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Содержание

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I. MY OWN STORY

CHAPTER I

MY name is Mary Peveril. My father was the incumbent of a proprietary chapel in that populous region which lies between Holborn and the New Road – a space within which there is a great deal of wealth and comfort, and a great deal of penury and pain, but neither grandeur nor abject misery. I like those streets, though I know there is no loveliness in them. I feel that I can breathe better when I come out into the largeness and spacious width of the squares, and I take a pleasure which many people will laugh at in the narrow paved passages – crooked and bent like so many elbows, with their bookstalls and curious little shops. How often have I strayed about them with my father, holding on by his coat-skirts when I was little, by his arm when I grew tall, while he stood and gazed at the books which he could so seldom afford to buy. When he found a cheap one that pleased him, how his face brightened up! While he looked at them I was not often thinking what the thoughts might be in his

mind. What was I thinking of – swinging by the skirts of his coat, or by his arm when I grew a great girl? How can I tell? Thinking how bright the twinkling lights were; how funny life was, so full of people passing whom we never saw again – of paving-stones and shop-windows; and droll with whispering airs that blew round the corners, and always seemed to want to tell you something; and again more lights and more faces and more shop-windows. In winter these passages always felt warm and comfortable, and I had some theory about them which I scarcely remember now – something like the theory of the poor man whom I once heard saying that he went into the streets by night because the gaslights made them so warm. The desolateness of such a forlorn being, seeking warmth in the lighted, streets, did not strike me when I heard that speech; I only felt I understood him, and had frequently been conscious of the same feeling. But I remember very well how once, when I was swinging back a little upon papa's arm, clinging to him, proud of showing that I belonged to him and was old enough to take his arm, yet separate from him, as youth so often is, thinking my own thoughts, living in another world, I all at once caught the illumination on his face as he fell upon a book he wanted which was cheap enough to be bought. To think he should really care about such a trifle – he – papa, the clergyman whom everybody looked up to; that he should look as pleased about it as Ellen our servant did when she got a new dress! I was half humiliated, half sympathetic. Poor papa! What a pity he could not buy a great many books

when he cared so much for them! But yet, I think, there was a little sense of shame on his behalf, and of humiliation, mingled with that more amiable thought; that he should care so much about anything, seemed somehow a derogation from his dignity, a descent on his part into a less lofty place.

We lived in Southampton Street, in the end where there are no shops. We had two very white steps before our front-door, which was the brightest point about us. When anyone asked in that street where the clergyman of St Mark's lived, the house was always pointed out by this: "No. 75, the house with the white steps." I used to think for years and years that they were a natural feature, and had nothing to do with any work of man, or rather, woman. It was a shabby house inside. There were two little kitchens in the basement, two little parlours on the ground-floor, two little bedrooms above that, and on the top storey I think there were three divisions instead of two. One of the little parlours – the back one, which looked out upon a little square yard about the same size – was papa's study. It was not a cheerful room, with that outlook upon four brick walls, and a little square bit of mouldy black soil in which flourished some poor tufts of grass, and the big water-butt in the foreground, where the water was black with soot – when there was any water at all. The room had a writing-table in it, always covered with books and papers, and papa's chair – black haircloth, beginning to wear white at the edges – between the table and the fire, and two other black chairs standing against the opposite wall. It was divided by folding doors

from the parlour, in which we lived. This room was furnished with a haircloth sofa, half-a-dozen chairs, a round table with a close-fitting oilcloth cover, and, thrust up into a corner, an old piano, upon which I practised sometimes, and which on other occasions served as a sideboard. There was a short Venetian blind at the lower part of the window to keep people from seeing in, and a chair in the recess, on which I used to sit and darn papa's stockings and dream. Sometimes I read, but, generally, dreaming was more fun. I made out such nice new lives for myself and papa. Sometimes I would dream that we were quite different people from what we appeared to be – great people, rich and noble, with all kinds of grandeur belonging to us, though no one knew; and how it would be found out all of a sudden, to the confusion of everybody who had ever been uncivil. I used to trace out, as minutely as if I had seen it, every detail of what we were to do. I was Lady Mary in these visions; and if anyone had called me so I should have been, I am sure, more shocked to think that *it* had been prematurely discovered than struck by the unreality of the title. It was not unreal to me. Sometimes it would take other shapes, and my imagination would content itself with the notion of someone dying and leaving us a fortune, and how we would wear mourning and do our very best to be sorry; but the other idea was much the favourite. It was very sweet to me to think that, for all so humble and so unknown as we were, things would appear very different *if people but knew*! The old life comes round me as my thoughts go back to it, the afternoon

sounds in the street – vulgar sounds, but softened by summer air as much as if they had been the sweetest; the drowsy tinkle of the muffin-man's bell, the prolonged cry of "water-cre-e-e-sses!" the sound of children's voices and dogs barking, and distant wheels that always ground out an accompaniment; and myself in the window, poor Mr Peveril the clergyman's daughter, to my own knowledge Lady Mary, and a very great, small person. I wonder which was the real Mary – she or I.

I have heard that in poor mamma's time we were so fine as to have a drawing-room upstairs on the first floor, like Mrs Stephens next door; but that splendour was long, long over, for mamma died soon after I was born, and I was left all alone – a small baby, with papa on my hands to look after. I do not think, however, that I was at any time very sorry for this. I was sorry for her, who died so young, but not for myself; I felt instinctively that, had she been there, always poking between papa and me, I should not have liked it, and that on the whole things were best as they were. The room which had been the drawing-room was papa's bedroom, and I slept in the room behind, over his study. Ellen had the three little places up above all to herself, though one of them was called – I don't know why – the spare room. In this little place we lived, and never asked ourselves whether it was dingy or not. The walls were dark, with papers which had not been renewed so long as I could remember; and the curtains were dark, and always had the look of being dusty, though, thanks to Ellen, they never were so in reality. We had no pictures, except two old prints

from Raphael's cartoons. One was the "Miraculous draught of fishes," and the other "Peter and John at the beautiful gate of the Temple." How I remember those twisted pillars, and how many dreams have they twisted through! But I never admired them, though they were part of my life. I should have liked a landscape better, or some pretty faces like those one sometimes sees in the shop-windows. When the people who went to St Mark's talked of having a lithograph of papa the thought made me wild with excitement; but the lithograph was never done.

It must not be supposed, however, that papa and I lived in that state of ecstatic delight in each other's society which one hears of often in books. There were no great demonstrations between us. I led my own life by the side of his, and he, I suppose, lived his by me, like two parallel lines which never meet whatever you may please to do. I do not know that it occurred to me to think articulately that the happiness of my life depended on him. I did not seek to sit in his study or to be near him while he worked, as I have heard of girls doing. I was quite satisfied to be in the parlour while he was busy on the other side of the closed doors; indeed, until he ceased to be all mine, I accepted papa as calmly as I did the other accessories of my life. When he went out to dinner, which was a very rare occurrence, yet happened sometimes, I would make myself very comfortable with a book over my tea. I was fond of going out with him; but then, he was the only person who ever took me out, through amusing places, where there were shop-windows and crowds of people passing. I had not

been brought up to have my walk regularly every day, like well-educated children. I walked when I could. Sometimes I had an errand to do – something to buy or order, which I did by myself in one of the shops of the neighbourhood; but this was an office I hated, for I was too shy to go into a shop with any pleasure; and sometimes old Mrs Tufnell would send for me to walk in the square, which was fine, but not very amusing. I liked the passages about Holborn with the bookstalls a great deal better. But we did not talk a great deal even in these walks. Sometimes I would be seized with a fit of inquiry, and would pester papa with a torrent of questions; but at other times I fell back into my dreams, and would be making some splendid expedition as Lady Mary all the time, while I hung, always a little behind him, on his arm, leaving him as undisturbed as, generally, he left me. I think of this calm of indifference now, when I look back upon it, with very odd feelings. Is it that one does not care so long as one has those whom one loves all to one's self? It is only, I suppose, when your rights are interfered with that you grow violent about them. I suppose it was the fact that we loved each other – I him, – and he me – that made us happy; but it was so natural to love each other that we thought little about it, and I am afraid it would have surprised me a little in my secret heart if any one had told me that my happiness depended upon papa.

The way in which this tranquil ease of possession was disturbed was a very gentle and gradual one – at least, so I can see now, though at the time it appeared to me most abrupt and

terrible. My idea of my father was that he was old, as a child's ideas generally are; but he was not old. He was about five-and-forty when I was fifteen. He was not tall – and he stooped, which made him look still less so. At fifteen I was as tall as he was. He had a handsome, refined face, with very clear features, and a sort of ivory complexion. His hair was worn off his temples, and there were a great many lines in his face – partly with trouble, partly with work; but his smile was the sweetest smile I ever saw, and he had a way of captivating everybody. I have heard it said since that this power of fascination did not last, and that he grew melancholy and monotonous after the first few times you had seen him; and though I was very angry when I heard this first, I can with an effort believe that it might be true. I suppose it was the same faculty which showed itself at church, where there were always new people coming, who attended closely for a few weeks and then went away. He was like a man who gives you everything he has at once, and then has nothing more for you. At home he was silent, always kind, but never saying much. I scarcely recollect ever to have been scolded by him. Ellen scolded me, and so did old Mrs Tufnell, and even Mrs Stephens next door; but papa only said, "Poor child!" with the air of a compassionate spectator, when I was complained of to him. Our chief conversation was at meals, when he would sometimes talk a little, and tell me of things he had seen or heard; and it was at tea one evening that he first brought forward the name of the other person who was henceforward to stand between us.

No such thought was in his mind then, I am sure; but he was more communicative than usual. He told me that he had seen a young lady on one of his visits, in a very strange place for such a person to be found – in the back parlour of a small grocer's shop which I knew quite well. He told me quite a long story about her – how she was an orphan and had been left destitute, and had been obliged to go back to her mother's family, who had been a governess in her day, and married much above her. Her father, too, was dead, having been of no use whatever in the world or to her, and there was no prospect before her but that of going out to be a governess – a thing which papa seemed to think a great hardship for her. I had been trained to believe that some such place would have to be mine as papa got older and I grew a woman; therefore I was not at all shocked by the suggestion. I said: "Has she heard of any nice situation, papa?" with the quietest matter-of-fact acceptance of his words.

"Heard of a situation! You talk very much at your ease, Mary, – but if you saw this elegant, accomplished, refined girl," said my father. "Poor thing, I cannot bear to think that she should be driven to such a fate."

I did not make any answer. I was surprised. It had never occurred to me that it was "such a fate." Most girls, it seemed to me, who were not great ladies were governesses, both in the little real world with which I was acquainted and in books.

"Poor thing!" he said again. "Poor thing! how I wish there was any possible way of saving her. What a thing it is to be poor!"

