speak; now it must be borne alone, with no human helper.

Everything looked dark and hopeless to Joan, through that long way between Mrs. St. John's and the Hall. She had never found any distance so great before. Would it ever come to an end? She grew so utterly weary that it became almost impossible to drag one foot before the other. When home was at last in sight, the garden appeared interminable; and when Joan reached the Hall, she stood within the front door, leaning on the balustrade at the foot of the staircase, unable to ascend.

“Joan, is anything wrong?” asked Dulcibel, coming up. “Why—Joan!”

Joan burst into tears. “I am so dreadfully tired, mother.” She spoke the last words with an unwonted tenderness. Who could tell how much

longer Dulcibel Rutherford would be “mother” to Joan?

“Tired! You poor child, I should think you were!” said Dulcibel. “Come upstairs to your own room and rest. What made you go so far?”

Joan attempted no explanation, and obeyed with difficulty, dragging herself from step to step, with that same feeling of leaden-weighted hopelessness. Once in the room, she dropped down, not on the bed but on the floor.

“Please let me—please let me lie still, mother dear!” she pleaded, in answer to Dulcibel’s alarmed remonstrance. “I’m not faint—only so very, very tired. Nothing rests like the floor. Please!”

Dulcibel submitted wonderingly. She brought a pillow for Joan’s head, and threw a shawl over her; then stood looking down at the pale cheeks and dark brows.

“I can’t think what is the matter, Joan,” she said. “I hope you are not going to be ill.”

“Oh no!” Joan said, with a long breath. “I shall be rested soon. Please kiss me, mother—one kiss, and then I’ll be alone. Don’t tell father.”

Dulcibel stooped to comply, and afterwards took herself softly off, to enter into a troubled consultation with Nessie as to the probable cause of Joan’s “odd state.”

Joan lay meantime in a kind of crushed silence and languor, not stirring, not even thinking, only conscious of a black cloud over her life. She dared not let herself look the matter fully in the face. She was capable at first of nothing but endurance. For nearly an hour this pause of body and mind lasted, and then the vigor of her young strong nature began to assert itself. Joan slowly sat up, pushed back the hair from her brow, and sighed deeply.

“I shall have to tell mother,” were the first words that passed her lips. “She and Nessie must know—and Leo.” Joan was surprised at the sudden shrinking which assailed her there. “Leo—must Leo be told? Yes, of course; he is one of us. Why not? I can’t deceive any of them. The sooner I speak, the better. And father—oh, dear, dear father!” sobbed Joan—“it would never make any difference to him. Perhaps to others, not to him. But doesn’t he know already?”

Joan stood up and went to the bow-window, where her little writing-table stood. How often she had sat there, looking out on the fair expanse of lawn and flower-beds, trees, and shrubs, and distant meadows! Everything was just the same as always, only Joan’s own condition seemed so changed.

“Cairns farm! Cairns farm, my real mother’s home! And that old man my grandfather!” Joan shivered. “I

don't believe it—I can't believe it. And Marian— Oh, I never, never could think of her as mother! It can't be true—it can't be true!" moaned the poor girl, in a low-voiced anguish. "Father would never turn me away—never, never! But what will mother say? I don't know how to tell her! And Leo? If only I could hide my head, and never see anybody again, except my own dear, dear father!"

Joan leant her forehead against the windowpane, sighing heavily again.

"If mother should turn against me—mother thinks so much of family and position. And father—now he is weak—if she should persuade him! No, that would be too terrible! I could not leave father. But when mother knows who really is my mother and my grandfather—that old farmer and her nurse—and my other grandfather too proud to have to do with me! I don't care about him; but this—this; it

does seem so strange. Father is not proud; but still—the Cairns living so near; and if mother—oh, if I could be sure they would not mind, I could bear anything—but if mother and Nessie turn against me—and Leo—”

Grief and distress were rising, to an over-powering pitch. Joan left the window, and walked to and fro with hasty, uncertain steps.

“How can I bear it? What can I do? If there were any help for me! If there were any help!”

As the words left Joan’s lips, her eyes fell upon the Bible which always lay on her writing-table, a well bound, handsome volume, one of George Rutherford’s numberless gifts to his adopted child.

And a sudden longing came over Joan. Might not comfort be found here?

She turned over a few pages slowly. Here and there a light pencil-

mark drew attention to a particular passage—George's doing again.

“A VERY PRESENT HELP IN TROUBLE.”

Joan did not see the words, but they came into her mind. She turned at once to the 46th Psalm.

““God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.””

Was not that enough?

At all events, Joan went no farther. She sat looking at the words, which seemed to grow in strength and beauty as she gazed, and once more the dark eyes filled and overflowed. Joan closed the book, and knelt down just where she had been standing.

“O God, I am in such trouble;
please, please help me, for Jesus
Christ's sake,” she sobbed.

No simpler prayer could well have been uttered; but more was not needed. Again and again she repeated the pleading words; and a strange

sweet sense of coming help crept over her.

“Will he help me? I think he will. I do think he will,” murmured Joan, kneeling still, but looking up.

“Joan may I come in?” asked Nessie’s voice at the door, and Joan rose at once, going to meet her.

“Mother didn’t like me to disturb you; but she thought I ought. Father seems so surprised not to see you. We think it worries him. Are you more rested, Joan?”

“Yes, quite,” Joan answered. “I’ll go to father directly. Do I look as if I had been crying, Nessie?”

Nessie made a sound of assent. “But the blinds are half down in the study,” she said; “so father may not see.”

Joan had not much hope. Altered as George Rutherford might be in many respects, he was keenly observant still, and no change of expression in the faces of those he

loved ever passed unnoticed by him. Joan had not been five minutes in the study before he was asking—

“What is the matter, my dear?”

Dulcibel, just in the act of quitting the room, turned back to say—

“She went too far, George, and tired herself. It was a great pity. But she looks better now.”

“Was that the case?” asked George, as Dulcibel vanished.
“Nothing but that?”

“I was tired, father.”

George Rutherford examined her narrowly, and a look of care came into his own face.

“Tell me all about it, Joan,” he said gravely.

“Another day, please, father. It is over now.”

“My dear, it will worry me more not to know. I can see that you have been unhappy. Perhaps if we both speak openly, each may be some help to the other.”

Joan turned her head away.

“I went to see old Mr. Brooke,” she said. “And he told me what he had said to you—about himself—and about—”

“Marian?” asked George cautiously. If Joan did not yet know this thing, he was in no haste to tell her. There were times still when George, if not flurried or excited, had much of his old presence of mind: and it was so now.

“Yes, father.”

“My poor little girl!” was his response.

“Mother doesn’t know yet,” Joan said, drawing a long breath. “But she must, of course.”

“I should have told her, if I had felt equal to speaking!”

“Father, you must not try. I will tell her and Nessie.”

Then a deep silence, broken at length by Joan.

“Father, you would never give me up—even if others wished it? Mrs. Brooke has no right over me—and I don’t think mother will wish me to go, even when she knows. You would never give me up.”

Not the answer she expected came, but only a clasping hand and continued silence.

“Say you would not,” entreated Joan.

George spoke slowly, as if he had a difficulty in utterance. “If it were right—if it should be our duty—” and Joan looked up, to see the signs of suffering which she too well knew.

“I cannot weigh the matter yet. It is all confusion,” he said.

“No, not a word more. I have been wrong to let you talk,” Joan said calmly. “Lie still, dear father, and try not even to think.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

JOAN'S CONFESSION.

TWO days later, towards the close of the afternoon, Joan passed swiftly from her father's room downstairs, on her way to the drawing-room. She did not wish to allow herself time for thought.

George Rutherford had something of a relapse, and Joan had scarcely left him all that day or the day before. Now he was sleeping, and she could venture away for half an hour.

Dulcibel and Nessie must be told what she knew. The sense of this "must" had grown upon Joan, till she felt that there could be no further delay. Joan dreaded the telling unspeakably, and doubted much her own courage when it should come to the point; but perhaps she dreaded putting off even more. For Leo was expected home late that same evening, and Joan knew that after his return speech would be tenfold harder.

So when she found her father quietly resting, and knew that Dulcibel and Nessie would be alone in the drawing-room, Joan rose under one of her sudden impulses, and hastened with rapid steps downstairs.

The drawing-room door stood ajar. Joan pushed it open, shut it behind her, crossed the wide room, and took her position on the thick rug, with clasped hands and downcast eyes, a deep flush on either cheek.

“Mother,” she began, “there is something I want to say to you, please—to you and Nessie.”

“Is it something that Leo may not hear?” asked Dulcibel. For Leo actually stood there, in the large bow-window, making one step forward to meet Joan, and pausing as he noticed the girl’s utter absorption.

“Leo! Oh yes, Leo may hear, of course, when he comes home,” said Joan hurriedly. “We have no secrets from Leo. And I suppose all the world

must hear. But I don't care about that—only about you and father and Nessie."

"And Leo," suggested Nessie.

"Yes, of course. Mother, I don't know what you will say," pursued Joan, raising sad, soft eyes to Dulcibel's face, but seeing nothing beyond. The flush in her cheeks faded, and Dulcibel, who had already risen, drew nearer anxiously. "I went yesterday—no, not yesterday, but a day or two before—to see old Mr. Brooke. And he—Oh, I don't know how to tell you," Joan said bitterly.

Dulcibel was becoming alarmed.

"Is anything really the matter, Joan?" she asked. "I wish you would say quickly what it is. You flutter me so. Mr. Brooke! Isn't he that unpleasant old man who called himself your grandfather?"

"Yes, and he says the same still," said Joan sorrowfully. "He does not want to have anything to do with me,

and I don't suppose I shall ever see him again. It is not that, but something worse—much worse. Mother, he says—”

“Joan, please make haste, and don't startle mother,” said Nessie, foreseeing hysterics. “Leo, make her speak out.”

Joan turned with a slight start towards Leo, and he came forward.

“Leo!” she uttered.

