

The New Mistress

A Tale

George Manville Fenn



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George Manville Fenn

"The New Mistress"

Chapter One.

The First Morning.

"Remember, Hazel," said Mrs Thorne, "remember this—we may be reduced in circumstances; we may have been compelled by misfortune to come down into this wretched little town, and to live in this miserable, squeezey, poorly-furnished house or cottage, with the light kept out by the yellow glass, and scarcely a chimney that does not smoke; we may be compelled to dress shab—"

"Yes, yes, mother dear—"

"*Bily*," said Mrs Thorne, with indignant emphasis on account of the interruption, "but remember this, Hazel, you are a lady."

"Forgive me for interrupting you, mother."

"*Mamma*, Hazel," said the lady, drawing herself up with great dignity. "If we are by a cruel stroke of fate compelled to live in a state of indigence when pride has made my eldest child refuse the assistance of my relatives, I still maintain that I have a right to keep up my old and ladylike title—mamma."

"But, dear, I am only a schoolmistress now—a national schoolmistress, and it would sound full of foolish assumption if I called you mamma. And are you not my dear, dear mother! There, there, good-bye, dear," cried the speaker, kissing her affectionately; "and mind the dinner is done, for I shall be,—oh, so hungry."

"As you please, Hazel," said Mrs Thorne, smoothing down her dress, and looking ill-used. "Let it be mother then. My feelings have to be set aside as usual. My life is to be one slow glide down a slope of indignity to the grave. Ah, what have I done to deserve such a fate?"

"Mother, dear mother, pray, pray don't grieve, and I'll strive so hard to make you and the girls happy. You will soon like this little cottage; and when we get some more furniture, and some flowers, and a bird in the window, it will look so bright and cheerful and—there, there, pray don't cry. I must go; it only wants five minutes to nine, and I must not be late the first morning."

"I think it disgraceful that, in addition to six days a week, you should be compelled to go and teach on Sundays as well; and I shall make a point of speaking to Mr Lambent the first time he calls—that is, if he should ever condescend to call."

"No, no, pray don't think of such a thing, dear," cried Hazel Thorne excitedly. "You forget that I have the whole of Saturday, and—there, there—dear, dear mother, I must go. Good—good-bye."

Hazel Thorne kissed the stiff stately-looking lady in the stiffest of widow's weeds, and with a bright look and a cheery nod, she hurried out of the little Gothic schoolhouse, with its prim, narrow lancet windows; but as she closed the door, the bright look gave place to one of anxious care, and there was a troubled nervous twitching about her lips that told of a struggle to master some painful emotion.

She had but a few yards to go, for the new school-buildings at Plumton All Saints were in one tolerably attractive architectural group, built upon a piece of land given two years before by Mr William Forth Burge, a gentleman who had left Plumton All Saints thirty—but it should be given in his own words, as he made a point of repeating them to every new-comer:

"Yes, sir; I left Plumton thirty year ago, after being two year with old Marks the butcher, and went up to London to seek my fortune, and I think I found it, I did."

Mr William Forth Burge's fortune was made by being a butcher's boy for some years, and then starting among some new houses near Chelsea on his own account. Fashion and the speculative builders did the rest. Mr William Forth Burge's business grew to a tremendous extent, and at forty-five he sold it and proudly returned to his native place—a gentleman, he said. Stout, red-faced, very pomatumy about his smooth, plastered-down dark hair, very much dressed in glossy broadcloth and white waistcoats, and very much scented with his favourite perfume, "mill flowers," as he called it.

Mr William Forth Burge left Plumton—"Bill"; he came back writing his name in full, and everybody followed his example as soon as he had shown himself at the various land sales and bought pretty largely. For he was always looking out for "investments," and the local auctioneers addressed him with great respect as "sir." Why, upon the occasion of the dinner given at the "George," when he took the chair after the laying of the first stone of the new school-buildings by Sir Appleton Burr, the county member, whose name was down for ten pounds, the Reverend Henry Lambent, the vicar, made his chin sore with his very stiff cravat, rolling his head to give due emphasis to the very sermon-like speech, the text of which was that Mr William Forth Burge was an honour to the place of his birth; and the finale, received with vociferous cheering and stamping of feet, was the proposal of this gentleman's health.

He was a very modest, mild man, this donor of a piece of land of the value of some three hundred and fifty pounds to the parish; and though an ex-butcher, had probably never slain innocent lamb, let alone sheep or ox, in his life. When he rose to respond he broke forth into a profuse perspiration—a more profuse perspiration than usual; and his application of a fiery orange silk handkerchief to his face, neck, and hands, almost suggested that its contact with his skin would scorch him, or at least make him hiss, what time he told people that he left Plumton thirty year ago, after being two year with old Marks the butcher, etc., and then went on to speak of himself as if he were an oyster, for every few moments he announced to his fellow-townsmen that he was a native, and that he was proud of being a native, and that he did not

see how a native could better show his love for his native place than by giving his native place a piece of ground for the erection of the new schools; and so on, and so on.

Of course, Sir Appleton Burr, M.P., said that it was a charmingly *naïve* piece of autobiography, and that Plumton All Saints ought to be very proud of such a man, and no doubt Plumton was proud of him, for where was the need of grammar to a man with fifty thousand pounds; especially as Mr William Forth Burge, besides having no grammar, had no pride.

In due time, the money was found, with the help of a grant from the Committee of Council on Education, the schools being meanwhile erected—a long red-brick semi-Gothic central building, with houses for the schoolmaster and mistress at either end, each standing in its neat garden, the central school building being so arranged that, by drawing up and pushing down sash-hung shutters, the boys and girls' schools could be thrown into one, as was always the case on Sundays.

Just as Hazel Thorne left her gate to walk thirty yards to that leading to the girls' entrance, Mr Samuel Chute, master of the boys' school, left his door to walk thirty yards to the gate leading to the boys' entrance, but did not stop there, for he came right on, raising his hat, and displaying a broad white lumpy forehead, backed by fair hair that seemed to have been sown upon his head and come up in a sturdy crop, some portions being more vigorous than others, and standing up in tufts behind the lumps about his forehead; doubtless these latter being kindly arrangements made by nature to allow room for brain projections, consequent upon over-study.

Mr Samuel Chute smiled, and said that it was a very fine morning, a fact that Hazel Thorne acknowledged, as the schoolmaster replaced his hat.

"The handle of the door goes very stiffly," he said, still smiling rather feebly, for he was annoyed with himself for not having offered to shake hands, and it was too late now. "I thought I'd come and open it for you."