"But any situation would be better than staying with the Spicers," I said. "Think, papa – the Spicers! I should not mind being a governess – I suppose I shall be, some day or other – but I should hate living in a parlour behind a shop."

"Well, Mary, I hope you will see her some time, and when you do see her you must be very kind to her," said my father with a sigh; and that night he drew his chair to the fire and tried to talk, which was a thing that took me very much by surprise. But, unfortunately, I had a new book which was very interesting, and instead of responding to this unusual inclination, as I ought to have done, I kept on reading, making pettish and uncertain replies, until he grew tired of the attempt and gave it up, and got a book too, as usual. He sighed a little as he did so, with a sort of disappointed air; and through my reading and my interest in the story somehow I perceived this, and felt guilty and uncomfortable all the rest of the evening. When I had finished my volume I was very conciliatory, and tried all I could to bring him back to the point where he had given it up, but it was of no use. I have always found it exactly so in my experience. If you are too stupid, or too much occupied with yourself, to take just the right moment for explanations, you never can recover the thread which you have allowed to slip through your fingers. Even to this day I often wonder what papa would have said to me that night had I let him speak. I have invented whole conversations, but they never were much satisfaction to me. To think out what perhaps some one might have said is very different from hearing them say it.

I was not at all pleased with myself that evening when I went to bed; but perhaps this was partly because I had finished my novel and it was not satisfactory, and seemed, now it was over, such a poor sort of thing to have preferred to a conversation with papa.

Nothing, however, happened for some time after this to put me on my guard. I went on in my old careless way. If he was out a little more than usual, I paid no attention. All that was quite natural. Of course he had his duties to attend to. He dined at Mrs Tufnell's once during this time, and was very particular about his tie, and about having his coat brushed. "It is quite nice," I said; "it was well brushed on Monday morning before it was put away. Why, papa, I thought you did not like a fuss: how you laughed at me for being so particular about my sash when we went to the party at Mrs Overend's. Shouldn't you like to have a sash too?"

He laughed, but he did not look like laughing; and I remember stopping short in the middle of my tea, and laying down my book to ask myself if anything could be the matter with him. One or two odd people whom I did not know had come to see him of late. Was it possible he could be ill? But no, he ate as usual, and he had looked quite ruddy when he went out. So I took up my novel again, and helped myself to jam, and thought no more of it. I believe the whole business was decided, or the next thing to decided, that night.

I could if I liked have heard a great deal of what was said in the study while I sat at work in the parlour, and this was a thing which Mrs Tufnell and Mrs Stephens had often remarked.

They thought it "not quite nice:" for, to be sure, people might say things to papa as their clergyman which they did not wish to be overheard. But it could not well be helped, for there was no other room where I could sit. I have said too that I could have heard if I liked; but the fact was I did not care, and I never heard. When you are perfectly indifferent and used to everything, and know there is no mystery in it, it is astonishing how little you hear. I had got accustomed to the hum of voices from the study just as I had to the cries in the streets and the muffin-man's bell. Sometimes, I suppose, a word must have caught my ear now and then, but I paid no attention, and heard as if I heard it not: I was thinking of such very different things. One day, however, I did catch a few words which surprised me. It was a summer day. The back-door into the little yard and all the windows everywhere were open. The noises in the street came into the house exactly as if we were living out of doors, but so softened by the warm air and the sunshine that they were pleasant instead of being disagreeable. The day was not hot, but only deliciously, genially warm. We had put up white curtains in the parlour, and the wind blew them softly about, flapping the wooden stretcher in the blind against the window-frame. I was in a muslin dress myself; and I was happy without any reason, not in the least knowing why. I came downstairs singing, as I had a way of doing, and went into the parlour and sat down in the window. I gave up singing when I sat down, partly because it might have disturbed papa, and partly because people stopped to listen as they were passing. I was

running up the breadths of my new frock, a blue print, which was as bright and pretty as the day, and, to tell the truth, did not care in the least what the voices were saying on the other side of the folding doors. I had made noise enough to demonstrate my presence, and, as nothing was ever hid from me, it never came into my head to listen. It was Spicer the grocer's voice, I think, which attracted my ear at last. It was a strange, little, harsh, snappish voice, so unharmonious that it worried one like a dog barking; and by degrees, as he talked and talked, some sort of vague association came into my mind – something which I had half forgotten. What was it I had heard about the Spicers? I could not recollect all at once.

"Governessing ain't paradise," said Spicer, "but it's better perhaps than other things. Marrying a man as is in poor health, and at a troublesome time o' life – and nothing to leave to them as comes after him; that ain't much, Mr Peveril. A woman's best married, I allow; but marriage has consekenses, and when there's no money – "

I did not hear what my father said in reply, and indeed I did not care to hear. I was half annoyed, half amused, by Spicer's queer little barking voice.

"Forty-five, sir? no, it ain't old – but it ain't young neither. I've known many a man carried off at forty-five. Them things have all got to be considered; though for that matter twenty-five would make little difference. The thing is, here's a young woman as has a trade she can make her living by. A man comes in, marries

her right off: they have a child or two in natural course, and then he goes and dies. Nothing more natural or more common. But then you see, Mr Peveril, sir, here's the question: what's to become of her? And that's the question I've got to consider. I've a family myself, and I can't put myself in the way of having to support another man's family; and a woman can't go out and be a governess, it stands to reason, with two or three young uns on her hands."

My father said something here in a very earnest, low, grave voice, which really attracted my curiosity for the first time. Whatever he was saying, he was very serious about it, and his tone, though I could not hear what he said, woke me up. Perhaps he warned Spicer to talk low; but at all events I heard nothing more for some time, except the grumbling and barking of the grocer's voice, in a much subdued tone. They seemed to argue, and Spicer seemed to yield. At last he got up to go away, and then I heard him deliver his final judgment on the matter, whatever it was, standing close to the folding doors.

"You speaks fair, sir. I don't say but what you speaks fair. Granting life and health, it's a fine thing for her, and a honour for us. And taking the other side of the question, as I'm bound to take it, I wouldn't say but the insurance makes a difference. A woman with a thousand pounds and a babby is no worse off than if she hadn't neither – and Missis is better nor Miss in the way of setting up a school or such like. I may say, Mr Peveril, as the insurance makes a great difference. A thousand pound ain't

much for a dependence; and if there was a lot of little uns – but to be sure, in them matters you must go on providence to a certain extent. I'll think it over, sir – and I don't see as I've any call to make objections, if her and you's made up your minds." Then there was a step towards the door, and then Spicer came to a stand-still once more. "First thing," he said, "Mr Peveril, is the insurance. You won't put it off, sir? I've known them as meant it every day o' their lives, and never did it when all was done; and died and left their families without e'er a – "

"It shall be done at once," said my father peremptorily, and almost angrily; and then there was a begging of pardon, and a scraping and shuffling, and Spicer went away. I saw him go out, putting his hat on as he shut the door. I never liked Spicer – of course he was one of the parishioners, and papa could not refuse his advice to him or to any one; but I made a face at him as he went away. I felt quite sure he was the sort of man one sometimes reads of in the newspapers, who put sand in the sugar, and sell bad tea to the poor people, and have light weights. This was in my mind along with a vague, faint curiosity as to what he had been talking about, when to my surprise papa came into the parlour. He came in quickly, with a flush on his face, and the most uneasy, uncomfortable look I ever saw a man have. Was he ashamed of something? – ashamed! he – papa!

"I suppose you have heard all that Spicer has been saying, Mary," he said to me, quite abruptly. He gave me one strange look, and then turned away, and gazed at the Beautiful gate of

the Temple which hung over the mantelpiece as if he had never seen it before.

"Yes," I said; and then it suddenly flashed upon me that Spicer's talk had not been exactly of a kind to be overheard by a girl, and that this was why poor papa looked so embarrassed and uncomfortable. He felt that it was not proper for me. "I heard a little of it," I said instantly, "but I never listen, you know, papa, and I don't know in the least what he was talking about."

Poor papa! how delicate he was; how shocked I should have heard anything I ought not to know – though it was not so dreadful after all, for of course everybody knows that when people are married they have babies. But he did not like to look me in the face; he kept his back to me, and gazed at the twisted pillars.

"Mary," he said, "I have a little explanation to make to you."

"An explanation?" I looked at him over my blue print, wondering what it could be; but it did not seem worth while to stop working, and I threaded my needle and made a knot on my thread while I waited for what he was going to say. Then suddenly my heart began to beat a little fast, and the thought crossed my mind that perhaps my dreams were about to become true, and that he knew all about it as well as I, and was just going to tell me I was Lady Mary, and he Earl of – . I had never been able to choose a satisfactory title, and I could not invent one on the spur of the moment; but instinctively I gave a glance from the window to see whether the beautiful carriage was in sight, coming to take

us to our splendid home.

"Perhaps I ought to have taken you into my confidence before," he said, "for you have been brought up a lonely girl, and ought to feel for people who are lonely. I have been very lonely myself, very desolate, ever since your poor mother died."

Here my heart gave a slight stir, and I felt angry, without knowing exactly why. Lonely? Why, he had always had me!

"When you are older," he went on nervously, "you will feel what a dreadful thing the want of companionship is. You have been a good child, Mary, and done all you could for me. I should not have been able to live without you; but when a man has been used to a companion of – of his own standing, it is a great change to him to fall back upon a child."

I grew angrier and angrier; I could scarcely tell why. A feeling of disappointment, of heart-sinking, of fury, came over me. I had never made much fuss about adoring my father, and so forth; but to find out all at once that he had never been satisfied – never happy —

"Do you mean me?" I said, quite hoarsely, feeling as if he had wronged me, deceived me, done everything that was cruel – but with no clear notion of what was coming even now.

"Whom else could I mean?" he said, quite gently. "You are a dear, good child, but you are only a child."

Oh, how my heart swelled, till I thought it would burst! but I could not say anything. I began to tap my foot on the floor in my anger and mortification, but still I was so stupid I thought of

nothing more.

"Don't look as if you thought I blamed you, Mary," said my father; "on the contrary, you have been a dear little housekeeper. But – do you remember, dear," he went on, with his voice shaking a little, "that I told you once of a young lady who lived with the Spicers?"

It began to dawn upon me now. I turned round upon him, and stared at him. Oh, how pleased I was to see his eyes shrink, and the embarrassed look upon his face! I would not give him any quarter; I felt my own face growing crimson with shame, but I kept looking at him, compelling him to keep opposite to me, preventing him from hiding that blush. Oh, good heavens – an *old* man – a man of forty-five – a clergyman – my father! and there he sat, blushing like some ridiculous boy.