“Yes; I came home by an earlier train. Perhaps you would rather not have me for a listener,” he said, taking Joan's cold hand into his own. “Shall I go away, or may I hear what you have to tell?”

“Oh, I suppose you may as well stay. It doesn't matter,” said Joan hoarsely, drawing her fingers from his grasp. “You will have to know. It will not be a secret. If I don't say it, father must, and that is so bad for him! It is only—I know who my grandfathers are now. Mr. Brooke is one, and the other

is old Mr. Cairns the farmer. And his daughter Marian is my mother—the one who nursed mother so nicely last autumn. I don't think I believe it all, but he says it is true."

Joan spoke in quick, broken sentences as if breath were failing her.

Dulcibel's first "My dear Joan!" was expressive only of bewilderment. She evidently thought Joan to be rambling. Nessie and Leo said nothing.

"It is true, I suppose," said Joan, sighing. "He seemed quite sure. And he said she—Marian—could tell me all about it. He calls her 'Marian Brooke.' She is the widow of his son, Hubert Brooke, and I am their child. Perhaps that is why Marian was so strange to me—if she knew it then. I suppose I ought not to speak of her as 'Marian' at all," added Joan dreamily; "but I don't know what else to say. It all seems so strange—like a story, and not at all to do with me."

“What does she mean? Joan, are you ill?” asked Dulcibel. “Such an extraordinary tale! One can’t really suppose—”

“The docketing of the lock of hair is explained,” said Leo slowly. He spoke as if lost in his own thoughts.

Joan looked up at him for a moment in sad protest, and then turned to Dulcibel.

“What am I to do?” she asked. “I am yours and father’s still, not hers. I have nothing to do with Marian Brooke. Must I leave off calling you ‘mother’?”

“Joan, how can you!” Nessie exclaimed, quite indignantly, while Dulcibel sat down and burst into tears.

“Of course I am ‘mother’ to you,” she said sobbing. “I should be very much hurt if you did leave off after all these years. Of course you are our child, and always will be. Do you mean to say it was Marian who left you at the bridge?—that horrid, heartless

creature!—poor dear little mite that you were! I always say she ought to have died of remorse for her cruelty. How did she know she hadn't killed you by exposure? How could she tell that George would adopt you? Oh, I have no patience with her, and I never had! The very thought of that woman always gave me a feeling of horror. I do feel so upset! But Nurse Marian! You actually mean to say she is the same person? Well, she must be very much changed, or else she isn't half so nice as she seems. Joan, don't stand there apart from us all. Come here."

Joan drew nearer, saying—"But I am old Mr. Cairns' grandchild. You won't like that by-and-by, mother."

"I don't like the thought of it now, but it can't be helped, and you belong to us all the same," Dulcibel answered, folding Joan in an unwontedly loving embrace. "There—you poor child! It's a most horrid thing to happen to you. But of course it

doesn't make a grain of difference, really. Marian gave you up in a shameful way, and she must take the consequences. She hasn't a shadow of claim on you now. I can't think what your father will say to it all."

"Mother, he knows. It was bearing this that made him so much worse."

"That dreadful old Mr. Brooke! Yes, of course, it was all his doing. I hope we shall never see anything of him again. If he comes to call, I shall say I am engaged. You needn't worry yourself, Joan. It doesn't matter what any of them say or do. Marian has no sort of right over you now."

Joan murmured some grateful words, as her adopted mother continued to inveigh against Mr. Brooke, Marian and the Cairns in general. Dulcibel's reception of the news was a great comfort to Joan, but she was keenly conscious of Leo's silence. "I think I ought to go back to

father,” she said presently, and she did not look towards Leo as she rose. Outside the drawing-room door, however, she found him by her side.

“Joan, this does not make any real difference,” he said, with some effort. “You are one of us still.”

“And Mr. Cairns’ grandchild, Leo!”

“It makes no difference,” he repeated. “That has to be put aside. Marian Brooke alone is to blame; and she has acted in such a manner as to forfeit every claim upon you. She must be well aware of this herself, and you see she has not come forward.”

“Please let me go,” was Joan’s response.

“But you and I are still—still—” Leo made a marked pause, a hesitating gasp—“still—brother and sister.”

“Certainly,” Joan replied rather coldly. “I am only afraid that in a little while things will look more disagreeable to you all than now. But

we will be brother and sister as long as you wish.”

Joan walked upstairs, a curious half-smile on her face, which had grown paler the last two minutes. “Leo did not like me to call myself his ‘sister’ two months ago,” she thought. “Now—yes, of course I know what he means. Well, perhaps it will save trouble. I could never leave dear father for anybody. And this will make just a little difference with Leo, if with nobody else. He is so like father in some things—but not in that. Leo is proud, and father never had any pride.”

She found George Rutherford sleeping still, and sat down by his side to think over what had passed, only putting studiously aside any further recollections of Leo’s chilled manner. On the whole she was conscious of much relief and thankfulness. When her father awoke, asking the not unusual question, “What is my Joan

thinking about?" she answered involuntarily, out of a full heart—

"Only those words, father—'A present help in trouble!'"

"Have you began to learn their meaning, my dear?" he asked.

"I think so," she said.

"That is well. Sometimes he sends the help in readiness for coming trouble," George murmured.

"But I think the worst of my trouble is over now," said Joan, speaking cheerfully. "Mother knows about the Cairns family, and about Marian—what ought I to call her?—and she says it doesn't matter at all. She says I belong only to you and her, and not at all to Marian. I did feel afraid of what mother might say."

"Marian Brooke is your mother, my child," said George seriously.

"Must I call her so?" asked Joan, with reluctance. "It seems so unnatural: 'My mother, Mrs. Brooke,' or 'Mrs. Brooke, my other mother!' That is all I

could say. Shall I ever have to see her, father? I should not like that.”

“Yes; I have been thinking. She ought to come here.”

“Oh no: it would be a worry for you. I’ll go to Cairns farm some day soon, and have an interview. It will be rather dreadful, but I shall get through somehow, I dare say. Of course I can’t pretend to be fond of her, and she could not expect it. She gave me up, and she has no right over me now.”

George’s look was hardly of assent. He said gently—“She is your own mother, Joan—nothing can undo that. Wrongly as she acted, the tie remains. I cannot think much yet, I can only feel. We shall see in time what is right. God is a very present help, darling, always, at all times. But he does not always help us just as we would choose. He brings us often by ways that we cannot understand.”

CHAPTER XXV. PERPLEXITY.

GEORGE RUTHERFORD was going downhill steadily. Bodily and mental powers seemed to be failing him together. As the long summer days grew brighter and more warm he appeared to be held in the grasp of an indescribable sadness, preventing all his wonted enjoyment of fair sights and sounds in nature.

They could not arouse him to his old interest in things around. If Joan coaxed him into the garden he soon asked to return indoors; and if she read aloud he listened without comment, growing speedily weary.

Dulcibel did not think so much of this as did others. Like many people who are greatly given to causeless and unreasoning fears, she was often by no means the first to take alarm where real reason for alarm existed. “George was languid with the spring,” she said. “He

would be stronger by-and-by. For her part, she really thought he wanted rousing. It was getting to be quite a habit of depression—very bad for anybody.”

Mr. Forest viewed the matter differently.

“There is something pressing on Mr. Rutherford’s mind,” he said seriously one day, after for a while holding his peace. “I find no other cause sufficient to account for the change in Mr. Rutherford of late.”

Mrs. Rutherford and Joan exchanged meaning looks. As yet no mention of Joan’s newly-found relatives had been made beyond their own circle. Even to Mr. Forest, old and tried friend that he was, not a word had been said. Joan and her adopted mother were almost equally loath to have the matter known, and speech had not yet become necessary. At present George Rutherford seemed disposed to shirk the subject—to put it aside. If Dulcibel

brought it forward, he did not respond. If Joan alluded to Mr. Brooke or Marian, he said only—"We shall see what to do before long."

And still he had gone downward; losing strength day by day; wearing always a look of care and trouble and weariness on the broad brow and in the brown eyes, never seen there in past days. Therefore when Mr. Forest spoke of "something pressing on Mr. Rutherford's mind," an involuntary glance passed between Dulcibel and Joan, noted at once by the doctor.

"Ah!" Mr. Forest said quietly.

Dulcibel's eyes went to Joan again.

"There have been—worries," she said hesitatingly. "Yes; I think my husband is worried, Mr. Forest—a good deal, perhaps."

Mr. Forest waited, and Joan spoke impetuously.

“Mother, Mr. Forest ought to know all. He can’t judge rightly about father without.”

Dulcibel began to cry, putting her handkerchief to her eyes; and Joan took the matter into her own hands, flushing and paling alternately, as was her fashion when this subject had to be touched upon.

“It will have to be told,” she said. “Things can’t be hidden long, mother; and Mr. Forest will tell nobody else until we wish.”

A gesture of assent was his response.

“Yes, I know—yes, of course; we are quite sure,” Joan said, clasping her hands over the back of a chair. “It is a great trouble, Mr. Forest; and you will understand. You know all about me, and how it is that I live here. Just lately we have found out who my—my—people are.” She hesitated for a word. “One grandfather of mine, old Mr. Brooke, has been staying lately at Mrs.

St. John's; and the other is old Mr. Cairns, of Cairns farm. His daughter, Marian Brooke—the one who nursed mother so long—is my real mother. Of course I don't feel her so, but she is. That is the trouble."

Joan spoke fast, only half articulating her words. Mr. Forest would not show how startled he was. There had always been a spice of romance about Joan—a kind of princess-incognita flavor; and he had a sense of sudden descent into prosaic lower levels. A vision of the sturdy old farmer in his gaiters, and of the farmer's angular daughter, Hannah, in tucked-up skirts and ponderous boots, swept before the mind's eye of the doctor.

But Joan saw only a kind look of sympathy, heard only a thoughtful—"Yes; this must be a trial for you all."

"It weighs on my husband's mind, I'm sure," said Dulcibel, shedding tears. "He is so fond of Joan.