Hazel thanked him. The heavy latch was twisted up by an awkward ring like a young door-knocker, and went *click!* and was let down again, and went *clack!* Then the new schoolmistress bowed and entered, and Mr Samuel Chute went back to his own entrance, looking puzzled, his forehead full of wrinkles, and so preoccupied that he nearly ran up against Mr William Forth Burge, whom he might have smelt if he had not seen, as he came to the school as usual on Sunday mornings to take his class, and impart useful and religious instruction to the twelve biggest boys.

There was a mist before Hazel Thorne's eyes as she entered the large schoolroom, with its so-called gallery and rows of desks down the side, all supported upon iron pedestals like iron bars with cricks in their backs. All about the floor were semicircles marked out by shiny brass-headed nails, as if the boards had been decorated by a mad undertaker after the fashion of a coffin-lid, while between the windows, and in every other vacant place, were hung large drawing copies of a zoological character, embracing the affectionate boa-constrictor, the crafty crocodile, and the playful squirrel, all of which woodcuts had issued from the Sanctuary at Westminster, probably with the idea that some child in Plumton schools might develop into a

female Landseer.

This being Sunday, Hazel Thorne's duties were light, and after Mr Samuel Chute had rapped upon his desk, and read prayers for the benefit of both schools, the new mistress had little to do beyond superintending, and trying to make herself at home.

She found that there were four classes in her side of the Sunday-school, each with its own teacher, certain ladies coming regularly from the town, chief of whom were the Misses Lambent—Beatrice and Rebecca, the former a pale, handsome, but rather sinister lady of seven or eight-and-twenty, the latter a pale, unhandsome, and very sinister lady of seven or eight-and-thirty, both elegantly dressed, and ready to receive the new mistress with a cold and distant bow that spoke volumes, and was as repellant as hailstones before they have touched the earth.

For the Misses Lambent were the vicar's sisters, and taught in the Sunday-school from a sense of duty. Hazel Thorne was ready to forget that she was a lady by birth and education. The Misses Lambent were not; and besides, it was two minutes past nine when Hazel entered the room. It was five minutes to nine when they rustled in with their stiffest mien and downcast eyes.

But they always displayed humility, even when they snubbed the girls of their classes—a humility which prompted them to give up the first class to Miss Burge—christened Betsey, a name of which she was not in the least ashamed, and which, like her brother with his William Forth, she wrote in full.

The third and fourth class girls had an enmity against those of the first for no other reason than that they were under Miss Burge, who heard them say their catechism, and read, and asked questions afterwards out of a little book which she kept half hidden beneath her silk *visite*; for pleasant, little, homely, round-faced Miss Burge could hardly have invented a question of an original character to save her life. One thing, however, was patent, and that was that the first class was so far a model of good behaviour that the girls did not titter very much, nor yet pinch one another, or dig elbows into each other's ribs more than might be expected from young ladies of their station; while they never by any chance made faces at "teacher" when her back was turned, a practice that seemed to afford great pleasure to the young ladies who were submitted to a sort of cold shower-bath, iced with awkward texts by the Misses Lambent, in classes third and fourth.

The second class was taken by another maiden lady—Miss Penstemon, sister of Doctor Penstemon, M.D., F.R.C.S., of the High Street. She was thinner and more graceful than the Misses Lambent, and possibly much older; but that was her secret and one which she never divulged.

The Misses Lambent, as before mentioned, bowed with dignity and grave condescension to the new mistress; and, taking her cue from the vicar's sisters. Miss Penstemon bowed also, plunging her hand afterwards into her black bag for her smelling-bottle, for she thought the room was rather close.

The bottle she brought out, however, she thrust back hastily, and gave a quick glance round to see if she had been observed; for, instead of its containing a piece of sponge saturated with the colourless fluid labelled in her brother's surgery, "Liq. Amm.," and afterwards scented with a few drops of an essential oil, the little stoppered bottle bore a label with the enigmatical word "Puls." thereon, and its contents were apparently a number of little sugar pills.

For be it known that Maria Penstemon had a will of her own, and a strong tendency to foster crotchets. The present crotchet was homoeopathy, which, without expressing any belief for or against, the doctor had forbidden her to practise.

"No, 'Ria," he said, "if you want to go doctoring, doctor the people with your moral medicines. It won't do for you to be physicking one way and me another, so let it alone."

But Miss Penstemon refused to submit to coercion, and insisted in secret upon following her path while the doctor went his, Maria's being the homoeopath, while the doctor's was, of course, the allopath; and he was a long time finding out that his sister surreptitiously "exhibited" pilules, for she never did any harm.

Hazel Thorne met with a different reception, however, from downright Miss Burge, who rose from her seat, looked red and "flustered," as she called it, smiled, and shook hands.

"I'm very, very glad to know you, my dear," she said warmly, "and I hope you'll come and see me often as soon as you get shaken down."

Shaken down! The words jarred upon the young mistress, who felt that she could never become intimate with Miss Burge, whom she left to her class, and then busied herself with the attendance register and various other little matters connected with her duties. Once she stole a glance across at the boys' school, to become aware of the fact that Mr Chute was watching her attentively, so was Mr William Forth Burge; and, to make matters worse, half the boys in the classes were following their teachers' eyes, so that it was with something like a feeling of relief that Hazel saw that the clock pointed to half-past ten, the time for closing for the morning, and marshalling the girls in order for walking two-and-two as far as the church.

Chapter Two.

The Vicar sees a Gentleman.

Mr Chute rang a bell and said, "Sh! sh!"

Books were put away, the lady teachers rose, and, with the exception of Miss Burge, moved towards the door, the latter lady glancing at the new mistress, and, apparently pitying her strangeness, seeming disposed to hang back and walk with her; but Hazel Thorne's attention was too much taken up by her task, and getting her little force of about eight-and-thirty or forty girls two-and-two, she started them for church, herself taking the smallest morsel—to wit, little Jenny Straggalls—under her wing.

Now, the only ways to march forty girls two-and-two to church with anything like order are either to put the two smallest pupils in the front, and then go on rising in years till you have the two eldest in the rear, or to pair off the largest and smallest children together.

If neither of these plans is adopted, discipline is liable to fail. One black sheep will corrupt a flock, and though not a black sheep but a very red-haired frisky lamb, there were qualities in Ophelia, or more commonly "Feelier," Potts sufficiently mischievous to corrupt any flock of girls.