He faltered, but he kept on, not looking at me, "I see you remember," he said, with his voice shaking like a flame in a draught of air. "She has no prospect but to go out as a governess, and I cannot see her do that. I have asked her to – to – share – our home. I have asked her to – to be your – best friend; that is, I mean, I have asked her to marry me, Mary. There! You must have seen that I have been disturbed of late. I am very glad there is no longer this secret between my little girl and me."

And with that he kissed me quite suddenly and trembling, and went off again to the mantel-shelf, and stared up at Peter and John by the Beautiful gate.

For my part I sat quite still, as if the lightning had struck me.

What ought I to do? I did not realise at first what had happened. I was struck dumb. I knew that I ought to do or say something, and I could not tell what. My lips stuck together – I could not now even open my mouth; and there he stood waiting. I suppose if I had possessed my wits at that moment I would have gone and kissed him or something. Even, I suppose, if I had stormed at him it would have been less idiotic – but I could say nothing; I was bewildered. I sat staring into the air with my mouth open, over my blue print.

At last he made an impatient movement, and I think said something to me, which roused me out of my stupefaction. Then – I do not know what impulse it was that moved me – I asked all at once, frightened, feeling I ought to say something, "What is her name, papa?"

"Mary Martindale," he said.

CHAPTER II

I REMEMBER quite distinctly how people talked. They did not think I observed or listened, for I had always been a dreamy sort of girl, and never had attended much to what was said about me. At least so everybody thought. They said I had always to be shaken or pulled when anything was wanted of me, to make me listen – which is true enough, I believe; but nevertheless I was not half so absent as people thought at any time, and heard a great deal that I was not supposed to hear. And now my senses were all shaken up and startled into being. How well I recollect hearing old Mrs Tufnell and Mrs Stephens talking in the quiet front drawing-room in the Square, while I was in the little room behind, taking no notice, as they thought. They had given me a book and got rid of me, and though they all pretended to deplore my dreamy ways, I think on the whole it was rather a relief to get rid of a quick, inquisitive, fifteen-year-old girl, and to be able to talk in peace. It was twilight of the summer evening and we had taken tea, and the two ladies were seated at one of the windows looking out upon the Square. The windows had long, full, white curtains, hanging and fluttering from the roof to the carpet. They were seated against that soft white background in their black silk dresses, for Mrs Tufnell was old, and Mrs Stephens was a widow and always wore black. It was like a picture: and I, not being so happy as I used to be, sat with my book and read and listened

both together. You may think this is nonsense; but I could do it. I see them now approaching their caps to each other, with little nods and shakes of their heads and the white curtains fluttering softly behind them. Mrs Tufnell was a great patroness of papa's, and always went to St Mark's regularly, and Mrs Stephens was our very nearest neighbour, living next door.

"I hope it will turn out the best thing that could happen for *her*," said Mrs Tufnell, nodding her head at me. They would not say any more lest they should attract my attention. "She has been greatly neglected, and left alone a great deal too much, – and I hear *she* is accomplished. Dear, dear, who would have thought that he, of all men in the world, would have taken such a step."

"I don't quite see that," said Mrs Stephens; "he is a young man still, and nobody could suppose he would always be contented with his child's company: besides, she is so cool and indifferent, as if she never thought it possible anything could happen: and I am sure she never did anything to make herself necessary or agreeable – "

"Poor child!"

"You may say 'poor child!' but yet I blame her. A girl of fifteen is a woman to all intents and purposes. She ought to have seen that there was a great deal in her power by way of making him comfortable and herself pleasant. It's rather hard to say the plain downright truth about it, you know, he being a clergyman and all that. Of course, when there is a young family one can say it is for their sake; but in this case there's no possible excuse – he

only wanted a wife, that's all. I don't blame him; but it's a coming down – it's a disturbance of one's ideal – "

"I don't know much about ideals," said Mrs Tufnell; "what surprises me is, if the man wanted to marry, why he didn't marry long ago, when the child was young and he had an excellent excuse. As for being a clergyman, that's neither here nor there. Clergymen are always marrying men, and it's no sin to marry."

"It disturbs one's ideal," said Mrs Stephens; and, though Mrs Tufnell shrugged her shoulders, I, sitting behind over my book, agreed with her. Oh the inward humiliation with which one sees one's father in love! – I suppose it would be still worse to see one's mother, but then, I never had a mother. I blushed for him a great deal more than he blushed for himself, and he did blush for himself too. If he was happy, it was a very uneasy, disturbed sort of happiness. He took me to see her – to Spicer's; and he went often himself and sat in the parlour behind the shop, and suffered, I am sure, as much as ever a man who is having his own way could suffer. Mrs Tufnell, who was a thoroughly kind old lady, at length came to his aid, and invited Miss Martindale to stay with her the rest of the time, and to be married from her house, which was a thing which even I was grateful for. And the night before the wedding-day the old lady kissed me and said, "Things will turn out better than you suppose, dear. It is hard upon you, but things will turn out better than you suppose."

I am not sure that this is ever a very effectual kind of comfort, but to me it was exasperating. Had I been told that things would

turn out worse than I supposed, I should have liked it. It seemed to me that nothing could be half bad enough for this overturn of all plans and thoughts and life. For you must recollect that it was my life that was chiefly to be overturned. Papa liked it, I supposed, and it was his own doing – but the change was not so great to him as to me. All the little offices of authority I used to have were taken from me – my keys, which I was proud of keeping – my bills and tradesmen's books, which I had summed up since ever I can remember. I was turned out of my room, and sent upstairs to the spare room beside Ellen. In the parlour I was never alone any more, and not even my favourite corner was mine any longer. I had no more walks with papa, swinging back from his arm. She had his arm now. She made the tea, and even darned his stockings. I was nothing in the house, and she everything. If you suppose that a girl bears this sort of dethronement easily, I am here to witness to the contrary. I did not take it easily; but the thing that went to my heart most was, I think, that she was called Mary, like me. For the first few days when I heard papa call Mary I used to run to him and find her before me, and get sent away, sometimes hastily (one time I ran in and found them sitting together, he with his arm round her waist. I wonder he was not ashamed of himself, at his age!); and another time with a joke which made me furious: "It was my other Mary I wanted," he said, looking as vain and foolish as – as – . I never saw anybody look so foolish. *My* father! It humbled me to the very ground. And then I took to never answering to the name at all, which

sometimes made papa angry when it was really me he wanted. I soon came to know very well which of us he meant by the sound of his voice, but I never let him know that I did so. His voice grew soft and round as if he were singing when he called her. When he called me, it was just, I suppose, as it always had been; but I had learned the other something now, the different accentuation, and I resented the want of it, though I knew that it never had belonged to me.

All this time I have not spoken of her, though she was the cause of all. When I saw her first, in the grocer's back shop, working at frocks for the little Spicers, I could not believe my eyes. Though I had already begun to hate her as supplanting me with my father, I could not but acknowledge how very strange it was to see her there. She had on a very plain black alpaca dress, and she sat in the back parlour, amid all that smell of hams and cheese, with a sewing-machine before her; and yet she looked like a princess. She was tall and very slight, like a flower, and her head bowed a little on its stem like the head of a lily. She was pale, with dark eyes and dark hair. I believe she was very handsome – not pretty, but very handsome, almost beautiful, I have heard papa say. I allow this, to be honest, though I cannot say I ever saw it. She had a pathetic look in her eyes which sometimes felt as if it might go to one's heart. But, fortunately, she always looked happy when I saw her – absurdly happy, just as my poor foolish father did – and so I never was tempted to sympathise with her. I do not understand how anybody but an

angel could sympathise with another person who was very happy and comfortable while she (or he) was in trouble. This was our situation now. She had driven me out of everything, and she was pleased; but I was cross from morning till night, and miserable, feeling that I scarcely minded whether I lived or died. Her smiles seemed to insult me when we sat at table together. She looked so much at her ease; she talked so calmly, she even laughed and joked, and sometimes said such merry, witty things, that it was all I could do to keep from laughing too. It is painful to be tempted to laugh when you are very much injured and in a bad temper. Reading was forbidden now at meals, and neither papa nor I ever ventured to prop up a book beside us while we ate. I suppose it was a bad custom; yet my very heart revolted at the idea of changing anything because she wished it. And then she tried to be "of use" to me, as people said. She made me practise every day. She gave me books to read, getting them from the library, and taking a great deal of trouble. She tried to make me talk French with her; but to talk is a thing one cannot be compelled to do, and I always had it in my power to balk that endeavour by answering *Oui* or *Non* to all her questions. But the worst of it all was that I had no power to affect either her or papa, whatever I might do to make myself disagreeable. I suppose they were too happy to mind. When I was sulky, it was only myself I made miserable, and there is very little satisfaction in that.

I cannot but say, however, looking back, that she was kind to me, in her way. She was always good-natured, and put up with me

and tried to make me talk. She was kind: but *they* were not kind. As soon as my father and she got together they forgot everything. They sat and talked together, forgetting my very existence. They went out walking together. Sometimes even he would kiss her, without minding that I was there; and all this filled me with contempt for his weakness. I could not support such nonsense – at his age, too! I remember one day rushing to Mrs Stephens' to get rid of them and their happiness. She was well off, and I don't really know why she lived in such a street as ours. She kept two servants all for herself, and had a nice drawing-room on the first-floor very beautifully furnished, as I then thought, where she sat and saw all that was going on. Without Mrs Stephens I think I should have died. I used to rush to her when I could bear it no longer.

"What is the matter, Mary?" she would say, looking up from her Berlin work. She had a daughter who was married – and she was always working chairs for her, and footstools, and I don't know what.

"Nothing," said I, sitting down on the stool by her wool-basket and turning over the pretty colours; and then, after I had been silent for a minute, I said, "They have gone out for a walk."

"It is very natural, my dear; you must not be jealous. It might be a question, you know, whether you liked your papa to marry; but now that he is married, it is his duty to be attentive to his wife."

"He had me before he had a wife," cried I; "why should he

love her better than me? Why should he be so much happier with her than with me? He has always something to say to her: he is always smiling and pleasant. Sometimes with me he will be a whole day and never say a word. Why should he be more happy with her than with me?"

Mrs Stephens laughed. "I can't tell you how it is, Mary, but so it is," she said; "and by and by, when you are older, you will have somebody whom you will be happier with than you ever were with your papa. That is the best of being young. When my Sophy married, it was very hard upon me to see her happier with her husband than she had been with her mother, and to know that all that sort of thing was over for me, and that I must be content with my worsted-work. But you will have a happiness of your own by and by, when you are older; so you must not grudge it so much to your poor papa. I think he is looking pale. I thought he coughed a great deal on Sunday. Is she doing anything for that cough of his, do you know?"

"I never noticed that he had a cough."

"Well, I hope *she* does," said Mrs Stephens, with a strange look, as if she meant something. "Your papa never was strong. He has not health to be going out of nights, and to all those concerts and things. She ought to look after his cough, Mary. If she does not, it will be she who will suffer the most."