I often say she is more to him than Nessie—not that Nessie feels jealous—she is so sweet-tempered, poor dear! And it is no fault of Joan's either. But he can't bear her out of his sight now, and he looks—I'm sure I don't know how he looks—as if he couldn't hold up his head, or care for anything."

Mr. Forest put two or three questions to Joan. How long had Mr. Rutherford known these particulars? How had they first come to his hearing? How had he received the tidings?

"Ah! That last severe attack—yes, I remember," he said, passing one hand thoughtfully over his chin. "A shock was the cause; you told me so much. Yes, I understand now." Then, after a pause for consideration, during which he sat gazing on the ground—"This cannot be allowed to go on. Something must be done."

"What can be done?" Dulcibel asked helplessly.

“That is the question. Anything rather than leave Mr. Rutherford to brood over it as he has done lately.”

“But I don’t see what to do,” repeated Dulcibel. “Are we to make my husband talk?”

“Anything rather than to have things as they are now,” Mr. Forest said again.

“I don’t believe talking will do any good. It can’t undo about Marian and all the rest,” said Dulcibel.

“Mother, that isn’t all. I don’t think you understand,” Joan said suddenly. “I know what really makes father so unhappy;” and her own eyes were full to overflowing. “He has said something once or twice—not much, but enough. He thinks I ought to leave him and you and go to Mrs. Brooke—because she is my mother. To leave you and this dear home altogether, and only come sometimes as a visitor to see you all!” cried Joan. “I told him I couldn’t—couldn’t—I should be

wretched. I said it would break my heart, and I would rather die. And he hasn't spoken since; but I know he is always thinking—always."

"Yes," assented Mr. Forest. "It is wearing him out."

"He thinks of nothing else, night and day," said Joan mournfully. "I am always seeing it in his look. He thinks he ought to give me up—ought to make me go. It is just the one thought of Mrs. Brooke being my mother, and a mother having the first right. He doesn't think of the way she behaved—and he can't look on the other side."

"He is not able," said Mr. Forest gravely. "The weakness of mind shows itself there. You cannot depend upon Mr. Rutherford's judgment in this or any other matter. If once he is possessed of a certain view of a question, he cannot take any other view. But nothing could be worse for him than this continued strain."

“I did ask him once if he would like to have Marian here to see Joan,” observed Dulcibel. “That was ten days ago, I think; and he only said ‘Not yet.’”

Joan turned pleading eyes upon the doctor.

“What ought I to do?” she asked. “If I only knew, I would bear anything for father’s sake—indeed I would.” She clenched her hands till the brown fingers grew white with pressure. Mr. Forest made no immediate answer; and Joan went on—“I could see Mrs. Brooke at the farm. Would that do?”

“Or send for her,” suggested Dulcibel.

“I hardly think the agitation of seeing Mrs. Brooke would be advisable for him at this moment,” Mr. Forest observed. “Remember, we do not know how she would act; and very little is needed in your husband’s present state to bring on another acute attack like the last. He has less strength

now to cope with it. One thing is certain, the weight of decision ought not to rest with Mr. Rutherford. He should be made to feel that the whole responsibility is taken out of his hands—that the matter must rest with Joan's conscience, not with his."

"Conscience! As if I could ever think it right to leave father for anybody," Joan said hurriedly. Then, sighing—"Yes, I see what you mean. It is conscience with father. He thinks it must be God's will that I should go to live with Mrs. Brooke, and that he ought to make me go. And then he would break his heart at losing me—oh, I know he would! Mr. Forest, what ought I to do? How can I put things right?" cried the girl beseechingly. "Don't you see how dreadfully difficult it is—if I see one thing to be right, and father thinks it wrong?"

"The question for you scarcely hinges there," said Mr. Forest. "The judgment and conscience of a

thoroughly weakened brain are not trustworthy. It is well for you to see that dearly. You feel it right to remain here, and certainly my own view of the matter is the same. But the fact that your father's view of it arises from disease or weakness, does not lessen the ill effects upon himself. The mental struggle and strain which he is undergoing may have the worst possible results."

Joan stood thinking, with drawn brows and troubled look. "Yes, I see," she said. "And anything that will take away the worry, anything that will make him feel happy again—"

"If you were to see Mrs. Brooke," suggested Mr. Forest, "and she were to state plainly that she had no idea whatever of reclaiming you?" Joan's face flushed into sudden brightness. "You and I may count this unnecessary; but for your father's sake—"

“Oh, I do think that would be best—I do think it would put his mind at rest,” Joan said earnestly. “Thank you so much for helping me. I’ll go this afternoon—at once. And tomorrow I can tell you all about it.”

Ten minutes later Joan entered her father’s room, wearing hat and gloves. It had not occurred to her to ask Mr. Forest’s advice about informing her father where she was going, but he had evidently counted open speech better than silent brooding. Joan felt disposed to speak frankly.

“Are you going out, my dear?” George asked listlessly.

“Yes, father, to Cairns farm. I am going to see Mari—my—Mrs. Brooke, I mean.”

“Your mother.” George did not appear to be startled. He was not easily startled. That which tried and harassed him was having, with his enfeebled

brain, to decide a difficult question or to bear responsibility.

“Yes, father. You wanted me to see her some day; and perhaps it will be best over.”

She stood by his arm-chair, looking anxiously at the once fine lion-like face, now thinned and weakened. Some strong wave of feeling below could be dimly seen. Joan pressed his hand to her lips.

“I think it will comfort you to have me go, father dear.”

George drew Joan down into his arms, and held her tenderly—held her as one might hold a precious possession before parting with it.

“My Joan—my child,” he murmured—“the comfort of my life. But I give you up, my darling, if God so wills. It is right and just.”

“No, father,” Joan answered, growing white, “I do not believe that it is God’s will. She gave me up to you, and she cannot ask for me again.”

“If she did not—” George said slowly. “But Joan, my child, if she does, I consent. I dare not hold you back.”

“Father, I would not go,” said Joan gently. “I am not a little child now, and I must decide for myself.”

“If it is right,—you will do what is right,” George said. “That must come later. I cannot often think, or I would have seen her before this. She may not claim you, my darling; but if she did—”

“And if she did not, father dear?”

He smiled at the thought—a smile of sudden sunshine.

“But we must be willing,” he murmured—“willing, whatever God calls us to bear. The fight has been hard. I think I can consent now, from my heart. You have been a dear girl to me all these years, dear, past telling. Still, if we have to part, we can do it in obedience; and, after all, a mother’s claim! Yes, she forfeited it, perhaps,

and yet—no, I cannot think clearly, my darling. I can only feel—only be willing, and our God will guide us.”

Joan had no voice with which to answer. She kissed him passionately and hastened away.

CHAPTER XXVI. SHOULD SHE GIVE HER UP?

ALL these months Marian Brooke had lived quietly at the farm, making no effort to see her daughter.

Hardly “making no effort,” for she did occasionally allow herself one bitter-sweet pleasure. Now and then she would find her way to Woodleigh Church, and feast her eyes upon the dark-eyed girl in the squire’s pew. But on such occasions Marian found her own devotions to be almost pushed out of existence. She could see nothing,

remember nothing, think of nothing, except Joan.

So she usually attended the little hamlet church which lay nearest to Cairns farm. It was only when the mother-thirst grew, through long starvation, to an intolerable pitch, that she indulged herself in one of these stolen Sunday studies of Joan. After all, there was more of pain than of satisfaction in such study.

For as time went on she felt only more and more vividly that the giving away of her child had indeed been final—that she must yield up all hope of ever winning back the love of Joan in this life.

“You will never see or hear anything of me again from this day,” Marian had written to Mr. Rutherford, under the expectation of speedy death. She had no distinct recollection now of the actual phrases employed in her letter, but was disposed to magnify

them into more positive promises than they really were.

Marian could not count herself free to make herself known to Joan without Mr. Rutherford's consent. She believed that she had not promised that she would never divulge her name and relationship; but even on this point she had doubts. The letter had been hurriedly written, under strong excitement.

Had George Rutherford been in his usual health, Marian must have gone to him—must have told all—must have appealed to his pity and his judgment. But his present condition precluded this. She had heard that any severe shock or great trouble might tell upon him fatally; and she dared not come forward. His great love for her child Joan was known through all the neighborhood: her child—not his! That fact was not known.

So through, the past winter and spring there had been nothing for her

but to wait; and as she waited, much of peace came back to Marian's spirit.

Old Mr. Cairns began more and more to appreciate the presence of his long-lost elder daughter; and Jervis was happier than for many long years before.

The one family fret and trial was Hannah's uncomfortable rasping temper. But this mattered less to Jervis now he had Marian's companionship, and Marian herself did not seem to be easily ruffled. She was a good deal changed in that respect since early girlhood.

"Something's wrong with Betsy," Hannah announced as they rose from early dinner.

"Wrong—how?" inquired Jervis.

"I don't know. She's been sick all the morning, and she's gone to bed, leaving everything on my hands—as if I hadn't enough to do already—and Saturday too!"

“The poor thing can’t help being ill, I suppose,” said Jervis.

“Nobody said she could,” retorted Hannah. “Other folks can help being lazy, though.”

The cut at her sister was obvious; but Marian only asked, with a half-smile—

“What is it you want me to do?”

“Oh, I never count on you for anything!” Hannah responded, with an indignant whisk of her body towards the dresser. “You’ll be wanting to read your Bible all the afternoon, because of to-morrow’s Sunday-school. That’s about all you’re good for! I’ve got the bread to make, and a pie for to-morrow, and father wants a lot of bread-and-butter and tea taken out to the mowers in the front meadow—I can’t see on earth why! And Betsy wants looking after too. She’ll have to see to herself, for I’ve no time. And there’s no end of sheets to darn.”

“Well, I can darn the sheets and see to Betsy,” said Marian. “If you like, I’ll make the pie.”

“I dare say!” Hannah answered ungratefully, “I know what your pies are like.”