The experiences she had picked up at Whitelands were forgotten by Hazel Thorne in the flurry and excitement of this her first morning with her school. The stern looks of the lady teachers had made her feel nervous. It was tiresome, too, just at starting that Mr Chute should be holding his boys in hand at the door, with a politeness of which he had never before been guilty, to allow the girls to go on first to church; and Mr William Forth Burge was standing by him, smiling all over his round, closely-shaven face, which was so smooth that it shone in the sun, and preparing himself for the incense of forty bobs, that he would receive from the girls as they went by.

This was Feelier's opportunity. As one of the biggest girls, she had been placed first with Ann Straggalls, the fair, round eyed, and fat; and as Feelier went marching on with head erect, she turned the said head slowly round towards the boys, and squinted so horribly that her eyes half disappeared beneath the bridge of her nose, and Tommy Sullins, a very wild, excitable little boy, forgot his awe of Mr Samuel Chute, and burst into a loud "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sullins!" shouted Mr Chute; and Feelier was gazing wonderingly at the boy with her eyes in their normal, position, as the little fellow became perfectly snail-like in his action, and crept back into the very stiff long pinafore he was wearing.

Then bob, bob, bob, bob went the girls as they passed Mr William Forth Burge, who came out of the gate as the last pair passed and smiled his way up to his sister, who was toddling along beside Hazel Thorne, and making Mr Samuel Chute feel annoyed, for he was obliged to leave some little space before starting his boys; and then as he had always been in the habit of walking last, it would have looked peculiar to walk in front. Besides which there would have been the risk of little boys straggling behind, and perhaps not appearing in church at all; so, in spite of an intense desire, freshly developed, to keep near the new schoolmistress, he was compelled to walk at a distance of twenty-two doubled boys behind, and this made him metaphorically gnash his teeth.

Mr Chute's way of gnashing his teeth was, paradoxical as it may sound, with his hands, upon which he wore a pair of brand new kid gloves, bought late on Saturday night expressly to impress the new mistress. These hands seemed to have been suddenly seized with an angry itching to seize little boys' arms and shoulders, to give them nips and shakes and pushes for not walking better than they did; and the severe drilling he gave them as he walked backwards and forwards along the semi-military column made the boys stare. But it was upon Master Sullins that the vials of his wrath threatened to be emptied. He could not forgive that laugh. What, he asked himself, would Miss Thorne think? It was terrible, and seemed to him like the first step towards blasting the hopes that had already begun to bud after seeing the new mistress only

twice. The consequence was, that whenever he told himself never had the boys walked to church so badly before, he glanced at Tommy Sullins, and when he glanced at Tommy Sullins, he thought of a certain length of that thin rattan or *rotan* cane that grows so beautifully in the Malay Peninsula, running up and down trees in festoons for two or three hundred feet. Utterly ignorant as he was of the beauty of rotan cane in its native state, Tommy had so lively a recollection of it in its cut-up or commercial form, that reading threats in Mr Chute's eyes, the boy's face began to work, and had not the master gone right to the rear, and rigidly abstained from further demonstrations, the procession would have been enlivened by a most tremendous howl.

Quite disposed to be friendly. Miss Burge, then, while her fellow Sunday-school teachers sailed gracefully on to church, toddled and prattled beside the new-comer to Plumton, feeling pleased and attracted by her gentle ways.

Toddled is the only word that will express Miss Burge's way of progression, for it seemed as if there were no joints to her legs, and consequently, as she walked she rolled sharply first to right and then to left, but got over the ground pretty smartly all the same.

"Oh, this is my brother, Miss Thorne," she prattled pleasantly. "My brother, Mr William Forth Burge, who presented the town with the site for the new schools. Bill, dear, this is our new mistress. Miss Hazel Thorne, and a very pretty name, too, isn't it?"

"A very nice name indeed," said "Bill," taking off his hat and perfuming the morning air with a whiff of pomatum scent; after which he replaced his hat and smiled, and breathed very hard, but took his place, to Mr Chute's great annoyance, on Hazel's other side, evidently with the intention of walking with her and his sister right up to church.

Hazel felt more nervous than before. It was very kind and friendly of these people, but they divided her attention, and the schoolgirls wanted it all. For, having succeeded so well over the squinting, and thereby won the admiration of her fellow-pupils, girl-like, Miss Feelier must attempt something new, and this novelty was the giving vent to little mouse-like squeaks, just loud enough to be heard by Ann Straggalls, who began to titter, and of course this was communicated to others near.

The long notes became so marked at last that Hazel had to apologise to her new friends, and hurry to the front and admonish, painfully conscious the while that plenty of the inhabitants were at their windows and doors, watching and commenting upon the appearance of the new mistress, some remarks being loud enough for her to hear.

Order being restored, Hazel resumed her place, and Mr William Forth Burge took up his parable and said:—

"Plumton's a deal altered. Miss Thorne, since I knowed it first."

"Is it?" said Hazel.

"Oh, a deal. Why, when I left Plumton thirty year ago, after being two year with old Marks

the butcher, and went up to London to seek my fortune—and I think I found it eh, Betsey?”

“That you did indeed, dear,” said little Miss Burge proudly.

“Ah, I did, Miss Thorne,” he continued. “Why, at that time—”

“I beg your pardon,” said Hazel; “the girls are not yet used to me.”

She had become aware just then that something else was wrong in the van of her little army, and hurrying to the front, she found fat Ann Straggalls furiously red, and choking with laughter.

“For shame!” began Hazel severely. “I don’t yet know your name.”

“Straggalls, teacher,” burst out a chorus of voices. “Annie Straggalls.”

“Straggalls, I shall have to punish you if you do not walk properly. A great girl like you, and setting so bad an example.”

“Please, teacher, it wasn’t me,” began fat Ann Straggalls.

“It was you,” retorted Hazel; “I saw you laughing and behaving very badly.”

“But please, teacher, it was Feelier Potts kept tiddling of me—”

“Oh, what a wicked story, teacher.”

“Silence!” cried Hazel.

“Inside of my ’and, where there’s a ’ole in my glove, teacher.”

“’Strue as goodness I didn’t, teacher,” cried Feelier.

“Not another word. Walk quietly on to church. I will talk about it to-morrow.”

This was, of course, as the progression went on, and just at that moment, as she was resuming her place. Hazel Thorne felt as if she had been attacked by a severe spasm. Her heart seemed to stand still, and she turned pale; then it began to beat furiously, and there was a crimson flush in her face and temples as she became aware of the fact that a tall, well-dressed, gentlemanly-looking young man was walking on the other side of the long street leading into the town, and she saw him change his thin, closely-folded umbrella from one hand to the other, ready to raise his hat to her if she would have looked across the road again. But she let her eyes fall, and this time returned to her place between Mr and Miss Burge, feeling glad that they were there, and almost glorying in the vulgarity of their appearance as a safeguard to her from recollections of the past, and the possibility of troubles in the future.