I did not in the least understand what this meant; I had never remarked papa's cough. Yes, to be sure, he always had a little cough – nothing to speak of. I had been used to it all my life,

and it was not any worse than usual – it was nothing. I told Mrs Stephens so, and then we talked of other things.

What a long year that was! When the wedding-day came round again they had a party, and were quite gay. It was a very odd thing to see a party in our house; but, though I would not have owned this for the world, I almost think I half enjoyed it. I had got used to papa's foolish happiness, and to Mrs Peveril's ways. By mere use and wont I had got more indifferent; and then there began to be some talk of getting a situation for me as a governess. Papa did not like the idea, but I myself pressed it on, with a feeling that something new would be pleasant. I took most of my ideas of life from novels; and if you will think of it, young ladies who are governesses in novels, generally come to promotion in the end, though they may have to suffer a great deal first. I did not much mind the suffering. Whatever it may be that makes one superior to other people, one can bear it. I made up my mind to a great deal of trouble, and even persecution, and all kinds of annoyances, feeling that all this would come to something in the end. All my dreams about being Lady Mary, and a great personage, had been dispersed by my father's marriage. But now I began to dream in another way; and by degrees the old nonsense would steal back. I used to sit with a book in my hand, and see myself working in a schoolroom with the children; and then some one would come to the door, and I should be called to a beautiful drawing-room, and the lady of the house would take me in her arms and kiss me, and say, "Why did not you tell me

who you really were!" and there would be a lawyer in black who had come with the news. All this I am sure is intensely silly, but so was I at the time; and that is exactly how my mind used to go on. Sometimes a gentleman would come into it, who would be intensely respectful and reverential, and whom I would always refuse, saying, "No; I will allow no one to descend from their proper rank for me!" until that glorious moment came when I was found out to be as elevated in rank as in principles. Oh, how absurd it all was! and how I liked it! and what a refuge to me was that secret world which no one ever entered but myself, and yet where so many delightful people lived whom I knew by their names, and could talk to for hours together! Sitting there under Mrs Peveril's very nose, I would have long argumentations with my lover, and he would kiss my hand, and lay himself at my feet, and tell me that he cared for no one in the world but me; and the scene of the discovery was enacted over and over again while papa was talking of parish matters, quite unaware that by some mysterious imbroglio of affairs he was really the Earl of – So and So – (I never could hit upon a sufficiently pretty name). Thus, instead of weeping over my hard fate and thinking it dreadful to have to go out as a governess, I looked forward to it, feeling that somehow the discovery of the true state of affairs concerning us was involved in it, and that, without that probation, Fate would certainly never restore me to my due and native eminence in the world.

But, however, I must come back to the night of the

anniversary, and to our party. I had on a pretty new white frock – my first long one: and I half, or more than half, enjoyed myself. Everybody was very kind to me, everybody said I was looking well; and Mrs Tufnell and Mrs Stephens petted me a good deal behind backs, and said, "poor child!" And then papa's curate, who was one of the guests, kept following me about and trying to talk to me; whenever I looked up I met his eyes. I did not admire him in the least, but it amused me very much, and pleased me, to see that he admired me. When I wanted anything he rushed to get it for me. It was very odd, but not at all disagreeable, and gave me a comfortable feeling about myself. When the people went away, papa stood a long time in the hall between the open doors, saying good-night to everybody. He went back into the parlour after they were all gone; he went up to the fireplace, I don't know why, and stood there for a moment as if there had been a fire in the grate. Then he called "Mary!" I might have known it was not me he wanted. He held out his hand without turning round. "I never thought I could be happier than I was this day last year," he said, "and yet I am happier to-night. What a delightful year you have given me, my darling – Oh, is it you? What did you mean by not telling me it was you, when you must have perceived that I thought I was talking to my wife?"

"There was no time to tell you," I said. It gave me a pang I can scarcely describe when he thrust my hand away which I had held out to him. He was ashamed; he sat down suddenly in the big chair, and then all at once a fit of coughing came on, such a

fit of coughing as I never saw before. It frightened me; and he looked so pale, and with such circles round his eyes! When he could speak he said, hurriedly, panting for his breath, "Be sure you do not tell her of this – ." That was all he thought of. It did not matter for me.

But, as it happened, it was not long possible to keep it from *her*. When I look back upon that evening, with its little follies, and the laughter, and the curate, and my new dress! O, how little one knows! That very night papa was taken ill. He had caught cold in the draught as he shook hands with the people. It was congestion of the lungs, and from the first the doctor looked very serious. The house changed in that night. The study and the parlour and the whole place turned into a vestibule to the sick room, which was the centre of everything. The very atmosphere was darkened; the sun did not seem to shine; the sounds outside came to us dulled and heavy. I was not allowed to be very much in the room. She took her place there and never left him, day or night; and if I were to spend pages in describing it I could not give you any idea of my dreariness, left alone down below, not allowed to help him or be near him while my father lay between living and dying. I could not do anything. I tried to read, but I could not read. To take up a novel, which was the only thing I could possibly have given my attention to, would have seemed like profanation at such a time. It would have been worse than reading a novel on Sunday, which I had always been brought up to think very wicked; and as for my dreams, they were worse

even than the novels. I dared not carry them on while papa was so ill. I felt that if I allowed my thoughts to float away on such useless currents, I never could expect God to listen to my prayers. For this reason I made a dreadful effort to think "as one ought to think," to think of religious things always and all day long – and this was very difficult; but I made the effort, because I thought God was more likely to listen to me if I showed that I wanted to do well.

But, oh the dreary days and the dreary nights! The three last nights I sat up in my dressing-gown, and dozed drearily and woke still more drearily, after dreaming the strangest dreams. Sometimes I thought it was the wedding-day again, and he was standing with her hand on his arm; sometimes it was the anniversary, and he was saying how happy he was; sometimes it was a funeral. I dreamed always about him, and always in different aspects. One morning I woke up suddenly and found Ellen standing by me in the grey dawning. She did not say anything; the tears were running down her face. But I got up and followed her quite silent, knowing what it was.

He died, after a week's illness, in the morning, leaving us a whole horrible, light, bright day to get through with what patience we could; and then there was a dreary interval of silence, and he was carried away from us for ever and ever; and she and I, two creatures of different minds as ever were born, with but this one link of union between us, were left in the house alone.

CHAPTER III

SHE and I alone in the house! I do not think that I could express our desolation more fully were I to write a whole book. He who had brought us together was gone. The link between us was broken – we were two strangers, rather hostile to each other than otherwise. No pretence of love had ever existed between us. She had never had any occasion to be jealous of me; but she had known and must have felt that I was jealous of her, and grudged her position, her happiness, her very name. She knew this, and it had not mattered to her so long as he was alive; but now that he was gone, now that she and I, bearing the same name, supposed to belong to each other, were left within our dismal house alone —

We went together to the funeral. I was too much absorbed in my own feelings, I believe, to think of her; and yet I noticed everything, as people do when they are deeply excited. She walked by herself, and so did I. There was no one to support either of us, and we did not cling to each other. The churchwardens were there, and Spicer the grocer, to my annoyance. When I saw him all the conversation which I had once overheard came to my mind. Even as I stood by my father's grave it came back to me. I understood it only partially, but it seemed to me as if the time had come on which he calculated, and which he had spoken of. I do not think it had ever recurred

to me till that moment. She would be better off with a thousand pounds than with nothing. A thousand pounds – and – what had he said? I thought my heart had been too faint to feel at all, and yet it began to quicken now with excitement. I looked at her as she walked before me. What was to become of her? What was to become of me? But I did not think of myself.

When we got back to the house Spicer came in and the churchwardens with him; they came into the parlour. When I was going away Mr Turnham, who was one of them, called me back. "Miss Mary," he said, "wait a little. It is hard upon you, but there is some business to be settled. Pray, come back."

I went, of course. She had dropped into the chair my father used to sit in. He had given it up to her when they were married, but now death had unmarried them, and I could not bear to see her there. Spicer had gone to sit by her; they were at one side of the room, Mr Turnham and I at the other, as if we were opposite sides. The other churchwarden had shaken hands with us all and gone away.

"In the present melancholy circumstances it is our duty," said Mr Turnham, "to inquire into our late dear friend's monetary arrangements; there must have been some settlement or other – some explanation at least, as he married so short a time ago."

Then Spicer cleared his throat, and edged still more on to the edge of his chair. Oh, heaven knows. I was as miserable as a girl could be – but yet I noticed all this as if I did not care.

"There was no settlement," he said, "reason good, there wasn't

nothing to settle as was worth the while; but being Mrs Peveril's only relation, and responsible like, he spoke very clear and honourable about his means to me. 'I ain't got no money, Mr Spicer,' he said, 'but I've insured my life for my daughter, and I'll do as much for her. They'll have a thousand pounds apiece, and that's better than nothing,' he said; 'it will get them into some snug little way of business or something.' He was a sensible man, Mr Peveril, and spoke up handsome when he saw as nothing was exacted of him. I don't know what office it's in, but I believe as what he said must be true."

"Perhaps if we were to adjourn into the study, and if one of the ladies would get the keys, we might look in his desk if there was a will," said Mr Turnham. "I am very sorry that our late lamented friend had so short an illness, and therefore was unable to say anything as to what he wished."

"Stop, please," Mrs Peveril said all at once. "Stop: neither of us is able to give you any help to-day; and afterwards we will try to manage for ourselves. We thank you very much, but it is best to leave us to ourselves. I speak for Mary too."

"But, my dear Mrs Peveril, you will want some one to manage for you; it is painful, I know, but it is best to do it at once; you will want some one to manage – "

"I do not see the necessity," she said. She was dreadfully pale; I never saw any one so pale; and it went to my heart to be obliged to side with her, and acquiesce in what she said; but I could not help it, I was obliged to give in. She spoke for me too.

"As long as there's me, you may make your mind easy," said Spicer. "A relation; and on the premises, so to speak. I'll do for 'em all as is necessary; you may make your mind quite easy, Mr Turnham – you trust to me."

Then she got up; her head drooped in her great heavy black bonnet and veil. She was not like a lily now, in all that crape; but I could not keep my eyes from her. She was not afraid of these men, as I was. She held out her hand first to the one, then to the other. "Good-bye," she said. "We thank you very much for taking so much interest, but we would like to be alone to-day. Good-bye."

Mr Turnham got up not quite pleased, but he shook hands with her and then with me, and said "Good-bye and God bless you" to us both. "If you want me, you know where I am to be found," he said, with a little look of offence. Spicer stayed behind him, as if he belonged to us.