Marian allowed the question to drop. Discussion with Hannah was at all times useless. When once she had made an assertion, however recklessly, she would cling to it afterwards with a bull-dog tenacity. Marian had a light hand for pastry, but one batch of pies had proved a failure in the course of the winter; and Hannah never forgot it.

The old farmer vanished, and his son also. Marian helped to clear away the dinner-things; ran upstairs to attend to the prostrate Betsy; then settled herself near the window of the large kitchen for a prolonged darning of sheets. About an hour passed thus uninterruptedly. Hannah usually chose to perform bread-making in the airy back kitchen, so Marian was left to

herself. She worked steadily for an hour, sometimes singing softly; and then pausing for a dreamy gaze out of the window, in the midst of which her sister entered.

“That’s the way to get work done!” Hannah remarked with a grim derisiveness.

“I am not wasting time, Hannah,” said Marian. “It’s only—”

“Oh, you’re not, ain’t you?” interrupted Hannah.

“No. My hand is tired, and I’m taking ten minutes’ rest. Two sheets are done.”

“Well, there’s plenty more that wants doing,” said Hannah.

Exit Hannah, and enter Jervis in her stead. His flushed face and audible breathing told their own tale.

“Jervis, you haven’t been in the hay-field?” said Marian.

“Yes. It wasn’t wise. Never mind.”

Jervis sat down, leaning forward, and not speaking. Marian gave him a glance or two of sympathy, but kept silence until he seemed more comfortable.

“I wish you could get rid of that tiresome asthma,” she said.

“Not likely. It seems tied to me—most likely for life,” Jervis answered cheerfully. “There, I’m better now. I’d no business to go near the hay.”

“Farming doesn’t suit you,” said Marian.

“I’d give it up gladly, and do anything else, if father was willing. But I don’t like to go against him now, after all the trouble he has had. And so long as he can see to everything it doesn’t much matter that I can’t. I don’t know how things will be by-and-by.”

“We haven’t got to settle now for by-and-by,” Marian observed placidly.

She darned on for a while, saying no more, and too much wrapped up in

her own thoughts to be conscious of her brother's steady observation.

"Polly, are you thinking about your child?" he asked.

Marian started; his words brought her back so suddenly to a forgotten present.

"Yes—" and she sighed—"I was seeing her dear little face just then as clear as daylight, just like what she was when I gave her away."

"You've never told me yet who you gave her to."

"No," Marian answered.

"And you'd rather not? You can't trust me? Sometimes I do think a second ought to know it beside yourself. Suppose you should be ill—too ill to speak—and should want your child sent for?"

"I've thought of that. But I don't see my way to telling yet. Yes, I trust you—more than anybody else in the world. It's myself I can't trust. Just now I'm feeling stronger and not so

troubled; but how can I tell that it'll last? And if your persuadings should pull the same way as my own heart, I think it would be too much for me."

"And you don't think it would be right to try to get your child back?"

"No, I don't—I can't; I wish I could. She's in a happy home, and doesn't want me. And they that have kept her all these years have the right to her now. It wasn't as if I'd given them any choice. I threw my child into their arms, so to speak, and took myself off, and they couldn't give her back to me, if they wished. Yes, it was a mad thing to do—mad and foolish and wrong. Anybody else would have sent her off to the workhouse—anybody but one who is all kindness; and it was his kindness that I trusted. But I sometimes wish now that my trust had proved false; for if my child were poor and unhappy she'd be glad to welcome me—glad to see her own mother. She wouldn't be glad now.

And yet if he had cast her off, she might have been brought up in wicked ways. Sometimes I don't know what to wish—what to think. I feel it was the maddest deed a mother ever ventured on, almost—a mother who loved her little one, as I loved Joan. Worry must have driven me pretty nearly out of my mind, before I could have done it."

Jervis said "Yes" to this. "But you've looked happier of late," he added kindly.

"I'm getting more used to waiting. It was dreadfully hard at first—hard to know I'd put my child away from me with my own hand, and mightn't try to take her back. It's been easier lately, or else I've grown stronger. There's help for those who pray and trust; and if God lets us bear the punishment brought by our own doings, he's willing to forgive. Yes; I think I must be stronger."

A half-smile flickered round her mouth as she spoke.

“Things do seem to get better as one goes on. Sometimes earth grows less and hopes of heaven get brighter, and then troubles don’t matter so much. Perhaps my child will learn to love me yet—by-and-by. God knows how I thirst and pray for that! But it don’t do to snatch at what one wants before the right time.”

“No, my dear,” Jervis answered, in a grave voice.

The window looked out upon a large yard which opened by means of two heavy wooden doors upon a muddy lane. At the present moment nobody was in the yard, and the wooden doors were shut.

As Marian gazed dreamily, one of the doors began to stir in a slow and uncertain fashion, as if moved by unaccustomed fingers. It was pushed gradually open, and a girlish figure entered—a slender, well-dressed figure, stepping with a somewhat

gingerly and reluctant air, as if not particularly gratified to be there.

Marian's loosely folded hands became locked with a tight clasp, and her absent gaze changed into a fixed stare.

“Why, Polly, what’s the matter? Do you know that young lady?” asked her brother.

Marian showed no signs of having heard the question. She seemed almost to have lost consciousness of her whereabouts.

“I wonder who it is, and what she wants,” Jervis said again, just as Hannah came bustling into the kitchen, with tucked-up sleeves, pinned-up skirts, and floury hands. “She looks puzzled where to turn. Perhaps I’d better go—”

“Go where?” demanded Hannah shortly. “Somebody in the yard? Oh, I see! Why, it’s Mr. Rutherford’s daughter. What on earth does she want here, I should like to know? We don’t

supply the Hall with milk now—more shame that we don't. I never did like that Mrs. Rutherford, coming and turning everything upside down, with her fussy ways, as soon as ever she was married. I'm not going to begin sending again now, after all these years, so she needn't think it. Shouldn't wonder if Miss Rutherford has come for that, and I shall just say no. Well, she is finding her way to the door at last. One would think she'd got no eyes. Polly'll have to go and answer the bell, for Betsy's upstairs."

But Marian still remained seated in that strange trance, with fixed eyes and locked hands, as if seeing and hearing nothing.

"What on earth's up with her now?" uttered the amazed Hannah.

"I don't think she's well," said Jervis uneasily. "Polly, my dear—Polly," and he grasped her shoulder gently, giving a slight shake. "Polly,

wake up; are you asleep? That's right—" as Marian rose.

"Will you answer the bell, or shall I? Come, my dear, we must be quick. Miss Rutherford is waiting."

Marian resumed her seat.

"I can't stand," she said. "I think—I think I'm taken dizzy. My head's all of a maze." She looked up at her brother entreatingly. "You go, Jervis, please," she whispered. "And let me have a word with her before she leaves."

"Yes, to be sure, if she doesn't mind," replied Jervis cheerfully. "You'd like to ask all about Mr. Rutherford, wouldn't you?"

CHAPTER XXVII. THE INTERVIEW.

AS Jervis had opened the door to his sister, one wintry evening, months earlier, so now he opened it to his

niece. But he no more knew Joan to be his niece than he had known Marian at first sight to be his sister. He thought of her only as Mr. Rutherford's adopted daughter—Miss Rutherford. Joan was so commonly spoken of in the neighborhood by this name, that very many, including Jervis, quite believed her to be Mr. Rutherford's niece.

“Is Mrs. Brooke at home?” asked Joan. Rapid walking and suppressed agitation had brought a flush to her cheeks, and her dark eyes wore their look of mingled trouble and defiance. The black brows above were drawn into one straight line of rich pencilling, and she held herself upright with a resolute dignity which scarcely sufficed to conceal her inward trembling.

“My sister Marian?” Jervis was surprised to find Marian’s surname known. He was aware what pains she had taken to suppress it, both during

her stay at the Hall, and during her stay at home.

“Yes—Marian Brooke. I wish to speak to her, if you please.”

Jervis privately thought that the young lady need not have assumed quite so haughty an air. He began to wonder whether perhaps “Polly” were to be called upon again to act the “nurse” to somebody at the Hall. That seemed on the whole more likely than a request for renewed supplies of milk or butter. Joan, meanwhile, never doubting that all the Cairns family must be fully aware of the relationship between herself and them, wondered a little at the unconsciousness of his manner. Marian, his sister! That meant that he was her uncle—Joan’s uncle! Joan was quite prepared to repel any advances made on the score of this relationship, but as yet there were no advances to repel.

“My sister Marian is just inside,” said Jervis. “If you would like to come in—”

“Yes, I want to speak to Mrs. Brooke,” repeated Joan, with a touch of impatience. Jervis was struck by the distressed alternations of flush and paleness, and by the nervous excitement which underlay her haughtiness.

“Certainly!” he said in his pleasantest manner. “Will you please step inside, and I will call Marian.”

“What’s it all about, Jervis?” demanded Hannah, from the kitchen-door.

“Miss Rutherford wishes to see Polly,” Jervis answered.

“Oh!” Hannah said, making her appearance. “Well—she’ll have to come in here then. The parlor’s all in a mess. I haven’t had time to get anything straight.”

“It does not matter where,” observed Joan. Beforehand, she had

pictured an interview alone with Marian; but now a despairing indifference to spectators seized upon her. These people of course all knew the facts of the case. And what did it matter? What did anything matter? What was aught in the world to Joan, except one aim—to bring rest and ease to her father's troubled heart?

Marian Brooke forgot her own sensations as Joan came in. She rose again, and came forward, walking slowly, with her eyes fixed on the young girl's face—the face of her long-lost child. Jervis looked on wonderingly. Hannah stood and stared with bare, floury arms, and pulled-up skirts. Only Marian and Joan moved, drawing nearer together.