“Ah, as I was a-saying,” resumed Mr William Forth Burge, “Plumton’s wonderfully changed since I went to London. Do you know London, Miss Thorne?”

“Oh, yes, I know London,” she replied. “I used to live at Kensington.”

“Did you now!” cried her companion, looking at her with admiration. “Well now, that is strange!”

Hazel could not see the strangeness of the fact, but she said nothing.

“Why, my carts used to go all round Kensington, right to Notting Hill, and take in Chelsea and Pimlico as well.”

“I really must beg of you to excuse me once more,” said Hazel.

“Naughty child. Sh—sh—sh!” said little Miss Burge, shaking her parasol at the two first girls of the rank, as Hazel went off again. For, highly indignant at having been charged with “tiddling” her fellow pupil. Miss Ophelia Potts had snatched herself together very tightly, and keeping hold of Ann Straggalls’ hand—the one that had a hole in the glove—she had begun to walk as fast as she could with so much heavy ballast as Miss Straggalls proved. The consequence was, that the girls behind followed suit not quite so fast, the next couple caught the infection, and then there was a hiatus, six girls straggling a long way ahead, and after a great gap of twenty or thirty yards there was the rest of the school. Hazel hurried after her disordered forces, and checked the advance guard till they were joined by the rest, after which she allowed the brother and sister to come up to her, when she once more took her place, looking terribly conscious of the fact that Archibald Graves was on the other side, keeping pace with them, and looking across as if begging for a glance.

“Quite a stranger, Betsey. No; I never see him afore.”

“Why, how hot and flustered you do look, my dear!” said little Miss Burge. “The girls *is* tiresome this morning. If that Feelier Potts don’t behave herself, she sha’n’t come up to the garden to tea.”

“You haven’t seen my garden, Miss Thorne,” said the ex-butcher.

“No.”

“Ah, you’ll have to come up and see my garden. My sister here will ask you to bring up some of the best girls to take them on the lawn, and eat cake.”

“But not a bit for that naughty Feelier Potts,” cried Miss Burge, shaking her parasol at the delinquent. “Look at that now, Bill. Well, of all the aggravating hussies.”

Hazel was already on in front, to where Miss Feelier had turned what her mother termed “stunt,” that is to say, she behaved as a horse does that has a character for jibbing—she was not allowed to go her own pace, so she began to walk as slowly as possible, and almost stopped.

It needs neither blackboard nor chalk to demonstrate the problem that follows:

A, B, and C, are divisions of a column of troops on the march. Portion A forms the advance guard; B the centre; C the rear. If A marched one mile per hour, B two miles per hour, and C three miles per hour, what would be the result?

Setting aside miles per hour. Hazel Thorne's column behaved as above; and in two minutes, to Feelier Potts' great delight of which, however, she did not display an inkling in her stolid face, the little column was all in confusion, while the young lady called out loudly:

"Please, teacher, they're a-scrouging of us behind."

There was nothing for it but for Hazel Thorne to lead the van, leaving little Miss Burge in charge of the rear, seeing which state of affairs, Mr William Forth Burge was about to leave his sister and go up to the front and continue his egotistical discourse; but here he was checked by Miss Burge.

"No, no, Bill; you mus'n't," she whispered.

"Mus'n't what?"

"Mustn't go after her and walk like that."

"Why not?"

"Well, because—because she's—well, because she's so nice, and young, and pretty," whispered Miss Burge, who was at a loss for a reason.

"But that's why I like to go and talk to her, Betsey," exclaimed the man of fortune heartily. "She's about the nicest young lady I think I ever did see."

"But you mus'n't, Bill," said his sister in alarm, "people would talk."

"Let 'em," said the ex-butcher proudly. "I can afford it. Let 'em talk."

"But it might be unpleasant for Miss Thorne, dear."

"Oh! Hah! I didn't think of that," said the gentleman slowly; and, taking off his hat he drew his orange silk handkerchief from his pocket, and blew such a sonorous blast that little Jenny Straggalls, who was last in the rank, started in alarm.

After this Mr William Forth Burge held his hat in one hand, his orange handkerchief in the other, and looked at both in turn, scenting the morning air the while with "mill flowers," and the essential oil in the pomade he used.

Custom caused this hesitation. For years past he had been in the habit of placing his handkerchief in his hat—the proper place for it, he said—but Miss Burge said that gentlemen did not carry their handkerchiefs in their 'ats. "And you are a gentleman, you know, now, Bill."

So, with a sigh, Mr William Forth Burge refrained from burying the flaming orange silk in

the hollow of his hat, thrust it into his pocket, and replaced his glossy head-piece, uttering another sigh the while, and looking very thoughtful the rest of the way.

Oh! the relief of reaching the church door, and following the children into the cool shadows of the empty building. Not quite empty though, for the Misses Lambent were in their places in the pew near the chancel, and the Reverend Henry Lambent, cold, calm, handsome, and stern of mien, was raising his head with a reproving frown at the girls who clattered so loudly up the stairs, in spite of Hazel's efforts to keep them still.

"Why, Betsey," said Mr William Forth Burge, "that chap seems to know our new mistress."

"Ye-es, dear, perhaps he's her brother," whispered back Miss Burge, as they entered their richly-cushioned pew—one which used to belong to the old manor-house that was pulled down.

"Beatrice, did you see a strange gentleman go up to Miss Thorne and speak to her as she came into church?" said the Reverend Henry Lambent, as he and his sisters were going back to the vicarage after the morning service.

"Yes, brother Henry; we both saw it," said Miss Beatrice, "and were going to mention it to you."

The incident was this:—

Just as Hazel Thorne was going to her seat in the gallery, the tall gentleman came through the porch, hesitated a moment, and then, seeing that the church was nearly empty, he went quickly up to the young mistress.

"Hazel," he whispered, "I have come down on purpose. I must—I will see you after church."

"I beg your pardon," she said coldly; "our acquaintance is at an end."

"End! No. I have come to my senses. It must not—it shall not be."

"It must and shall, Mr Graves," she said, turning away.

"For Heaven's sake, why?" he whispered excitedly, as she was going.

"Times are changed, sir. I am only a schoolmistress now."

Just then Mr Chute entered with the boys, and he turned white as he saw the stranger there.

Chapter Three.

Hazel's Troubles.

About a year and a half before Hazel Thorne had the task of conducting her school for the first time to Plumton church, she was in her home at Kensington, leading the every-day pleasant life of the daughter of a stockbroker, who was reputed among his friends as being “warm,” that being the appropriate term for a man who is said to have a pretty good store of money well invested in solid securities.