"I agree with you," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "Them as is strangers has no business with your affairs. Trust 'em to me, my dear; trust 'em to me. When your money's safe in a good snug little business you won't be so badly off; at least it's always something to fall back upon; – don't you be downhearted, my dear. I don't see as you will be so badly off."

"Good-bye, Mr Spicer," she said. She pushed past him and left the room with an impatience which I understood. He and I were left standing together, looking at each other. Nobody considered me much. It was the wife who was thought of – not the daughter.

He shook his head as he looked after her.

"Bless us all! bless us all!" he said. "That's what comes of turning a woman's head. Miss Mary, I ain't going to forsake you, though she's far from civil. I'll stand by you, never fear. If the money's well invested you'll both get something 'andsome. Nothing pays like business; and as there ain't no babby – which was what I always feared – "

"I don't want to talk about Mrs Peveril," I said.

"Oh, you don't want to talk about her! no more do I. She's very flighty and hoity-toighty. I remember when she was very glad to get a corner at my table. She thinks she's set up now, with her thousand pounds. It's a blessing as there's no family. Miss Mary, I'll take your instructions next time as I comes if you'll put yourself in my hands. I've come to think on you as a relation too; but bless you, my dear, I know as you can't be cheerful with visitors not just the first day. Don't stand upon no ceremony with me."

He wanted me to leave him, I thought, that he might examine everything, and perhaps, get at poor papa's papers; but I would not do that. I stayed, though my heart was bursting, until he went away. What an afternoon that was! it was summer, but it rained all day. It rained and rained into the smoky street, and upon papa's grave, which I seemed to see before me wet and cold and sodden, with little pools of water about. How heartless it seemed, how terrible, to have come into shelter ourselves and to have left him there alone in the wet, and the cold, and the misery! If one

could but have gone back there and sat down by him and got one's death, it would have been some consolation. I went up to my room and sat there drearily, watching the drops that chased each other down the window panes. It was so wet that the street was quite silent outside, nobody coming or going, except the milkman with his pails making a clank at every area. There were no cries in the street, no sound of children playing, nothing but the rain pattering, pattering, upon the roofs and the pavement, and in every little hollow on both. The house, too, was perfectly still; there was no dinner, nothing to break the long monotony. Ellen came up in her new black gown, with tears on her cheeks, to bring me a glass of wine and a sandwich. I could not eat, but I drank the wine. "Oh, Miss Mary," said Ellen, "won't you go to her now? There's only you two. It ain't a time, Miss, oh, it ain't a time to think on things as may have been unpleasant. And she's a taking on so, shut up in that room, as I think she'll die."

Why should she die any more than me? Why should she be more pitied than I was? I had lost as much, more than she had. She had known him but a short time, not two years; but he had been mine all my life. I turned my back upon Ellen's appeal, and she went away crying, shaking her head and saying I was unkind, I was without feeling. Oh, was I without feeling? How my head ached, how my heart swelled, how the sobs rose into my throat; I should have been glad could I have felt that it was likely I should die.

"Will you go down to tea, Miss Mary," Ellen said, coming

back as the night began to fall. I was weary, weary of sitting and crying by myself; any change looked as if it must be better. I was cold and faint and miserable; and then there was in my mind a sort of curiosity to see how she looked, and if she would say anything – even to know what were to be the relations between us now. I went down accordingly, down to the dark little parlour which, during all papa's illness, I had lived in alone. She was there, scarcely visible in the dark, crouching over a little fire which Ellen had lighted. It was very well-meant on Ellen's part, but the wood was damp, and the coals black, and I think it made the place look almost more wretched. *She* sat holding out her thin hands to it. The tea was on the table, and after I went in Ellen brought the candles. We did not say anything to each other. After a while she gave me some tea and I took it. She seemed to try to speak two or three times. I waited for her to begin. I would not say a word; and we had been thus for a long time mournfully seated together before she at last broke the silence. "Mary," she said, and then paused. I suppose it was because I was younger than she that I had more command of myself, and felt able to observe every little movement she made and every tone. I was so curious about her – anxious, I could not tell why, as to what she would do and say.

"Mary," she repeated, "we have never been very good friends, you and I; I don't know why this has been. I have not wished it – but we have not been very good friends."

"No."

"No; that is all you say? Could we not do any better now? When I came here first, I did not think I was doing you any wrong. I did not mean it as a wrong to you. Now we are two left alone in the world. I have no one, and you have no one. Could we not do any better! Mary, I think it would please him, perhaps, if we tried to be friends."

My heart was quite full. I could have thrown myself upon her, and kissed her. I could have killed her. I did not know what to do.

"We have never been enemies," I said.

"No. But friends – that is different. There never were two so lonely. If we stayed together we might get to be fond of each other, Mary; we might keep together out of the cold world. Two together are stronger than one alone. You don't know how cold the world is, you are so young. If we were to keep together we might stay – at home."

Some evil spirit moved me, I cannot tell how; it seemed to me that I had found her out, that it was this she wanted. I got up from my chair flaming with the momentary hot passion of grief. "If there is any money for me, and if you want that, you can have it," I cried, and tried to go away.

She gave a little moaning cry, as if I had struck her. "Oh, Mary, Mary!" she cried, with a wailing voice more of sorrow than of indignation; and then she put out her hand and caught my dress. I could not have got away if I had wished, and I did not wish it, for I was devoured by curiosity about what she would do and say. This curiosity was the beginning of interest, though

I did not know it; it fascinated me to her. She caught my dress and drew me closer. She put her other hand on mine, and drew me down to her, so that my face approached hers. She put up her white cheek, her eyes all hollowed out with crying, to mine: "Mary," she said, in a heartrending tone, "do not go away from me. I have nobody but you in the world." Then she paused. "I am going to have a baby," she said all at once, with a low, sharp cry.

I was confounded. I do not know what I said or did. Shame, wonder, pity, emotion – all mingled in me. I was very young, younger in heart than I was in years; and to have such a thing told to me overwhelmed me with shame and awe. It was so wonderful, so mysterious, so terrible. I dropped on my knees beside her, and covered my face with my hands, and cried. I could not resist any longer, or shut myself up. We cried together, clinging to each other, weeping over our secret. *He* had not known. At the last, when she was aware herself, she would not tell him to add to his pains. "He will know in heaven, Mary," she said, winding her arms round me, weeping on my shoulder, shaking me, frail support as I was, with her sobs. This was how the other Mary and I became one. We were not without comfort as we crept upstairs, with our pale faces. She went with me to my room; she would not let me go. I had to hold her hand even when we went to sleep. "Do not leave me, Mary; stay with me, Mary," she moaned, whenever I stirred. And we slept by snatches, in our weariness; slept and woke to sob, and then slept again.

CHAPTER IV

THIS union, following so close upon our complete severance from each other, astonished everybody. We frightened Ellen. When she came to call me next morning, and saw the other sleeping by me, she thought it was witchcraft; but I did not mind that I rose, and dressed very quietly, not to wake *her*. She was sleeping deeply at last, the sleep of exhaustion. During all papa's illness she had not rested at all, and at last sorrow and watching had worn her out. But I need not go over at length everything that happened. We told kind Mrs Tufnell and Mrs Stephens, our nearest neighbours; and I believe they told it to many in the parish; but Mary and I neither knew nor heard what went on out of our house. I had got to call her Mary, as he did; I liked it now – it no longer seemed to interfere with me. I thought my voice sounded round and soft like his when I said her name: Mary. It is a pleasant name to say, though it is my own. I got to admire it, being hers – I, who had hated her for being so called. But all that was changed now.

I do not quite know how our business was settled, for I know nothing about business. This I know, that she managed it all herself, as she had said; she would not let Spicer have anything to do with it. She wrote about the money to an old friend of papa's, and got it invested and all settled. Half was for her and half for me. It brought us in about £85 a year. We settled to let the

first floor, two rooms furnished as a sitting-room and bed-room, which would pay our rent; and we got three or four little pupils, who came every day, and whom we taught. Everything was very closely calculated, but we decided that we could manage it. We had never been used to be rich, neither one nor the other: and though when all was well I had dreamed of going away among strangers, yet now I could not help chiming in with that desperate desire of hers to avoid separation and remain together. She used to tell me stories of how she had been when she was a governess. How she had lived upstairs in a schoolroom alone in the midst of a great houseful of people; how when she came downstairs she was in the society without belonging to it; and how when any one in the family was kind to her they got into trouble. What she said was quite vague, but it was not comfortable; and by degrees my dreams and ideas were modified by her experience. But I could not be cured of my follies all in a moment, even by grief. After a while I began to dream again; and now my dreams were of my high estate being discovered somehow when I was seated lonely in that schoolroom, trying to get through the weary evening. I used to make a picture to myself of how the lady of the house would come penitent and ashamed, and make a hundred apologies; and how I would say to her, that though her other governesses might not turn out to be Lady Marys, yet did not she think it would be best to be kind and make friends of them? Lady Mary! I clung to my absurdity, though I began to be old enough to see how ridiculous it was. How could I ever turn out to

be anybody now – now that papa was gone? But when a girl is but sixteen there are often a great many follies in her head which she would be deeply ashamed of if any one knew them, but which please her in secret as she dreams over them.

My life was altogether changed by papa's death. It is dreadful to say so, but it was not changed for the worse. Perhaps I had been happier in the old days before Mary was ever heard of, when he and I used to sit together, not talking much, and walk together, thinking our own thoughts – together yet without much intercourse. I had been quite content then, having enough to amuse me in my own fancies, as he, I supposed, had in his. But now I began to be able to understand why he had wearied for real companionship, now that I knew what real companionship was. We lived together, Mary and I, in a different way. We talked over everything together; the smallest matter that occurred, we discussed it, she and I. She had the art of working everything that happened, into our life, so that the smallest incident was of importance. Even in those very first days, though her heart was broken, she soothed me. "Mary," she said, with her lips trembling, "we cannot be always crying; we must think of something else whenever we can; we must *try* to think of other things. God help us; we must live, we cannot die." And then she would break down; and then dry her eyes, and talk of something, of anything. When we got our little pupils, that was a relief. She went into her work with all her heart. Her attention never seemed to wander from the business, as mine constantly did. We

had four little girls; they came for two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon. When they went away we had our walk. In the evening we did our needlework, and she made me read aloud, or sometimes play, and she taught me to sing. We used to stop and cry at every second bar when we began, but by degrees that hysterical feeling passed off. I was never away from her. I had constant companionship, communion, – talk that kept me interested and even amused. I got to be – I am almost ashamed to confess it – happier than I had been for a long time, perhaps than I had ever been in my life.