Mother and daughter! And both knew it. Each knew also that the other knew it. But no brightness was in either face; for never till this moment had Joan felt the reality of the relationship, the tremendous force of

that tie of nature which nothing could ever undo. She felt it, but only with a sense of bitter pain and shrinking. There had been a time when those dark eyes of Joan's had looked lovingly into Marian's with lisped words of tenderness to "Muvver, muvver!" Nothing of that kind now. The very memory of such days, ever fresh in Marian's heart, had died out of Joan's mind; and the sudden dread which showed itself in the girl's whitening face, was reflected in the silent anguish of the mother's passionate yearning.

Then Joan stood still, gazing down upon the red-brick floor. What was she to do or say next? What was she here for? And Marian broke the silence, speaking in the muffled tone of one half-choked.

"I think, perhaps, you'd like to see me in another room, wouldn't you, Miss Rutherford, my dear?"

Joan laid one hand on the table for support, conscious of pallor and sickness.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said huskily. “Yes, I think I should like that best. But it doesn’t really matter. You all know, of course. I am not Miss Rutherford really. It is kind of you to be willing to call me so; but of course you know! I am Joan Brooke, your daughter; but much, much more Mr. Rutherford’s child!” added Joan, with a sob.

One moment’s dead pause, and then, “Well, I never!” broke from Hannah.

“Polly, my dear, is this your secret?” Jervis asked sorrowfully.

“Yes,” Marian said, coming closer to Joan. “It has been my secret, and I wish it was still. She shouldn’t have told. There wasn’t need. Why did you, my dear?” Marian asked of Joan, almost reproachfully.

Joan's downcast eyes gave one startled look up.

"Didn't they all know?" she gasped, rather than said.

"No, my dear, only me—nobody but me," said Marian, taking one of Joan's gloved hands, and fondling it between her own. "You won't mind me doing that, will you, my dear? I've craved so for a touch! It seems to put new life into me. But I wouldn't have told them yet, if you hadn't. I didn't mean to."

Tears were slowly dropping from Marian's eyes, as she went on caressing the little cold limp hand. Joan submitted only, making no response. Jervis said nothing after his first involuntary question. Hannah came to the other side of the table, rested her floury hands upon it, and scanned Joan all over.

"Well, I never!" she repeated. "You don't mean to say it's true? I never! And you not to say a word

about it all these months! I never!
What's to be done next, I wonder?"

"Hannah, you'd better come away," Jervis said in an undertone.

"Come away! What for?" demanded Hannah. "If this young woman is Polly's daughter, she's my niece, and I s'pose I've a right to speak to my own niece."

"Not now. It's not the time," urged Jervis. "Not now, Hannah. Come away, and leave them quiet. Polly will tell us all by-and-by. Hannah—Hannah, come away."

His whispered importunities prevailed. Very reluctantly Hannah permitted herself to be drawn aside, and the kitchen-door was shut. Mother and child stood alone, each facing the other.

For a minute neither spoke. The tall clock ticked on with loud, slow distinctness; and the afternoon sun streamed in through the lattice window, casting slender, diamond-

shaped shadows on the red-brick floor. The purring even of the old cat lying beside the fender came to Joan's ears, and the shrill chirp of a cricket in the hearth.

"You'll sit down, my dear—won't you?" Marian pleaded at length in a trembling voice. "You won't mind sitting down here, just for a little?"

Joan allowed herself to be led to the big arm-chair of old-fashioned shape, commonly occupied by the old farmer—her grandfather. She sat in it, upright and pale, like one in a dream. Marian stood in front, gazing and gazing as if her eyes could not have their fill.

"I want to know if this is really true?" Joan said at length, speaking with a resolute composure. "It was old Mr. Brooke who told me."

Marian was surprised at the question. Joan's manner hitherto had implied no sort of doubt; and Joan, looking up, read her expression. "I

know—I know,” she said bitterly. “Of course it is true—really. I haven’t any hope—really—of finding it a mistake. But he said you could tell me all about it. And I have come to ask.”

“Mr. Brooke’s son, Hubert, was my husband,” Marian said.

“Yes, so he told me. And you are my—”

Then a pause. Marian’s face worked.

“What made you give me up?” asked Joan suddenly. “If you had loved me, and kept me with you, I should have been your child now. I should have learnt to care for you. Now I am Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford’s child. I love them dearly, dearly, and I should be miserable away from them. Father is everything in the world to me. And it was your doing. You gave me up of your own free will; gave me over to them. It was a wrong, unjust thing to do. You did not deserve that they should keep me; but they did, and they

were strangers—and you were my mother. And now I owe everything to them—not to you—nothing at all to you.”

Marian’s tears were streaming, and voice failed her for self-defence, if indeed she had any to offer.

“Father is ill, and he has a fancy that you will expect to be able to claim me as your own child,” Joan went on feverishly. “That is what I have come to speak about to-day. I want your help.”

“I’d give my right hand to help you, my dear, if it would be any good,” said Marian brokenly.

“Do you really care about me still?” asked Joan, with a momentary touch of curiosity. “I wonder you did not keep me, then, instead of giving me away. Of course I know that you had no money; but poor people don’t always give their children away in that fashion, directly they are in difficulties. It seems such an extraordinary thing to

have done. I can't understand it at all, and other people can't either. Everybody says how wrong you were."

Marian moved her head in mute, sorrowful assent.

"That is all over now, and can't be helped," pursued Joan. "I only want you just to see that it is not anybody's doing except yours—that of course life is quite altered both for you and me by it. I want to speak to you now about my father. Since he heard all this from Mr. Brooke—my grandfather—he has been very unhappy and worried. It is making him ill again. He seems to think that you have a first right to me. He seems to think I am wrong not to be willing to leave him, and to live with you. As if I could!" Joan cried passionately. "He is everything to me—dearer than all the world. And you are only a stranger. You turned me off when I was a little helpless child, and gave up your right, and now you cannot take it back; anybody must see

that. The very idea is absurd. But father's head is weak since his accident, and he cannot grasp things as he used to do. If a fancy takes hold of him, he has no power to shake it off. And he has got this thought into his head, and nothing that I can say makes him feel differently. It is his illness, the doctor says, and the worry and unhappiness are wearing him out, and I have come to you for help. I think you ought to be willing to do this one thing for me, when you remember how very much I owe to dear, dear father. It is only just that you should."

"Re would give you up to me!" Marian spoke faintly. Tears ceased, and she sat down in one of the stiff-backed chairs, looking straight before her. "He would give you up! That's more than I dared to reckon on."

"It is illness only," repeated Joan, not quite catching the words spoken. "He would not have such an idea in his mind if he were strong and well. For,

of course, I am his now—not yours—only his! I belong to him and to nobody else. But he is weak and ill, and he has this worry in his mind, that perhaps he ought to give me back to you, and he cannot shake it off.”

Joan stopped, struck with her mother’s look. Those gray eyes were gazing hungrily at her. In truth a sharp temptation had all at once assailed Marian, in the hour of her fancied strength. What if she took George Rutherford at his word? What if she accepted his offer, and demanded her Joan?

“Of course the idea is ridiculous,” Joan said coldly, with a change of manner. “I am of age now—not a child to be given away. Father knows that, and he will not force me to leave him. If he did, I would not live with you. I would earn my living elsewhere. But I have come to you to-day, because mother and I are so anxious about dear father, and I thought you would help

me. I thought you might be willing to put matters straight—to tell father that he has every right to keep me, and that of course you could never think of asking me back. That is all I want. It is little enough—after the past! And I fancied you might perhaps care enough about my happiness to do it; I felt almost sure you would.”

Did she not care enough for Joan? Marian could only make a faint, wordless sound, and Joan went on: “Father has this constantly in his mind, and it weighs him down. It is making him worse, and the doctor says something must be done. I thought you would tell him—or write a letter to him—just saying that you do not want me, do not expect ever to have me back. That would put his mind at rest, and nothing else would in the same way.”

Marian was silent.

“It would kill him to lose me—and if I ever had to leave him it would break my heart.”

“To leave him—and come to me!” The words seemed dragged from Marian.

“Yes,” Joan answered, with darkening, resentful eyes; “nothing could make me more wretched.”

No reply came. The clock ticked on slowly, and Marian sat with bent head. How long this silence lasted, neither could have told. Marian felt at length a touch on the arm. Joan was standing by her side.

“Will you do it?” Joan asked hoarsely. “Will you give me up—altogether?”

“It is a hard thing to ask of a mother,” moaned Marian, still in the grasp of that dire temptation.

“Hard! Why, you have done it once, when you had no need!” The girl’s voice of scorn went through Marian like a knife-blade. “How did

you know that I might not have been starved to death! You don't suppose I can believe, after that, in your having ever cared for me!" Then with a sudden change to softness—"But if you will do this—if you will do what I ask—I promise to try and learn to love you."

Again silence. Marian's head had sunk on her chest.

"Then I shall take the matter into my own hands," Joan said, flaming up into a proud and wrathful decisiveness. "I will tell father that I shall not leave him—that nothing can make me go away. And if it does him harm—if he is worse—then I will never, never speak to you again."

When Marian again looked up, Joan was gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII. WARFARE.

FOR nearly thirty hours Marian Brooke was in the thick of a conflict.

Nothing outside mattered much. She came and went listlessly, took her share in housework, ran little errands for Hannah, mended, darned, washed-up—did anything that had to be done. But her heart and her thoughts were out of it all. When Hannah grumbled and scolded, she did not even hear. If questions were asked, she forgot to answer.

Once more the light of peace had died out from Marian's face. Once more the battle was too strong for her.

She sought no earthly help in this fierce fight. From whom might she seek it? Who of those around her could have understood the power of a mother's longing for her child? Jervis would have been sorry and perplexed; but that was not what she wanted.

He was sorry and perplexed now; and Hannah was displeased. For all the evening after Joan's departure, and

through the greater part of the next day, Marian went about like one stunned by some great calamity, wan and hollow-eyed, with the look of a sufferer who had forgotten how to smile.