“Fred Thorne will buy mining shares for you, or shares in any bubble that is popular at the time; but catch him putting his coin in anything doubtful.”

That is what people said; and as he had a good home at Kensington, and gave nice, quiet little dinners, he and his were pretty well courted.

“Well, yes, I don’t mind, Archy,” said old Graves, the wholesale cork merchant of Tower Hill. “Hazel Thorne is a very nice girl—very pretty and ladylike, so I suppose we must swallow the mother for her sake.”

The boa-constrictor-like proposition was naturally enough taken by Archibald Graves in its slango-metaphorical sense, and slango-metaphorically Mrs Frederick Thorne was swallowed by the whole of the Graves family, and she did not agree with them.

For Mrs Thorne was not a pleasant woman. Tall, handsome, and thoroughly ladylike in appearance, she was very proud of having been considered a beauty, and was not above reminding her husband of the fact that she might have married So-and-so and What’s-his-name, and You-know-whom, all of which gentlemen could have placed her in a better position than that she occupied; and as she grew older these references were more frequent. Each child she had seemed to be looked upon by her as a fresh grievance—a new cause for tears, and tears she accordingly shed to an extent that might have made any one fancy this was the reason why the Thorne home generally seemed damp and chilly, till Hazel entered the room like so much sunshine, when the chill immediately passed away.

Gradually growing weaker in act and speech, the unfortunate woman received a shock which completed the change that had been gradually heretofore advancing, for Fred Thorne—handsome, bright, cheery, and ever ready to laugh at mamma’s doldrums, as he called them—went out as usual one morning to the City, saying that he should be back a little earlier to dinner that day, as he had stalls for the opera.

“I’ll come back through Covent Garden, Hazel, and bring you a bouquet,” he cried merrily.

“You need not bring flowers for me, Frederick,” said Mrs Thorne, in an aggrieved tone. “I am growing too old for flowers now.”

“Too old? Ha, ha, ha!” he cried. “Why, you look younger than ever. Smithson asked me the other day if you and Hazel were my daughters.”

“Did he, Frederick,” said Mrs Thorne, in a rather less lachrymose tone.

“To be sure he did; and of course I am going to bring you a bouquet as well.”

He bought the two bouquets, and they were kept fresh in water, taken to pieces, and spread over his breast, as he lay cold and stern in his coffin: for as he was carefully bearing the box containing the flowers across Waterloo Place on his way home that evening, there was a cry, a shout, the rush of wheels, and the trampling of horses; a barouche came along Pall Mall at a furious rate, with two ladies therein clinging to the sides, and the coachman and footman panic-stricken on the box. One rein had broken, and the horses tore round the corner towards Regent Street as if mad with fear.

It was a gallant act, and people said at the inquest that it saved the ladies and the servants, but it was at the sacrifice of his own life. For, dropping the box he was carrying, Fred Thorne, a hale strong man of five-and-forty, dashed at the horses' heads, caught one by the bit and held on, to be dragged fifty or sixty yards, and crushed against the railings of one of the houses.

He stopped the horses, and was picked up by the crowd that gathered round.

"Stop a moment, he wants to say something—he is only stunned—here, get some water—what say, sir!"

"My—poor—darlings!"

They were Fred Thorne's last words, uttered almost with his last breath.

The shock was terrible.

Mrs Thorne took to her bed at once, and was seriously ill for weeks, while Hazel seemed to have been changed in one moment from a merry thoughtless girl to a saddened far-seeing woman.

For upon her the whole charge of the little household fell. There was the nursing of the sick mother, the care and guidance of Percy, a clever, wilful boy of sixteen, now at an expensive school, and the management of the two little girls, Cissy and Mabel.

For the first time in her life she learned the meaning of real trouble, and how dark the world can look at times to those who are under its clouds.

The tears had hardly ceased to flow for the affectionate indulgent father, when Hazel had to listen to business matters, a friend of her father calling one morning, and asking to see her.

This was a Mr Edward Geringer, a gentleman in the same way of business as Mr Thorne, and who had been fully in his confidence.

He was a thin, fair, keen-looking man of eight-and-thirty or forty, with a close, tight mouth, and a quick, impressive way of speaking; his pale-bluish eyes looking sharply at the person addressed the while. He looked, in fact, what he was—a well-dressed clear-headed man, with one thought—how to make money; and he found out how it was done.

That is hardly fair, though. He had another thought, one which had come into his heart—a small one—when the late Mr Thorne had brought him home one day to dinner and to discuss some monetary scheme. That thought had been to make Hazel Thorne his wife, and he had nursed it in silence till it grew into a great plant which overshadowed his life.

He had seen Hazel light and merry, and had been a witness, at the little evenings at the house in Kensington, of the attentions to her paid by Archibald Graves. He knew, too, that they pleased Hazel; and as he saw her brightened eyes and the smiles she bestowed, the hard, cold City man bit his lips and felt sting after sting in his heart.

“Boy-and-girl love,” he muttered though, when he was alone. “It will not last, and I can wait.”

So Edward Geringer waited, and in his visits he was in Hazel’s eyes only her father’s friend, to whom she was bright and merry, taking his presents of fruit and flowers, concert tickets, and even of a ring and locket, just as one of her little sisters might have taken a book or toy. “Oh, *thank* you, Mr Geringer; it was so good of you!” That was all; and the cold calm, calculating man said to himself: “She’s very young—a mere child yet; and I can wait.”

And now he had come, as soon as he felt it prudent after the funeral, to find that he had waited and that Hazel Thorne was no longer a child; and as he saw her in her plain, close-fitting mourning, and the sweet pale face full of care and trouble, he rose to meet her, took both her hands in his, and kissed them with a reverence that won her admiration and respect. “My dear Hazel,” he said softly.

She did not think it strange, but suffered him to lead her to a chair and saw him take one before her. He was her father’s old friend, and she was ready to look up to him for help and guidance in her present strait.

For some minutes they sat in silence, for she could not trust herself to speak, and Geringer waited till she should be more composed.

At last he spoke.

“Hazel, my dear child,” he said.

“My dear child!” What could have been kinder and better! It won her confidence at once. Her father’s old friend would help and counsel her, for she needed the help much; and Archibald had seemed since those terrible days to be thoughtless and selfish instead of helpful.

“I have come to talk to you, Hazel, on very grave matters,” Geringer went on; and she bowed her head for him to continue. “I have to say things to you that ought by rights to be spoken to your mother; but I find here that in future you will be the head of this household, and that mother, brother, sisters will turn to you.”