We had lived like this for about three months, and had got used to it, when something came to make a little change. Mary and I rarely spoke of our secret. It seemed to be my secret as well as hers, and I tried all I could to take care of her, with a secret awe which I never expressed. I could not have spoken of it; I should have been ashamed; but the mysterious sense of what was coming was always in my mind. The needlework which we used to do in the evenings filled me with strange feelings. I never dared ask what this or that was for. I was afraid and abashed at the very sight of the little things when they happened to be spread out and showed their form. It was making them which made me a good needlewoman: perhaps you will think that is of no great importance in these days of sewing-machines; but oh, to have let a sewing-machine, or even a stranger's hand touch those dearest little scraps of linen and muslin! Nothing but the finest work, the daintiest little stitches, would do for them. I used

to kiss them sometimes in my awe, but I would not have asked questions for the world. This is a digression, however; for what I was going to say had nothing to do either with our work or our secret. All this time we had not let our first floor – and it was with great satisfaction in her looks that Mrs Stephens came in one day and told us that she had heard of a lodger for us. "He is a gentleman, my dears," she said, "*quite* a gentleman, and therefore you may be sure he will give no trouble that he can help. He is an engineer, and has something to do, I believe, about the new railway; otherwise he lives at home somewhere about Hyde Park, and moves in the very best society. When I say an 'engineer,' I mean a 'civil' one, you know, which is, I am told, quite the profession of a gentleman. He will want the rooms for six months, or perhaps more. His name is Durham; he is cousin to the Pophams, great friends of mine, and if the lodgings suit him he would like to come in at once."

Mary had given a little start, I could not tell why. There seemed no reason for it. Her work had fallen out of her hands; but she picked it up again and went on. "His name is – What did you say, Mrs Stephens? – a civil engineer?"

"Yes, my love, a civil engineer – Durham, his name is. He will come with me to-morrow, if you are agreeable, to see the rooms."

Mary made a visible pause. She looked at me as if she were consulting me; it was a curious, appealing sort of look. I looked back at her, but I could not understand her. What did I know

about Mr Durham, the civil engineer? Mrs Stephens was not so observant as I was, and probably she never noticed this look. And then Mary said, "Very well. If they suit him, we ought to be very thankful. I should have preferred a lady – "

"My dear, a lady is a great deal more at home than a man, and gives more trouble," said Mrs Stephens; "very different from a man who is out all day. And then, probably he will dine almost always at his West-end home."

The idea was funny, and I laughed. The notion of the West-end home amused me; but I could not help observing that Mary, who was always ready to sympathise with me, did not smile. Her head was bent over her work. She did not even say anything more on the subject, but let Mrs Stephens go on and make all the arrangements for coming next day. I thought of this after; and even at the time I noticed it, and with some surprise.

Next day, just as we were going out for our walk, Mary, who had been at the window, started back, and went hurriedly into the little room behind, which had once been papa's study. "Mary," she said, "there is Mrs Stephens and – her friend. Go with them, please, to see the rooms. I am not quite well: I would rather not appear."

"I am so stupid; I shall not know what to say," I began.

"You will do very well," said Mary, and disappeared and shut the door. I had no time to think more of this, for the stranger came in directly with Mrs Stephens; and in my shyness I blushed and stammered while I explained. "She is not very well," I said;

"I am to show you. Will you please – sit down; will you come upstairs?"

"You will do very well," said Mrs Stephens, patting me on the shoulder. "This is Mr Durham, Mary, and I don't think he will eat any of us. It is a nice light, airy staircase," she said, as she went up, not to lose any opportunity of commending the house. "A capital staircase," said Mr Durham, with a cheery laugh. I had scarcely ventured to look at him yet, but somehow there was a feeling of satisfactoriness diffused through the air about him. I cannot explain quite what I mean, but I am sure others must have felt the same thing. Some people seem to make the very air pleasant: they give you a sense that all is well, that there is nothing but what is good and honest in the place where they are. This is what I felt now; and when we got upstairs I ventured to look at him. He was tall and strong and ruddy, not at all like any hero whom I had ever read of or imagined. There was nothing "interesting" about him. He looked "a good fellow," cheery, and smiling, and active, and kind. He settled at once about the rooms. He laughed out when Mrs Stephens said something about their homeliness. "They are as good as a palace," he said; "I don't see what a man could want more." The sitting-room was the room papa died in, and it cost me a little pang to see them walking about and looking at the furniture; but when people are poor they cannot indulge such feelings. We learn to say nothing about them, and perhaps that helps to subdue them. At all events, I made no show of what I was thinking, and it was all settled in a few minutes. He was

to come in on Saturday, and Ellen was to work for him and wait upon him. I could not help thinking it would be pleasant to have him in the house.

And thus there commenced another period of my life, which I must speak of very briefly, – which indeed I do not care to speak of at all, but which I will think about as long as I live. I did not see very much of him at first. I was nearly seventeen now, and very shy; and Mary watched over me, and took great pains not to expose me to chance meetings with the stranger, or any unnecessary trouble. Ellen managed everything between us. She was a good, trustworthy woman, and we did not require to interfere; she was full of praises of Mr Durham, who never gave any trouble he could help. But one night, when I was taking tea with Mrs Stephens, he happened to come in, and we had the pleasantest evening. He knew a song I had just learned, and sang a second to it in the most delightful deep voice. He talked and rattled about everything. He made Mrs Stephens laugh and he made me laugh, and he told us his adventures abroad till we were nearly crying. When it was time for me to go he got up too, and said he would go with me. "Oh, it is only next door; I can go alone," I said, in my shyness. "It is only next door, but I live there too, and I am going to work now," he said. "To work! when all the rest of the world are going to bed?" said Mrs Stephens; "you will make yourself ill." How he laughed at that! his laugh sounded like a cheery trumpet. He did not mean to kill himself with work. "But I hope you will let me come to tea again," he

said. How pleased Mrs Stephens was! She always says she likes young people, and we had spent such a pleasant night.

Many more of these pleasant evenings followed. Sometimes when we were sitting quiet after tea, she would send for me suddenly; sometimes she would write a little note in the afternoon. This expectation filled my life with something quite new. I had never had many invitations or pleasures before: I had never expected them. When we sat down to work after tea I had known that it was for the whole evening, and that no pleasant interruption would disturb us. But now a little thrill of excitement ran through my whole life. I wondered, would a note come in the afternoon? If it did not come, I wondered whether the bell would ring after tea, and Ellen come in saying, "If you please, ma'am, Mrs Stephens's compliments, and would Miss Mary go in, and take her music?" Mary never interfered; never said "Don't go." She looked at me sometimes very wistfully; sometimes she smiled and shook her head at me, and said I was getting dissipated. Once or twice she looked anxious, and told me a story, which I only half understood, of girls who met with people they liked, and were very happy, and then lost sight of them ever after. Mary was very clever at telling stories, and I was fond of listening; but she did it so well and delicately that I fear I never thought of the moral – never, at least, till all the harm was done and it was too late.

I would not have any one think, however, that Mr Durham either meant or did any harm. To say so would be very wrong.

It was as imperceptible with him as with me. He went quite innocently, as I did, to cheer up Mrs Stephens, and because an evening's chatter with a little music was pleasant; and by degrees we thought less and less of Mrs Stephens and more and more of each other. If any one meant anything beyond this, it was she who was the guilty person. She would nod off to sleep in her easy-chair while we were talking. She would say, with a sleepy smile, "Don't mind me, my dears. The light is a little strong for my eyes. That is why I close them – but I like the sound of your voices even when I don't hear what you say." Alas, if she had heard everything that had been said it might have been better. After a while he began to say strange things to me while she had her doze. He talked about his family to me. He said he hoped I should know them some day. He said his mother was very kind and wise – "a wise woman." These were the very words he used. And then he said – other things; but that was not till the very, very last.

One morning we met in the little hall. It was raining, and it was a holiday, and when he insisted on following me into the schoolroom, what could I do – I could not shut him out. He seemed to fill the whole room, and make it warm and bright. I do not think we had ever been quite alone before. He came to the window and stood there looking out upon the bare bit of smoky grass and the water-butt. And then all at once he came to me and took my hand. "If I had a nice little house out in the country, with flowers and trees about it, a bright little house – Mary – would

you come and be my little wife, and take care of it and me?"

Oh, what a thing to have said to you, all at once, without warning, in the heart of your own dull little life, when you thought you were to work, and pinch, and put up with things, for ever! It was different from my old fancy. But how poor a thing to have been found out to be Lady Mary in comparison with this! What I said is neither here nor there. We stood together in the little old study, among the forms where we had our little scholars, as if we had been in a fairy palace. I was not seventeen. I had no experience. I thought of nothing but him, and what he said. It was not my part to think of his father and mother, and what he would do, and what he wouldn't do. He was a great deal older than I was; about thirty, I believe. Of course, I thought of nothing but him.

"Do you know," he said, after a long time, "I have never seen your stepmother, Mary? I have been three months in the house, and I have never seen her. I must go and see her now."

"Oh, wait a little," I said; "wait a day. Let us have a secret all to ourselves one day." How foolish I was! – but how was I to know?

He consented after a while; and then he made me promise to bring her out at a certain hour in the afternoon, that he might meet us at the door and see her. I made all the arrangements for this with a light heart. Though it was very difficult to hide from her what had happened, I did so with a great effort. I persuaded her to come out earlier than usual. She did not resist me. She was kinder, more tender, than I had ever known. She began to say something of a story she had to tell me as we went out. I went

first and opened the door, and stood aside on the white steps to let her go out. Her crape veil was thrown back. Though she was still pale, there was a tint of life upon her cheeks. She was more like herself in her refined, delicate beauty, more like a lily, my favourite image of her, than she had been for ever so long.

I had begun to smile to myself at the success of our trick, when suddenly I got frightened, I could scarcely tell how. Looking up, I saw him standing on the pavement gazing at her, confounded. I can use no other word. He looked bewildered, confused, half wild with amazement. As for Mary, she had stopped short on the step. She was taken strangely by surprise too; for the first moment she only gazed as he did. Then she dropped her veil, and stepped back into the house. "I have forgotten something," she said; and turned round and went upstairs to her room. He came in, too, and went upstairs after her, passing without looking at me. His under lip seemed to have dropped; his cheerful face had lost all its animation; his eyes had a wild, bewildered stare in them. What did it mean? oh! what did it mean?

I did not know what to do. I wondered if he had followed her to speak to her, or what was the meaning of those strange looks. I lingered in the hall holding the handle of the door, feeling miserable, but not knowing why. In two or three minutes she came downstairs. "I had forgotten my handkerchief," she said; and we went out together as if nothing had happened. But something had happened, that was certain. She did not talk very much that day. When we were coming home she said to me, quite

suddenly, "Was it your doing; Mary, that I met Mr Durham at the door?"

"He said it was so strange he had never seen you," I said.

"Yes; but you should have known I would not do that for nothing. You should not have been the one to betray me, Mary. I knew Mr Durham once. He is associated with one of the most painful portions of my life."