Jervis asked no questions, and would fain have had Marian left alone, but the old farmer and Hannah showed no such forbearance. They were brimful of curiosity, and put her through a long catechetical lecture with respect to Joan. It seemed to make little difference to Marian. She gave facts, with a dreamy and mechanical indifference; and when they blamed her for her long silence, she did not show signs of hearing.

All through the long hours of night the strife continued; and when morning came the victory was not won.

Must she give up her child again? If Mr. Rutherford were willing, must hers be the hand to cast Joan from her

anew? Was it needful? Could she not lawfully once more claim her own?

Her own! But she had given Joan away! She had promised not to claim her!

How about Mr. Rutherford's state of health?—and how about his love for Joan? After all his goodness to her child, was this to be the return?

But how about herself? After all these years of separation, might she never have her child for her own again?

So the fight went on; and one hour one side nearly won, and another hour the other side had the best of it.

Marian was vanquished at last,—seemingly, and for a while. She could not give up Joan. Let come what might, she would accept Mr. Rutherford's offer, and would claim her child. Somebody must suffer. Why should her heart be torn, rather than the heart of another?

And for three hours or so Marian was calm in this decision. She was not at first aware of a spirit-darkness which came with it. The thought of Joan, and Joan alone, filled her whole horizon.

Towards sunset she had to go into the village of Woodleigh for some slight purchase, and she took her way back through the churchyard. It was a very quiet, lonely churchyard, quite fenced off by a thick rim of trees and bushes, from the outer world.

Marian's mother lay buried there—no, not her mother. Marian knew better than that: but the clay remains had been laid in a shady corner, and a flat stone spoke to her memory. The daughter who had broken that mother's heart often went and stood beside the grave, her own heart aching keenly for the past, which could not be undone.

This afternoon, as on other days, Marian turned her steps to that quiet

spot; and stood there dreamily, thinking and listening.

The name and date came first on the stone; and below, one very-short and simple text,—

“THE TIME IS SHORT.”

Nothing more than that. It had been the choice of Mrs. Cairns herself, before she died.

“Caw! caw! caw!” came hoarsely through the air overhead; and “twitter, twitter!” from the bushes close at hand.

“THE TIME IS SHORT.”

Those four words sounded more loudly in Marian’s ears than all the cawing and the twittering.

Standing there, under the blue sky, she became suddenly conscious of a darkness over her spiritual sky. When at this spot, it was her habit always to pray for Joan. To-day Marian could not pray. Her soul seemed to drop earthward, like a bird with broken wing.

“The time is short! The time is short!”

Yes, that was true indeed. Time was short. Years were passing away. A little space, and then the great change. What mattered aught meanwhile, except the one thing needful? What mattered even her great desire?

Ah! but it did matter. Marian could not so reason away the passion of her heart’s longing. Gladly would she have given up all that she possessed, once more to have her child’s arms clinging round her. Little loving arms they had once been; and now Joan—her own Joan, her only child—held coldly aloof. It did matter terribly to Marian. Years might be short, and life only a brief span; but days, and hours, and minutes were long, while she was in the grasp of this agony.

Give up Joan altogether! Oh, she could not—would not!

But the darkness of spirit that was upon her, the deadness of heart in prayer! Marian drew herself up, frightened, to learn the cause. Whatever else she might be willing to part with, for Joan's sake—and in that dire strife it did seem to Marian that she could gladly have given up all she possessed or hoped for in life, to feel Joan once more her own—one thing she could not face, and that was the loss of heavenly peace.

This it was which brought Marian to her knees beside the grave, and to tears of penitence. The battle was won at last.

Leonard Ackroyd had been away from the Hall lately. At once, after the discovery of Joan's relationship to the Cairns family, he had taken himself off on a round of visits.

How long he might have remained absent is uncertain, but for a wish to see him again expressed by

George Rutherford. So soon as an echo of that wish reached Leo, he quitted the house where he was staying, and came homeward with all possible speed, arriving unexpectedly during Joan's absence, when she was paying her visit to Marian Brooke at Cairns farm.

Dulcibel took Leo straight upstairs to see her husband, and he was very painfully impressed with the great change in George Rutherford's appearance. Leo was in a mood to be easily rendered indignant, just because he was himself thoroughly unsettled and unhappy in mind. He felt indignant now that he had not been more fully informed as to the state of the invalid.

To Dulcibel herself, Leo said little. But when Joan came back from her unsuccessful expedition, Leo met her in the hall. She looked so sad and weary-hearted, that Leo's own heart gave a great throb of pitying sympathy. He did not, however, wish her to know that, and his manner was brusque as he

asked, after scant greeting—"Why was I not told about my uncle?"

"I don't know what you mean," Joan said listlessly. She walked into the drawing-room, and stood there, waiting for his next words. Nobody else was present.

"About his being so much worse. Surely you have seen it, Joan!" as the dark eyes went up to his with a look of terror. "The difference seems to me so very marked. Where are you going?"

"To father. Oh Leo, don't keep me."

But Leo was at the door before her, and his warm strong hands grasped her cold shaking ones.

"No, Joan, no—forgive me, but you must wait. Indeed I did not mean to alarm you; and he must not be startled. But surely you have not thought him so well lately?"

"I don't know. Oh, I don't know. If you would only let me go!"

He looked so wonderfully like George Rutherford at that moment—grave and kind, and resolute—that Joan had no power to fight against his will. She stood still, drooping and trembling, yet conscious of a certain comfort in the very touch of those firm hands. But the next moment Leo had withdrawn himself a pace or two, and his manner was different.

“Have you seen your mother, Joan?” he asked seriously, having heard from Dulcibel the object of her expedition.

Joan looked quickly up, with defiant eyes and fleshing cheeks. She dreaded lest Leo should read the pain which his change of manner gave, and she was angry with herself for feeling pain, about that or anything else at such a time—anything except her father’s state.

“Yes, I have seen my mother—if you mean Mrs. Brooke,” she answered recklessly. “And an uncle and aunt into

the bargain. A very respectable uncle, not at all bad-mannered, and an aunt, all over flour. I didn't come across the old grandfather. But perhaps the three were enough for one day. The aunt looks decidedly vixenish."

"Joan!" Leo said sorrowfully. He could not help it; though he knew, or might have known, that he had himself caused the perverse mood.

"Well?" responded Joan. "You don't expect me to fall in love with them all on the spot, do you? Everything was very clean—quite polished and shining. I paid my call in the kitchen, and I should think my worthy aunt must be quite an adept at scrubbing. They were so good as to leave me alone for a talk with Mrs. Brooke. It was not a very pleasant interview. She seems to think she has a sort of right over me still, which is absurd. Unless you have any more questions to ask, Leo, I should be glad to go. I want to tell my father all about

it—my real father,” Joan added, her hard look suddenly softening into an intense tenderness.

“I must not keep you, of course,” Leo said gravely. “But, Joan, be careful. I do not think my uncle ought to be excited.”

“What did you mean just now—about his being worse?” Joan asked, in her most abrupt manner.

“He seems to me changed—thinner and weaker. And I did not like the drowsiness.”

Joan repeated the last word inquiringly.

“Aunt Dulcibel said it had come on almost immediately after you left him. He knew me, but seemed quite unable to talk. If Mr. Forest were not coming in presently, I should have advised his being sent for.”

Joan waited for no more, but hurried upstairs. Just outside George Rutherford’s room she was met by Dulcibel.

“I think he is nearly asleep,” the latter said softly. “He has been so, off and on, ever since you went. I must go to Leo now. Don’t try to rouse him, Joan.”

“No, mother.”

“Have you seen those people at the farm?”

“Yes,” and Joan sighed.

Dulcibel kissed her kindly.

“You shall tell me all about it by-and-by. But don’t say anything to your father, if he does not ask.”

Joan put aside hat and gloves, then sat down to watch patiently beside the couch. George Rutherford presently opened his eyes, and gave a little smile, but he showed no inclination to speak. The look of harass and strain, which had been of late constantly stamped upon his fine features, seemed singularly to have vanished. An absolute peacefulness was resting there instead.

Had he forgotten about Marian Brooke, and about Joan's visit to the farm? It might be so, in the present condition of his brain and memory.

CHAPTER XXIX. HIS CHILD.

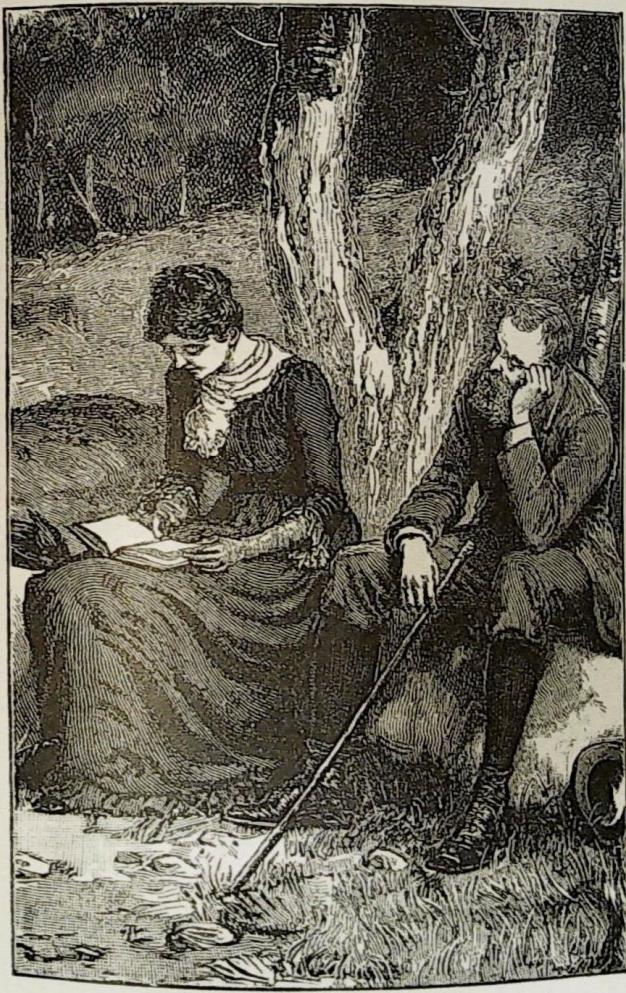
THE drowsiness which had come on did not pass off quickly. When Mr. Forest called, he said little at first beyond an echo of Leo's "I do not like it." But he paid a second call that same evening, and was at the house again in the early morning. By that time he was able to speak with sorrowful decisiveness. A marked change for the worse had taken place.