“Poor mamma! she is broken-hearted,” sighed Hazel. “I shall try to do my best, Mr Geringer.”

"I know you will, Hazel, come what may."

"Yes, come what may," she replied, with another sigh.

"Shall I leave what I have to say for a few weeks, and then talk it over? I can wait."

"I would rather hear it now," replied Hazel. "No trouble could be greater than that we have had to bear, and I see you have bad news for us, Mr Geringer."

"I regret to say I have—very bad news."

"Tell me," said Hazel sadly, as she gazed in her visitor's face.

"It is about the future, my dear child," he said slowly; and he watched the effect of his words. "You and your brother and sisters have been brought up here quite in luxury."

"Papa was always most indulgent and kind."

"Always," assented Geringer. "There, I will not hesitate—I will not go roundabout to tell you. I only ask you, my dear Hazel, to try and bear with fortitude the terrible news I have to inflict upon you, and to beg that you will not associate it in future with me."

"I shall always think of you as my father's most trusted friend. But pray, pray tell me now, and—and—I will try to bear it as I should."

She was choked now by her sobs, and as Geringer tenderly took one of her hands, she let him retain it while he spoke.

"My dear Hazel," he said, "your late father always passed for a wealthy man, but I grieve to say that of late he had embarked in some most unfortunate speculations."

"Poor papa!"

"They were so bad that at last all depended upon one change in the market—a change that did not take place till after his death."

Hazel sobbed.

"If he had lived two days longer he would have known that he was a ruined man."

Hazel's tears ceased to flow, and Geringer went on:—

"I grieve, then, to tell you, my dear child, that instead of leaving his family in a tolerably independent state, my poor friend has left you all penniless."

"Penniless?"

"Yes. Worse; for this house and its furniture must go to defray the debts he has left behind."

It is terrible—terrible indeed.”

“Terrible?”

“Yes, dreadful,” he said, gazing in her face.

“Is that all?”

“All? All, my child? What do you mean?”

“Is that the terrible trouble you said that you had to communicate.”

“Yes, my dear child,” he exclaimed; “it is dreadful news.”

“But it is only money matters,” said Hazel innocently; and her face lit up with a pleasant smile. “I thought it was some dreadful trouble—some fresh misfortune.” And as she sat looking him full in the eyes, her quick imagination carried her on to the time when Archibald would ask her to be his wife. His father was rich, and they would have a nice, bright little home somewhere, and mamma and the little girls would live with them. Percy would come home during his holidays, and they would be as happy as the day was long. Certainly, she did shrink a little at the thought of mamma and Archibald; but then she knew he would be as self-denying as herself, and he would do anything for her sake, of course.

She was brought back to the present by her visitor.

“You do not think this so great a trouble, then!” he said.

“Oh, no!” cried Hazel. “It only means going to a humbler house: and of course Percy and I will set to work to make mamma happy and comfortable.”

“Of course,” said the visitor dryly.

“And Percy is growing into a man, and he must take an office and do something in the City; and I must do something too, Mr Geringer—teach music or painting. You will help me, will you not!”

“In any way. In every way I will devote myself to your service. You will allow me?”

“Indeed I will,” she said, placing both her hands in his. “Papa always said you were one of his best friends, and to whom could I look better than to you.”

“Trust me, Hazel, and you shall never repent it,” he cried warmly—so warmly that he saw a half-alarmed look in the young girl’s face; but he succeeded in chasing it away by his after-display of tender regret and reverence; and left her comparatively happy and at rest.

Chapter Four.

A Proposal.

All looked so easy and bright in the future that it seemed harsh on the part of Fate to crush out hope after hope. All appeared so promising when Hazel had discussed her position with Mr Geringer, and then during the next few months bit by bit the morsels of blue sky were blotted out of her horizon, till all above her seemed cold grey cloud, and her life a blank.

First then was her mother's health to battle for, and to comfort her when they had to move to furnished lodgings and manage without a servant.

"Yes, it will be better," said Edward Geringer to himself with a smile. "Let it work."

He had thought the matter out thoroughly—for the family, save for a little consideration displayed by the creditors, were absolutely penniless; and he let them go into lodgings, and waited to be asked for help.

The first appeal to him was about Percy, the son; and he responded willingly, advising sensibly and well that the lad should go into some City office and fight his way in the world.

Hazel sighed, for she had hoped for more schooling and then a career at college, in spite of her talk of her brother's working. So Percy went into the office of Suthers, Rubley, and Spark, the sugar-brokers, and came home grumbling every night.

It was hard to bear, for it upset poor weak Mrs Thorne, who sympathised with her son, and talked of the degradation, and sighed and petted him, calling him her noble boy, inveighing against Fate, and making the lad ten times as discontented with his position as he had been before, and so increased the load on Hazel's shoulders just at a time when she was nearly broken-hearted.

For it was unmistakable: Archibald Graves, the true, the sterling, the handsome, the best of men, had been yielding to home-pressure. Old Graves said it was preposterous. The girl was right enough, but he was not going to see his son throw himself away and set up a home with a penniless girl so as to keep her mother and family as well.

Archibald Graves was indignant at first, then he thought it over. Hazel was the nicest and dearest of girls, but certainly Mrs Thorne only wanted a vowel left out of her name for it to describe her exactly. He did not like Percy either, whom he thought "a spoiled young cub." Then there were more words with his father; introductions to friends of his sisters, especially to one Miss Pettifer, who was reputed rich, and so on, till Archibald Graves, in following his own likings, set it all down to his father's stern orders.

He told himself that he was only doing his duty in ceasing his visits to the Thornes, and after nearly breaking her heart, pride came to Hazel Thorne's help, and she grew pale and sterner of face as the weeks passed, and no Archibald, while Edward Geringer came regularly, called her his dear child, and went away smiling and praising himself for his self-restraint.

It is needless to go on describing Hazel Thorne's troubles during these months, when, in addition to the suffering produced by the falling away of one to whom she had looked for help, there was the attendance on the querulous, sick, thoughtless mother, always complaining of her fate and the fact that a lady should be brought down to such a life. There was Percy to combat when he talked of throwing up his situation, "appointment" he called it—the children—the little sisters—to teach, and, above all, the battle to fight of finding money, and lowering her pride to accept help from relatives who gave grudgingly when unwillingly appealed to.

Mr Geringer had thoughtfully placed money in her hands twice.

"The result of a little speculation in which I was engaged with poor Thorne, my dear child," he said; but that failed fast, and as Hazel toiled on at her task of giving lessons to three or four pupils she had got together, she looked blankly forward at the future, and wondered what they all would do.