"Oh, Mary dear! I did not know – "

"You did not know, and I did not want you to find out; but never mind, it is done. It need not, I hope, do any harm to you."

That was a very strange day: the excitement of the morning, and then the other excitement; and to feel that I had a secret from her, and that he was seated upstairs giving no sign, taking no notice of our existence all day long. I was so agitated and disturbed that I did not know what to do. At last I settled myself in the schoolroom to do some translations. When one has been looking for a long time for a holiday, and something happens to spoil the holiday when it comes, it is worse even than if that something had happened on an ordinary day. I think Mary was glad to be left to herself, for instead of our ordinary companionship, she sat in the parlour at work all the long afternoon, and I in the schoolroom. One of the doors was half opened between us. She could hear my pen scratching on the paper, and the rustling of the leaves of my dictionary – and I could hear her moving softly over her work. It was autumn by this time, and the days were growing short, and neither of us cared to

ring for tea; and I think Ellen was cooking dinner for Mr Durham and forgot us at the usual hour. We still sat as we had been all the afternoon when the twilight came on. I laid down my pen, having no light to write by, when I heard some one knock softly at the parlour door.

Mary made no reply. She sat quite still, never stirring. The knock came again; then I, too, put my paper away from me and listened. The door opened, and some one came into the parlour. How well I knew who it was! I listened now so intently that nothing escaped me. How could it be wrong? He must have come to talk to her of me.

"Mary!" he said. I rose up softly in my excitement, thinking it was me he was calling; but before I could move further a strange consciousness came over me that it was not me he meant. The old feeling with which I had heard my father call Mary came into my very soul – but worse, a hundred times worse. Oh, had he too another Mary besides me?

"Mary!" he said, breathless, and then paused. "How has all this come about? Why do I find you here? What does it mean? There are many explanations which I have a right to ask. You disappear from me – sent away – I know not how; and then – not to count the years that have passed – after these three months, in which you must have known me, I find you by chance – "

She knew that I was within hearing, and that whatever she said to him must be to me too. If that was a restraint upon her, I cannot tell. I felt sorry for her vaguely in my mind; but yet I

did not move.

"I did not wish you to find me at all," she said, very low. "Mr Durham, there is and can be nothing between you and me."

"Nothing!" he said; "what do you mean, Mary? Why, there is all the past between us – a hundred things that cannot be undone by anything in the future. You know how many things there are connected with you which are a mystery to me – things not affecting you alone, but others. How you went away, for instance; and what became of you, and how much my mother had to do with it? You must have known the moment I found you that all these questions remained to be asked."

"All these questions," she said, "are made quite unimportant by two things. First, that I am the wife, though now the widow, of a man I loved dearly – and that you have begun to love, begun to think of, some one very different from me."

"Ah!" he said, with a strange brief utterance of distress. Whether he was grieved to think of the wrong he was doing me, or whether the strange position he stood in troubled him, I cannot tell; but there was pain in the cry he gave – "ah!" with a little shiver. "You have abundance of power to pain me," he said, very low, "but it seems strange you should upbraid me. Yes, I have begun to think of some one else; but that does not prevent me from being deeply startled, deeply moved, by the sight of you."

There was a little silence then, and I came to myself slowly. I woke as it were out of a trance. She knew I was there, but he did not. I had no right to hear his secrets without warning him. I tried

to get up, but could not at first. I felt stiff and weary, as if I had been travelling for days together. I could scarcely drag myself up from my chair. The sound I made in rising might have warned him, but I do not think he heard. Before I could drag myself to the door and show I was there, he had begun again.

"Mary," he said, lingering upon the name as if he loved it, "this is not a time for recrimination. Tell me how you left Chester Street, and what my mother had to do with it? and then, if you choose, I will never see you again."

"Is it for your mother, or for me?"

I did not hear the answer. I could not stay longer. I got to the door somehow, and threw it open. I was too much bewildered to know what I was doing, or to think. I came out with a little rush as feeble creatures do. "I want to get away. I want to go out. I cannot stay there all day and hear you talking," I said. I was not addressing either her or him. The sound of my voice must have been very piteous, for I remember it even now.

"Mary!" he cried.

Oh, what a difference in the sound! This time his voice was startled, pained, almost harsh, with a kind of reproof in it: not as he said Mary to her. Oh, papa, papa! it was you first who taught me the difference. I gave a hoarse little cry. I could not speak. Millions of words seemed to rush to my lips, but I could not say any of them. "I have been here long enough," I managed to stammer out. "Let me go – let me go!" Next moment I was in the dark, in the silence, in my own little room, kneeling down by

the bedside, crying and moaning to myself. I did not know why. I had heard nothing wrong; but it seemed to me that all my life was over, and that it did not matter what came next.

And, indeed, I cannot tell what came next. She came up to me, and told me the whole story, and in a vague sort of way I understood it. She was not to blame. He had been fond of her (everybody was fond of her) when she was the governess in his mother's house; and it had been found out, and his mother was harsh, and she had gone suddenly away. There was nothing in this which need have made me unhappy, perhaps – so people have said to me since – but then I was very young; and I had been happy – and now I was miserable. I listened to her, and made no answer, but only moaned. The night passed, I cannot tell how. I did not sleep till late in the morning; and then I fell asleep and did not wake till noon. Then what was the use of going downstairs? I stayed in my room, feeling so weary, so worn out. It was Saturday, a half-holiday, and there was nothing to do. She came to me and spoke to me again and again; but I gave her very little answer. And he took no notice – he sent no message, no letter – not a word of explanation. He never asked my pardon. In my misery I thought I heard voices all the day as if they were talking, talking – and he never sent a message or note or anything to me. And then, after a long talk, as I fancied, with him, she would come to me. "Mary, this must not be. You must get up. You must be like yourself. Neither Mr Durham nor I have done you any wrong, Mary."

“Oh, don’t call me Mary!” I said; “call me some other name. If you knew how different it sounds when it is said to you, not to me.”

And then she would look at me with her eyes full of tears, and sit down by me, and say no more. And so passed this bitter day.

CHAPTER V

NEXT day was Sunday. When I woke up, early, I recollected all that had happened with a flush of overwhelming shame. How childishly, how foolishly I had behaved. I was very, very wretched; but I was ashamed, and pride got the upper hand. I dressed myself carefully, and went downstairs, resolved not to show my misery at least, to be proud and forget it. "If he does not care for me," I said to myself, "I will not care for him." I passed his room very softly that I might not wake him. There was early morning service in St Mark's now, for the curate who had succeeded poor papa was very High Church. I stole out and went to this early service, and tried to be good, and to give myself up to God's will. Yes, it must have been God's will – though how it could ever be God's will that anybody should be false, or unkind, or cruel, I could not tell. I know it is right, however, whatever happens that vexes you, to accept it as if it must be the will of God. I tried to do that, and I was not quite so miserable when I went home. Ellen opened the door to me, looking frightened. "I thought you was lost, too, Miss," she said. "I have been to church," I answered, scarcely noticing her words. Breakfast was laid in the little parlour. It was very, very tidy, dreadfully tidy – everything was cleared away – the basket with the work and all the little things, and every stray thread and remnant. All of a sudden it occurred to me how little I had been doing to help

of late. Instead of working I had been spending the evenings with Mrs Stephens. I did not even know how far the "things" were advanced, and it seemed strange they should all be gone. Of course it was because of Sunday. After a while Ellen brought in the coffee. She had still the same frightened look. "Missis wasn't with you at the early service, Miss Mary?" "Oh, no," I said, surprised at the question; "perhaps she is not up."

"She's never lain down all night," said Ellen; "she was worrited and worn off her legs going up and down to you yesterday, Miss – you that was quite well, and had no call to your bed. She was a deal more like it, the dear. She's never lain in her bed this blessed night, and I can't find her, high or low."

I scarcely waited to hear this out, but rushed up to her room. The bed had not been touched since yesterday. A little prayer-book lay on it, as if she had been praying. The room was in perfect good order – no litter about it. The little "things" were not to be seen. One of her dresses hanging against the wall made me think for a moment she was there, but it was only an old dress, and everything else was gone. Oh the terror and the pain and the wonder of that discovery! I could not believe it. I rushed through all the house, every room, calling her. Mr Durham heard me, and came out to the door of his room and spoke to me as I passed, and tried to take my hand, but I snatched it away from him. I did not even think of him. I can just remember the look he had, half-ashamed, appealing with his eyes, a little abashed and strange. I scarcely saw him at the time – but I remember him now, and

with good reason, for I have never seen him again.

And I have never seen Mary again from that day. Mrs Stephens came in to me, startled by the news her servants had carried her; and she told me she had heard a carriage drive off late on the previous night, but did not think it was from our door. She knew nothing. She cried, but I could not cry; and it was Sunday, and nothing could be done – nothing! even if I had known what to do. I rushed to Spicer's, and then I was sorry I had gone, for such people as they are never understand, and they thought, and think to this day, that there was something disgraceful in it. I rushed to Mrs Tufnell, not expecting to find her, for now it was time for church. The bells had done ringing, and I had already met, as I walked wildly along, almost all the people I knew. One woman stopped me and asked if Mrs Peveril was taken ill, and if she should go to her. "Poor thing, poor thing!" this good woman said. Oh, she might well pity us – both of us! But to my surprise Mrs Tufnell was at home. She almost looked as if she expected me. She looked agitated and excited, as if she knew. Did she know? I have asked her on my knees a hundred times, but she has always shaken her head. "How should I know?" she has said, and cried. I have thought it over and over for days and for years, till my brain has whirled. But I think she does know – I think some time or other she will tell me. It is a long time ago, and my feelings have got a little dulled; but I think some time or other I must find it out.

This wonderful event made a great change in my life. I began at once, that very day, to live with Mrs Tufnell in the Square. She

would not let me go home. She kissed me, and said I was to stay with her now. Mr Durham came twice and asked to see me; but I could not bear to see him. Then Mrs Stephens came with a letter. He said in it that I must dispose of him; that he, was in my hands, and would do whatever I pleased; that he had been startled more than he could say by the sudden sight of one whom he had loved before he knew me; but that if I could forgive him any foolish words he might have said, then he hoped we might be happy. In short, he was very honourable, ready to keep his word; and I felt as if I hated him for his virtue – for treating me "honourably!" Was that what all his love and all my happiness had come to? I sent him a very short little note back, and it was all over. He went abroad soon after, and I have never heard of him any more.