George Rutherford was not unconscious, as in former attacks. He only seemed very weary, and indisposed to talk. Most of the morning he lay quietly, with closed eyes, noticing nothing that went on around

him. It was singular how every trace of anxiety and distress had passed from his face, leaving only a complete repose. Sometimes a dim, calm smile gleamed slowly, like an irradiation from the other world.

After midday the drowsiness lessened and a certain restlessness took possession of him. He seemed to those around to be wandering, as he murmured broken half-sentences about “the valley,” and “the bridge,” and “hills round about.”

A QUIET VALLEY.



The Valley once more.

Chap. 29.

The Valley once more.

“The valley of the shadow of death,” Leo said, with lowest possible utterance to Joan. Mr. Forest still spoke of hope, but Leo could see none; and it seemed to him that Joan ought to understand the blow which was in all probability coming upon her.

“No, no, no,” Joan answered hurriedly and with anger. “No, no—not that, but the valley in Wales!” She turned to the bed, and said fondly, “Yes, father dear—that was where you found your little Joan, was it not?”

He evidently understood, and looked up, smiling, his hand clasping hers.

“My comfort! My child!” he said tenderly.

“Dear, dear father!” burst passionately from Joan’s lips.

“Hush, don’t agitate him,” Leo whispered. But George only smiled again, seeming rather to be roused than agitated.

The thought of the valley haunted him for a while, mingled with recollections of the anxiety which had weighed upon him recently.

“The bridge has to be crossed,” he murmured, lifting his eyes to his wife. “Yes—come, my Dulcie, no need to fear. The Master’s hand is strong enough. ‘O thou of little faith!’... Sometimes over a difficult way—and flesh and flesh and heart may fail.... But he is our portion, for ever and ever! So foolish ever to fear!... And all will be well—as he wills. No need to choose. He has cared for the child. He will never forsake—never fail her.... My little Joan, I have loved her very tenderly.... But if the call has come—Father, thy will, not mine.... Yes—as thou willest.... A hard bridge to pass over—but as thou wilt.”

Joan found it difficult to restrain herself, listening to him.

A little later he was uttering other words, connected in his mind, with memories of the fair Welsh valley:—

“Come thou must, and we must die,

Jesus, Saviour, stand thou by!”

No more than this, but over and over again the prayer came solemnly—

“Jesus, Saviour stand thou by!”

“He is not far-away,” Leo said quietly.

“No, my dear Leo—very near—in death and in life—always near,” was the reply, with calm emphasis.

Nessie, helplessly sobbing, had left the room, and Dulcibel at length could bear up no longer. But Joan showed no signs of breaking down. Pale as wax, she remained close beside her father, watching intensely every movement, anticipating every need.

Drowsiness again usurped sway over him, and George seemed passing into a heavy sleep. Would he ever wake from it again? Leo thought not. But by Joan's wish an urgent messenger was sent again for the doctor, though not two hours had elapsed since his last call; and he came at once.

Almost immediately after Mr. Forest's arrival, some one desired to speak to Leo outside the room. A few whispered words were exchanged in the passage, and when Leo reappeared, it was to say to Joan in an undertone—

“Mrs. Brooke wishes to see you.”

Joan shook her head.

“She is downstairs, and will not be denied.” Leo scarcely breathed the utterance audibly, fearing to rouse George, whose calm face showed no sign of consciousness. “Would it not be best for one minute?”

Again Joan shook her head.

Leo hardly knew whether to press the matter further.

“Joan, it is something about your interview—something that she wishes to unsay or undo.”

No response came to this. Joan simply turned her head aside, with an air of resolute refusal. A slight silence followed, broken by George Rutherford. He had not seemed to hear what passed, but now his eyes opened, looking towards Joan, and the faint voice uttered the words—

“Marian Brooke?”

Leo only said, “Yes,” gently, and Joan gave him a most reproachful glance.

George spoke distinctly, “I should like to see Marian Brooke.”

“Father dear, don’t trouble yourself about her; please don’t!” entreated Joan. “Everything will come right by-and-by—indeed it will.”

“Yes, my darling,” and George smiled at her. But again he said, “I should like to see Marian Brooke.”

“I think it might be as well,” Mr. Forest observed, after a very brief low consultation with Leo.

“Oh don’t;” Joan said, with imploring voice and eyes.

Her wish was not regarded. George Rutherford seemed roused and expectant, to a degree which no one would have thought possible ten minutes earlier.

“Bring Marian Brooke here!” he reiterated, and Leo went.

Dulcibel, with reddened eyes and sobbing breath, now came back into the room, taking up her station on the other side of her husband from that occupied by Joan. Dulcibel believed him to be dying, as did Leo. Then Marian entered slowly, and stood at the foot of the bed.

She looked very worn and haggard and sad, but the gray eyes

were full of a nameless peace, something like that which rested upon the countenance of George Rutherford.

He had not seen her since her bright and pretty girlhood. It would not have been surprising if he had failed to detect any likeness. But unexpectedly he held out his hand, and said in his old kind manner—

“Why, Polly Cairns!”

Marian took the wasted hand, and burst into tears.

“No—I am forgetting. Not Polly Cairns now—but—” George hesitated.

“Marian Brooke, sir,” she answered.

“Yes, true. My Joan’s mother.”

A troubled look came over George’s face. He held out his hand again, took Joan’s, and placed in Marian’s.

That was the crucial moment, and none watched with more intense anxiety than Mr. Forest. He was resting

his last faint hope of George Rutherford's life upon this interview.

Joan visibly shuddered, and George sighed. But Marian lifted the little cold hand to her lips, kissed it fervently, and gave it back to George.

"No, sir," she said, very distinctly. "There mustn't be any mistake about that matter, please. Joan is your child now—now and always. I gave her up to you, and I can't take her back."

A strange look came over George Rutherford's face—a look of doubt, of relief, of awakening, of renewed life. His eyes brightened and his voice grew stronger.

"You do not wish—" he said.

"It is not a matter of wishing, sir," she answered, with resolute calmness. "Joan can't be mine, as she would have been if I hadn't given her up. If I had her with me ever so much, that couldn't make her mine. Her heart is yours, and I couldn't be so cruel as to

take her from you—even if I had the right, which I haven’t. You’ve been a true father to Joan, and I do thank you. And she is yours now—yours for always. I pray God he may spare you both long to one another. I’ll ask to see her now and then, and may be one day she’ll learn to love me a little. That’s all I can hope for now, and I’ve none but myself to blame that things are as they are. I’ve no fit home to offer Joan, and I couldn’t make her happy. I’ll only ask to see her once in a while.”

“Not to have her always?” murmured George.

“No, sir.” said Marian firmly. “If you made me the offer now to take her back altogether, I wouldn’t accept the offer, knowing it isn’t really your wish to part with her. It would be only another wrong to you both, and another sin on my part; and I’ve enough on my conscience already. No, sir; Joan is yours.”

George could not speak. Tears filled his eyes, and in his utter weakness a sob broke from him. Then his arm was round Joan, and her dark head lay against his tawny beard, just as on that long-past day when he had first taken the little forsaken one into his loving heart.

“My own little girl,” he whispered.

“You’ll get well now, father,” she said.

At a sign from the doctor Marian passed out of the room, Leo saying, as she went—

“Wait in the dining-room, till one of us can come to you.”

Marian obeyed. She had done her utmost, and something of a reaction followed. Not reaction in the way of resolution, but of strength. None saw her in the next half hour of grief and loneliness, and perhaps it was well. She had a full hour in which to recover herself.

Then a quick step approached, and Joan herself opened the door. Marian had not expected this.

Joan came close, took both her hands, and looked into her face with eyes no longer defiant, only full of soft gratitude.

“Mother!” Joan said.

“My dear!” faltered Marian.

“He has dropped asleep—such a sound, quiet sleep,” said Joan. “And Mr. Forest thinks he will be better when he wakes. Mr. Forest thinks the worst is over now. And he says you will have saved his life! I can never, never thank you enough! Mother, I shall always love you for this!”

Joan’s lips were pressed against Marian’s cheeks.

“Oh, my dear, it’s too much—too much!” sobbed Marian. “I didn’t think I was to have such comfort. It’s more than I deserve.”

* * * *

*

The worst was over at last; not only the worst of this one attack, but the worst of George Rutherford's long ill-health. The tide had reached its lowest ebb, and steady improvement began to set in.

Day by day strength came back to body and mind, as it had never yet come back since the railway accident which made an invalid of the strong and vigorous man.

"I think you have taken out a new lease of life," Mr. Forest said one day. "We shall soon have you almost your old self again, Mr. Rutherford, thank God!"

"Yes, thank God!" echoed George.

"But you must get away for a change soon. Where will you go? Scotland?"

"Or Wales," said George.

"What—your favorite valley? No, not this summer. Some other year,

perhaps. I should like a fresh scene for you now."

George made no objection, and Dulcibel fully concurred in Dr. Forest's decision. Two days later Joan asked Leo—

"Are you going to Scotland with us?"

"I am not sure—yet," said Leo.

"We don't start for a fortnight, so you need not make up your mind at once," said Joan carelessly. For a sudden change of expression in Leo's face made her regret having put the question.

"What do you wish about it yourself, Joan?"

"I? Oh, I don't know. It doesn't make very much difference either way," said Joan, "except that of course we all like to have you—especially father."

Leo spoke rather coldly, after a pause—

"Joan, do you care for any one in the world except uncle?"