It was nearly six months since her father's death, and she could not conceal the fact from herself that they were rapidly going down-hill. Instead of Percy being a help, he was an expense; and everything depended upon her. Under the circumstances, the only prospect open to her was to start a school; but while the grass was growing the steed was starving, and she used to look with envy at the smart well-dressed mistress of the national school hard by, with her troop of girls who came pouring out at noon; and at last came like an inspiration the idea—why should not she get a post as mistress?

To think was to act, and she boldly called on the mistress, who sent her away terribly dejected, with the information that at least a year's training in the system, however well educated the would-be teacher might be, was absolutely necessary. Hazel, however, obtained a good deal of information as well, ready to ponder over—how she might either go to Whitelands or to Smith Square, Westminster; what would be the cost; the probabilities of her obtaining a school afterwards; the salary; etcetera, etcetera.

She went back in despair, for how could the money be obtained to pay her expenses and keep house as well, while the idea of obtaining a school at the end of a year's training, with a certain salary and a comfortable home, seemed so Eden-like a prospect that the difficulties to be surmounted appeared to grow.

Like all other difficulties, however, they began to shrink when boldly attacked. Hazel wrote to two or three relatives, as a forlorn hope, and they who had before only doled out a few pounds unwillingly, jumped at the chance of getting the indigent applicant off their hands, and after a consultation, wrote to her saying they were so pleased with her efforts at self-help, that amongst them they would subscribe the funds for paying her fees, at the training institution and for maintaining Mrs Thorne and the children for a year, or such time as Hazel should get a school.

"Oh, mamma, mamma, sunshine at last," cried the girl, and trembling, weeping, and laughing hysterically, in turn, so great was her joy, she read the letter, which came upon Mrs Thorne as a surprise, her child having kept her quite in ignorance of the plans to prevent

disappointment.

“Then, I think it very disgraceful, very disgraceful indeed, Hazel,” said the poor woman indignantly. “They ought to be ashamed of themselves.”

“Ashamed, dear mother!”

“Now, don’t you turn against me in my troubles, Hazel,” cried Mrs Thorne. “What have I done that my own child should begin to degrade me?”

“Degrade you? Oh, my own dear mother!”

“There—there again! I don’t care how low we are forced by the cruelty of my relatives, and your poor dear papa’s. I will never forget that I am a lady.”

“Surely not, dear,” said Hazel soothingly.

“Then why will you persist in calling me by that low, common, degrading term—Mother?”

“Dear mamma, I thought it better under the circumstances.”

“No circumstances could excuse it, Hazel,” said Mrs Thorne with dignity. “Percy never speaks to me like that; and by-the-way, my dear, Percy says he must have a new suit: his mourning is getting so shabby, he is quite ashamed of it, and I’m sure my heart bleeds every time I see the poor boy go out.”

“Yes, mamma, we will see what can be done,” said Hazel, suppressing a sigh.

“And as to that national school business,” continued Mrs Thorne, “it is disgraceful. Write and tell cousin Jane and her husband that, however low we may be reduced by poverty, my daughter will never forget that she is a lady.”

“But, mamma dear,” said Hazel gently; “it was entirely my idea, and I wrote for their help.”

“You—you, Hazel—my child—propose to go to a common training school, and then accept a situation to teach a pack of dirty poor people’s children? Oh, what have I done—what have I done to be called upon to suffer this new—this pitiful degradation! What have I done?”

It was hard work, but by degrees poor Mrs Thorne was brought round to think that perhaps—perhaps—she would go no farther—it might be less degradation to accept an honourable post and do a great duty therein of helping to make so many girls better women by careful training, than to live in indigence as a kind of respectable pauper, subsisting on the assistance of grudging friends.

So the poor, weak, proud woman at last gave way, and the preliminaries being arranged, Hazel was about to leave home for the training institution full of hope, when there was a change in the state of affairs.

All this had taken place unknown to Mr Geringer, who was quite startled when he heard the plans, for they ran counter to his own.

It had been quite in keeping with his ideas that the Thornes should taste the bitters of poverty, and know what being impecunious really meant. The poorer they were the easier would be his task. Matters had gone on swimmingly. Their position had had its effect upon the Graves's, and his rival, as he called Archibald Graves, had left the field; six months had passed, and Hazel had grown to look upon him as a very dear friend, though not as a lover, and he had come to the conclusion that the time was now ripe for asking her to be his wife; in fact, he had had thoughts of speaking at their last meeting, but had been put off! Now he had come to find Mrs Thorne alone, and after a certain amount of preliminary, was about to speak, when the lady fired off her views and took him by surprise.

"Go—to a training institution—become a schoolmistress!" he cried. "My dear Mrs Thorne, it is impossible."

"Exactly my words," said the lady. "'Hazel, my dear child,' I said, 'such a degradation is impossible.'"

"Quite impossible," said Geringer; and then he drew nearer and talked for some time in a low voice to Mrs Thorne, who shed tears and sobbed greatly, and said that she had always looked upon him as their best and dearest friend.

"I have waited, you see," he continued, "for of course if I had felt that dear Hazel really cared for this young Graves I should have said nothing, and I fully know my deficiencies, my age, and such drawbacks; but I am tolerably wealthy, and I can give her all she has lost, restore her nearest and dearest to their proper place in society—almost to the position they formerly held in the world's esteem."

Mrs Thorne thought they were words of gold, and at Geringer's request she not only readily promised to prepare Hazel, but that all should be as he wished.

L'homme propose, as the French proverb has it and things do not always turn out as he wishes. Mr Geringer, after the preparation Hazel received from Mrs Thorne, proposed and was refused. Hazel said it was impossible, and such was her obstinacy, as Mrs Thorne called it, she refused to become a rich man's wife, and insisted upon going to the Whitelands training institution, condemning her unfortunate mother to a life of poverty and degradation, her brother to toil, and blasting her young sisters' prospects, when she might have married, had her carriage, and all would have gone as merry as a marriage bell.

That was Mrs Thorne's view of the case, and she kept up her protests with tears and repining, winning Percy to her side till he was always ready to reproach his sister. Hazel bore all, worked with all the energy in her nature for the year of training, was fortunate in getting a school after a few months' waiting, and was, as we found her, duly installed in the little schoolhouse, her brother being boarded with some humble friends in town.

Chapter Five.

Disturbing Influences.

Hazel Thorne felt giddy as she took her seat in the front of the gallery, the seat with a little square patchy cushion close to the red curtains in front of the organist's pew. Beside and behind her the school children sat in rows, with ample room for three times the number; but the seats were never filled save upon the two Sundays before the annual school feast when somehow the Wesleyan and Congregational Sunday-schools were almost empty, and the church school thronged.