And thus my story ended at seventeen. I wonder if there are many lives with one exciting chapter in them, ending at seventeen, and then years upon years of monotonous life. I am twenty-three now. I live with Mrs Tufnell. I am daily governess to one little girl, and I have my forty pounds a-year, the interest of poor papa's insurance money. I am very well off indeed, and some people think I need not care to take a pupil at all – better off, a great deal, than I was in Southampton Street; but how different! I heard very soon after that Mary had a little boy. It was in the papers, but without any address; and I had one letter from her, saying that we had made a mistake in trying to live together, and that she was sorry. She hoped I would forgive her if she had been mistaken, and she would always think of me and

love me. Love me? Is it like love to go away and leave me alone? Two people have said they loved me in my life, and that is what both have done.

However, after that letter I could not do anything more. If she thought it was a mistake for us to live together, of course it was a mistake. And I had my pride too. “I always felt it was a doubtful experiment,” Mrs Tufnell said when people wondered, “and it did not answer – that was all.” And this is how it was settled and ended – ended, I suppose, for ever. Mrs Tufnell is very good to me, and as long as she lives I am sure of a home. Perhaps I may tell you her story one of these days; for she has a story, like most people. She tells me I am still very young, and may yet have a life of my own; but in the meantime the most I can do is to take an interest in other people’s lives.

CHAPTER VI

I HAD not intended to carry on any further a history which is chiefly about myself; but events are always occurring which change one's mind from day to day, and alter one's most fixed resolutions. I do not pretend to understand people who make unchangeable decisions, and certainly I am not one of them. Besides, common fairness requires that I should allow Mrs Peveril to have the same privilege as myself, and tell things her own way. I could not have imagined, had I not seen it, the difference there was between the aspect of things to her and to me. I suppose it is true after all that everybody has his or her own point of view, which is different from all others. Of course we realise this fact quite clearly in a great poem like "The Ring and the Book;" but to recognise it in one's own small affairs has somehow a much stranger, more surprising effect. What an odd difference it would make in the world if we could all see ourselves now and then with other people's eyes! I confess that the girl in her story, who was Mr Peveril's daughter, is very much unlike the girl in mine – and yet the same somehow, as may be traced out with a little trouble. This is humbling, but it is for one's good, I suppose. When you look at yourself in a mirror, you have so much interest in yourself that your defects don't strike you – you can't help being the first figure – the most important; but to feel that all along you are not important at all – anything but the first

figure, a mere shadow, scarcely noticed! it has a very odd effect – sometimes laughable, sometimes rather the reverse; but this was what now happened to me.

I must add, however, that a long time passed over before I could even think that Mrs Peveril might have something to say on her side. It was not because of the rupture between Mr Durham and myself, and the sudden conclusion of that dream and all that it seemed likely to bring with it. No doubt these things embittered all my feelings about her; but yet I was reasonable enough to come to see that it was not her fault – that she had kept out of the way with all her might – and that after all she could not foresee that another complication might arise between him and me. She could not of course foresee this; and even if she had foreseen it, what could she have done? I think it shows I was not unfair in my judgment, for a girl of seventeen, to say that I soon came to see that. But though I did not blame her, of course I was embittered against her, and took refuge in being very angry with her on other grounds. That she should have said our living together was a mistake was the chief of these. Why was it a mistake? Did she mean to say it was my fault? If it was simply her fault, as I felt sure it was, why did she call it a mistake? Why not say plainly out, "I was wrong, and so we got into trouble?" How easy it seems to be for people to acknowledge themselves in the wrong! but not so easy for one's self, somehow. I never met anybody who liked doing it, though I have met with so many who ought to have done it, and to whom it would have been so simple – so

easy, I thought; but that never seemed to be their opinion. Mrs Tufnell, who is in some things a very odd old lady, says it never is anybody's fault. "There was never any quarrel yet," she will say, "but there were two in it – there was never any misunderstanding but two were in it. There is no such thing as absolute blame on the one side and innocence on the other. Even in your affairs, Mary, my dear – " But this I never can see nor allow. How could I be to blame? Only seventeen, and knowing so little of the world, and expecting everybody to be good and true, and say just what they thought. When a man said he was fond of me, how was I to put up with his having been fond of somebody else? And when a woman professed to be thinking of me, was it natural that I could be pleased to know she had been thinking of herself? I could not help behaving just as I did. It was the only natural, the only possible way; but for them, they ought to have known better, they ought to have thought of me. On the whole that is the thing that hurts one – that goes to one's heart. People think of themselves first – when they ought to be thinking of you, they think of themselves first. I suppose it is the same all over the world.

The way in which I first heard Mary's story was simple enough. After years of a dull sort of quiet life at Mrs Tufnell's – who was very good to me, and very kind, but who, of course, could give to me, a girl, only what she, an old woman, had to give – the quietest life, without excitement or change of any kind – she had a bad illness. It was not an illness of the violent kind,

but of what, I suppose, is more dangerous to an old woman, a languishing, slow sickness, which looked like decay more than disease. The doctors said "breaking up of the constitution," or at least the servants said so, who are less particular than the doctors, and shook their heads and looked very serious. I was less easily alarmed than anyone else, for it seemed to me a natural thing that an old lady should be gently ill like that, one day a little better and the next a little worse, without any suffering to speak of. It was not until after she was better that I knew there had been real danger, but she must have felt it herself. The way in which her sense of her precarious condition showed itself was anxiety for me. I remember one evening sitting in her room by the fire with a book; she was in bed, and I had been reading to her, and now she was dozing, or at least I thought so. Things appear (it is evident) very differently to different people. I was extremely comfortable in that nice low easy-chair by the fire. It was a pretty room, full of pictures and portraits of her friends, so full that there was scarcely an inch of the wall uncovered. The atmosphere was warm and soft, and the tranquil repose and ease of the old lady in the bed somehow seemed to increase the warmth and softness and kindly feeling. She was an additional luxury to me sitting there by the fire with my novel. If any fairy had proposed to place her by my side as young and as strong as myself, I should have rejected the proposal with scorn. I liked her a great deal best so – old, a little sick, kind, comfortable, dozing in her bed. Her very illness – which I thought quite slight, rather an excuse for staying in this

cosy room and being nursed than anything else – heightened my sense of comfort. She was not dozing, as it happened, but lying very still, thinking of dying – wondering how it would feel, and planning for those she should leave behind her. I knew nothing of these thoughts, no more than if I had been a thousand miles away: and fortunately neither did she of mine. I was roused from my comfortable condition by the sound of her voice calling me. I rose up half reluctantly from the bright fire, and the little table with the lamp and my book, and went and sat by her in the shade where I could not see the fire; but still the sentiment of comfort was predominant in me. I gave my old lady her mixture, which it was time for her to take, and advised her to go to sleep.

"You must not doze this time," I said; "you must go right off to sleep, and never wake till morning. Everything is put right for the night, and I shall not go till you are asleep."

"I was not dozing," she said, with that natural resentment which everybody feels to be so accused; and then, after a moment, "Mary, I was thinking of you. If I were to die, what would you do?"

I was very much shocked, and rather frightened; but when I looked at her, and saw by the dim light that she did not look any worse, I felt rather angry. "How unkind of you!" I said, "to speak so! You frightened me at first. What would it matter what became of me?"

"It would matter a great deal," she said. "It would make everything so much worse. I don't want to die, Mary, though I

daresay I should be a great deal better off, and get rid of all my troubles – ”

“Oh, it is wicked to talk so!”

“Why should it be wicked? I can’t help thinking of it,” she said, lying in her warm cosy bed. It made me shiver to hear her. I began to cry, rather with a chill, wretched sense of discomfort in the midst of all the warmth than anything else; upon which she put her hand on my shoulder and gave me a little shake, and laughed at me softly. “Silly child!” she said – but she was not angry. There was a very grave look on her face behind the smile. Dying was strange to her as well as to me, though she was very old.

“But, Mary,” she went on, “I want to read you something. I want you to think again about some one you once were very fond of. I have some news of Mrs Peveril – ”

“Oh!” I said; and then I went on stiffly, “I hope she is well.”

“She is quite well – and – your little brother. I wish you would see them. All that happened was so long ago; I think you might see them, Mary.”

“I never made any objection to seeing them,” I said, more and more stiffly, though my heart began to leap and thump against my breast. “You forget I had nothing to do with it. It was she who went away. She said it was a mistake.”

“You are an unforgiving child. You did not try to enter into her feelings, Mary.”

“How could I?” I said. “Did she wish me to enter into her

feelings? Did she ever give me a chance? She said it was a mistake. What was there left for me to say?"

"Well, well," said the old lady, "I don't defend her. I always said she was wrong; but still I have been hearing from her lately, Mary. I have three or four letters which I should like you to read – "

"You have been hearing from her without ever telling me!"

"Bless the child! must I not even get a letter without consulting her? But, Mary, I am a free agent still, and I can't be kept in such order," she said, half laughing. "Give me that blotting-book, and my keys, and my spectacles, and bring the lamp a little closer."

Indignant as I was, I was comforted by all these preparations. And when she had put on her spectacles and opened the blotting-book, sitting up in bed, my mind was so much relieved that my indignation floated away. "It is a pretty thing for you to talk of dying, and frighten people," I said, giving her a kiss, "with your cheeks like two nice old roses." She shook her head, but she smiled too: she felt better, and got better gradually from that hour.

But in the meantime I had to listen to these letters. Perhaps if it had not been that my old lady was ill, I should have been offended to find that she had deceived me, and had known about Mary all along. It was a deception, though she did not mean any harm. "She had thought it best," she said, "to let time soften all our feelings, before she told me anything about it." However, I must not enter into all the discussions we had on this subject. It

is only fair that Mary should have her turn, and tell her story as I have told mine. It is not a connected story like mine, but you will see from it what kind of a life hers had been, and what sort of a woman she was. She is different from the Mary I thought – and yet not different either – just as I am different from the girl I thought I was, and yet very like too, if you look into it. I cannot tell what my feelings were as I read first one bit and then another, and a great deal more which I do not think it necessary to quote here. One moment I was furious with her – the next I could have kissed her feet. These people who send you from one extreme of feeling to another, who do wrong things and right things all in a jumble, take a greater hold upon you, somehow, than better people do, who are placid and always on the same level – at least I think so. I started by calling her Mrs Peveril – and here I am already saying Mary, as of old, without knowing! And Mrs Tufnell wishes me to go and see her. She has even made me promise as a kind of reward to herself for getting better. Since she takes it in this way, I shall have to go – and sometimes I fear it, and sometimes I wish for it. Will it make any difference to me? Will the old love come back, or the still older feeling that was not love? Shall I think of that "Mary" that sounded always so much sweeter to her than to me? Or shall I remember only the time when she was everything to me – when she charmed me out of my grief and loneliness, and told me her secret, and made me her companion, and was all mine? I do not know. I begin to tremble, and my heart beats when I think of this meeting; but in

the meantime Mary has a right to her turn, and to tell the story her own way. It is all in little bits taken from Mrs Tufnell's letters, and sometimes may appear a little fragmentary; but I can only give it as it came to me.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.