"Yes, of course I do," Joan answered rather hurriedly. "What an odd question. I love mother and Nessie, and I am trying to care for my other mother as I ought; she is so good and self-denying. And my uncle Jervis is really nice, too. Of course, I don't love anybody else in the world as I love father."

"And I suppose you never will," said Leo.

"Never," Joan answered decidedly. "Oh no, never! If I didn't know that before his illness, I know it now."

"But, Joan, after all, that is all nonsense," Leo asserted. "Girls often say such things, and it means nothing."

"It means a great deal with me," said Joan. "I will never leave father, Leo, for anybody. After all that I owe to him, how could I? Even if I could wish it, I could not do it. And I never

shall have such a wish—never. I love him much too dearly.”

“That is mere infatuation,” Leo declared. “Daughters leave their own fathers to be married;—every day it happens.”

“Yes, their own fathers! But this is different,” replied Joan. “If father were my own father, things would have come to me as a right which are only a gift. That would make all the difference. Nessie will marry some day, and then father and mother will need me all the more to take care of them.”

Leo did not seem convinced. He began to say something in a low, agitated voice, and Joan only caught two or three words. She would not hear more.

“No, Leo, no! Please stop,” she cried. “Oh, don’t go on! Don’t say it, and make everything uncomfortable. That can never be—never. I can never leave father. My work in life must be

to look after father. He will never be strong, as he used to be, and he does depend on me so. And though I like you very much—very much indeed—it isn't that. It couldn't be. Father is always first with me, and he always will be. And even if I could feel just exactly as you wish, still the thing could not possibly be. You know how you feel about my relations at the farm."

"But out in India, Joan!" entreated Leo.

"You won't spend your whole life in India, and I am not going to cast off my relations. Nothing of that sort can ever be. I am only sorry you did not keep from saying a word. We will forget about it as fast as possible. You are my brother, and that is all. The best thing you can do is to fall in love with dear good little Nessie. But please don't think about me any more, and don't say one word to father. My path in life is quite plainly cut out for me. I

will never leave dear father, by my own choice."

CHAPTER XXX. THE VALLEY ONCE MORE.

"OH no! I couldn't think of it, George. I am quite too old for swinging bridges now. I couldn't, really," said Dulcibel. Two years had gone by, and once more they were in their old quarters—Dulcibel being seated lazily in an arm-chair near the window of the hotel drawing-room, while George and Joan stood in front of her. George Rutherford, though a good deal aged by his long ill-health, now looked fairly strong again; and Joan's warm dark face was rippling over with happiness. Nobody else happened to be present. They had come late in the season this year, and the hotel was nearly empty. The trees

in the hotel grounds showed autumn tints and thinned foliage.

“I couldn’t possibly,” repeated Dulcibel. “You know I always had a horror of that bridge, George, dear. Last time we were here, you made me go over; but I can’t now—I really can’t. My nerves will not stand that sort of thing any longer. You and Joan must go together.”

“But, my dear, what are you going to do with yourself?” asked George.

“I shall just take a little turn presently, or else sit here and work. Besides, I want to write to Nessie.”

For Nessie was no longer with her mother. Men do not often follow such advice as Joan had rashly given to Leo; but in this case it had been followed. Finding Joan hopelessly out of his reach, Leo at length actually contented himself with the gentle and impassive little Nessie. Three months before this Welsh trip the wedding had taken

place, and Leo with his bride was now again in India.

Dulcibel felt the parting greatly, of course; still it had long been her ardent wish that Leo should wed Nessie, and if grieved she was also very much gratified. Her chief consolation was found in writing endless chit-chat letters to Nessie. So soon as one was finished, she started its successor.

And Joan now was the only home-daughter. She loved and exulted in this position. George depended upon her companionship more entirely than ever; and Dulcibel and Joan no longer rubbed and fretted each the other. Dulcibel's ways were perhaps not less teasing than in past years, but Joan was more patient; and there existed also between the two a greater heartiness of affection.

Joan's "other mother" saw her often. George Rutherford took care of this. Twice a year he sent Joan with

Marian for ten days together to some seaside place; and once a week regularly they spent an hour or two in company. Marian neither asked nor expected more.

“Shall we put off the valley till another day?” asked George.

“No, indeed. Why should you?” asked Dulcibel. “I don’t in the least care to go, and you and Joan have set your hearts on it. And it has rained every day since we came, and very likely will rain every day until we go. I suppose it means to keep fine this morning. You must take waterproof wraps. I shall just stay in, and write to Nessie.”

“You are sure you can spare me, mother?” asked Joan.

“Yes, of course. Your father will never be happy till he has been to that place. I can’t think what you are both wasting time for,” responded Dulcibel, rather ungratefully.

Joan did not seem distressed. She gave Dulcibel a kiss, slipped her arm in George Rutherford's, and turned to leave.

“Mother really does like writing to Nessie more than anything else in the world,” she remarked, outside the front door.

“Yes, I believe so. One is always afraid of her being lonely; but she has suffered less acutely from the parting than I feared.”

“Isn’t that mother’s way?” asked Joan. “She always dreads and fears everything, and yet somehow she always gets through trouble better than one expects. And after all, she did wish this very much.”

George Rutherford could not quite attain to his old vigorous speed. He would never be the strong man that he had once been, although more fully restored than could have been expected two years earlier. Very little of the head-weakness remained now. He was

only a decidedly older man, less able to endure than before his illness, and somewhat easily fatigued.

So a longer time was occupied with the walk than would have been three years before, had he gone then at his full speed. And when the tremulous swinging bridge was reached, George seemed glad to lean against a tree for a brief rest before crossing.

“We have come rather too fast, I am afraid,” Joan said, as he drew his handkerchief across his brow.

“No; I shall be all right directly. Take a look at the old surroundings, Joan.”

Joan obeyed, going slowly over, and giving herself up to the enjoyment of wooded heights, and varied autumn tintings. The little river babbled on still with its ceaseless soft chatter, and the old church stood unchanged in the centre. Quick changes of light and shade came from the passing of small cloudlets over the sun.

“It is very lovely, father,” Joan said, when he joined her. “I don’t know any dearer place than this valley, because it is where you first found me.”

“There might be a dearer spot, Joan,” he said, as they passed on slowly.

“What—home, father?”

“No, my dear. I meant the spot where Another found you.”

Joan was silent for a minute or more.

“Do you think he really has found me?” she asked at length.

George looked down into those dark eyes, full of earnest appeal for his decision.

“Yes!” he said.

“I can’t be sure always,” said Joan thoughtfully. “Sometimes—yes, sometimes I do feel sure. Things have never been the same since that dreadful time when you were so ill. I did learn

to pray then. And I think—I think I do love Christ now. But still—”

“But still, temptations come. Is that it?”

“Father, I am afraid I do love you too much still, and I love God too little.”

“He alone can cure that evil, dear.”

“If I knew what to do!” said Joan.

“There is only one thing to be done. Take it all to Jesus.”

Joan gave him one quick smile of response. She could respond now.

“Yes,” George said presently, as if carrying on or answering some thought of his own, “if the illness and trouble of that year brought my Joan to his feet, I can be thankful for the whole.”

“I think it did,” Joan said softly.

They were finding their way to the river brink—the spot where once Dulcibel the bride had dabbled her hands in water, and where twice over

George had read aloud, first to one hearer, and then to three hearers. Joan said smilingly, when this place was reached—

“Trench’s Poems.”

“It seems quite the correct thing now to have Trench with us here,” remarked George smiling too. “But unfortunately I forgot him to-day. My memory is uncertain.”

“Ah, but I am your memory, father!” —and Joan triumphantly held aloft a green volume.

“Well done, Joan!” He took it from her, but gave it back. “No, you shall read something to me for a change. No need for us to run in a groove.”

“I shall turn to my favorite ‘Century of Couplets,’ ” Joan answered.

She seemed, however, to find choice difficult. George watched for some time her fixed gaze at a certain page, and then caught a stealthy glance from eyes soft with unshed tears.

“What is it, my dear?”

“Something I came on here,” said Joan, with the least possible break in her voice. “It is only—only this—

“Some are resigned to go: might we such grace attain,

That we should need our resignation to remain.””

“Well?” George Rutherford said.

“I think this is like you, father. I am afraid you do need your resignation to remain.””

If she expected denial, she was disappointed, for none came.

“And here is another,” added Joan—

“Ill fares the child of heaven who will not entertain,

On earth the stranger’s grief—the exile’s sense of pain.””

“Yes; that is an old favourite of mine. Well, Joan?”

“Of course, it is quite right—and one ought,” murmured Joan. “But I can’t help feeling it rather dreadful that you would be so pleased to leave us.”

“No; you are wrong there. I could never be pleased to leave those I love.”

“Only—to go to—”

“That is another side of the question. I am an exile on earth—and a citizen of heaven. The true exile doesn’t grieve to go home. And no joy could be greater than to meet my Master face to face. But, Joan, that means no possibility of gladness in leaving you. Cannot you understand the existence of joy and sorrow side by side?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Joan said slowly.

“Only—what?” he asked, watching her.

“Father, if you could have seen your own face in that illness, the day

you were at your worst—" Joan said, and came to a pause.

"I had some fair glimpses of the light on the other side, my dear," he said, quietly. "And if the call had come, I could have gone rejoicing. The call did not come,—and I could turn back to wait, rejoicing. Joan, do you believe it was no pain to me at that time to think of parting with my child?"

Joan looked up with sudden comprehension.

"Oh, I know—I know it was," she said.

An hour later as they crossed the moor, one or two sharp showers overtook them; and some fine effects in the way of contrasted brightness and shadow were to be seen. A close phalanx of low black clouds with fringed edges swept over the hills, and following persistently in their wake was one broad belt of sunshine.

“Like life,” George said musingly, as they stood to gaze. “Remember, Joan, if the clouds return after the rain, as return they often do, the sunlight comes after the clouds again. But one must have the commingling. Pure joy and pure sorrow are scarcely known to us in this life.”