It was precisely the same on Mr Chute's side of the organ, with his boys beside and behind, and so situated that he could lean a little forward and get a glimpse of Hazel's profile, and also so that he could leave his seat, go round by the back of the organ, and give the new mistress the hymn-book, and the music used, with all the hymns, chants, and tunes carefully turned down.

It was a pleasant little attention to a stranger, and Hazel turned and thanked him with a smile that was not at all necessary, as Miss Rebecca who played the organ, and saw this through an opening in the red curtains, afterwards said to her brother the Reverend Henry Lambent, while at the time she said:—

“Sh! sh!” For Ann Straggalls was fighting down a desire to laugh, consequent upon Feelier Potts whining sharply:—

“Oh, Goody, me!”

“Like her impudence,” Mr Chute said to himself, in allusion to Miss Rebecca's interference with the duties of the new mistress. “She'd better not try it on with my boys,” and he went back to think of Hazel Thorne's sweet sad smile.

And all the time the object of his thoughts felt giddy.

Archibald Graves down there, when she had believed that he had forgotten her; and the more she thought, the more agitated and indignant she grew. At times she felt as if she must leave the church, for there, plainly in view, sat the disturber of her peace, one whom she had put behind her with the past; and when at last they stood up to sing the first hymn, to her horror she found that it was the custom in the old country church for the audience all to turn and face the organ, when Archibald Graves stood gazing up at her, and, strive how she would, she could not help once or twice meeting his eyes.

“It is cruel and unmanly,” she thought, as she resumed her seat, feeling half distracted by the flood of emotion that seemed to sweep away the present.

Fortunately there was an audible “Sh! sh!” from behind the red curtains just then; and this

drew Hazel's attention to the fact that Feelier Potts was, if not "tiddling," at all events making Ann Straggalls laugh, just when, in a high-pitched drawl, the Reverend Henry Lambent was going on with the service, as if he felt it a great act of condescension to make appeals on behalf of such a lower order of beings as the Plumtonites. What time the round smooth face of Mr William Forth Burge was looking over the edge of his pew, where he always knelt down standing up as Feelier Potts said, and always smelt his hat inside when he came into church. And while this gentleman forgot all about the prayers in his thoughtful meditation upon the face of one who he told himself had the face of an angel, Mr Chute kept forgetting the litany, and let the boys straggle in the responses, for he felt impelled to glance round the front of the organ pew at the soft white forehead he could just contrive to see.

"Those girls never behaved worse," said Miss Rebecca to herself. "If this is to be the way they are kept in order she will never do."

Miss Rebecca Lambent felt more sore than usual, for she was at heart aggrieved that the new schoolmistress should be so good-looking and ladylike—matters not at all in accordance with what was right for "a young person in her station in life;" and, to make matters worse, Jem Chubb, who blew the bellows, let the wind fail in the middle of the second hymn.

It was fortunate, then, that the girls did behave so badly, and that Feelier Potts would keep spreading out her hands, and saying, "Oh, Goody me!" in imitation of the vicar's tones, for it took Hazel's attention, and her task of keeping the girls quiet stayed her thoughts from wandering away.

There was no avoiding the meeting, and when at last—the service being over and the congregation going—the school children, evidently smelling dinner, having rushed off in spite of all efforts to detain them—Hazel slowly descended, it was to find Archibald Graves waiting at the foot of the stairs, and he stepped in front of Mr Chute, who, as he was so near a neighbour, aimed at walking with the new mistress home.

"Let us go off along the road here somewhere, Hazel," said Archibald Graves abruptly, "I have come down on purpose to see you. Never mind these people; come along."

What should she do? Miss Rebecca was staring—nay, glowering; the Burges were coming up, and this terrible interview, which she would have given worlds to avoid, was apparently inevitable: for, unlike some young ladies she did not feel disposed to faint. What then, should she do?

The knot was untied, for just then there was a rustle of silk, and Miss Beatrice swept up over the chiselled slabs, to say, in a stern, uncompromising voice—

"Miss Thorne, my brother, the vicar, wishes to speak with you in the vestry."

Chapter Six.

The Reverend Henry Lambent.

"I beg your pardon," said Archibald Graves, rather abruptly; "I spoke to Miss Thorne before church. I think she is engaged to me."

The eyes of Beatrice Lambent opened with astonishment and she stared at this daring young man, who had the presumption to talk of interposing between the new schoolmistress and the head of the parish. She was evidently about to speak, for her lips moved, but no words came.

It was Hazel who put an end to the unpleasant dilemma.

"I will come at once. Miss Lambent, if you please," she said respectfully.

"Miss Beatrice Lambent, if you please," said the lady haughtily; "Miss Lambent is now descending from the organ-loft."

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed Hazel. Then, glancing with quiet dignity at the intruder and back to Miss Beatrice: "Mr Graves was a friend of our family a year or two back. Mr Graves, my mother is at the schoolhouse; if you wish to see me, I must ask you to call there."

She followed Miss Beatrice up between the rows of pews that lady seeming to take her into moral custody; while, seeing himself the aim of several pairs of eyes, including those of Mr Chute, Mr William Forth Burge, Miss Burge, and above all, those of Miss Lambent, which literally flashed at him, Archibald Graves nodded shortly, turned upon his heel, and tried to march carelessly out of church; but his easy motions were terribly full of restraint.

"I was not aware that Miss Thorne would be so soon having friends," said Miss Lambent; but her remark elicited no reply, for Mr William Forth Burge and his sister both felt troubled, the schoolmaster angry, and all too much preoccupied with the appearance of Hazel Thorne as she passed into the chancel, and through a bar of brilliant colour cast by the sun from the new stained-glass window, which had been placed in the south end of the chancel in memory of the late vicar, the effect being very strange, seeming to etherealise Hazel; though for the matter of that the same effect would have been seen, had it been noticed, in connection with Miss Beatrice, who had led the way, drawing aside the curtain that hung in front of the vestry door, and tapping softly with her knuckles.

"Come in!"

Very simple words, but they set Hazel's heart beating, as, in a whisper full of awe, but at the same time very distant and cold, Miss Beatrice said:

"You may go in now."

As she spoke she drew back, holding the curtain for Hazel to pass; and trying to master her emotion, the latter raised the latch and entered the vestry.

The vicar was standing with his hat in hand, gazing out of the little window at the cheerful prospect of a piece of blank old stone wall, surmounted by a large waterspout, and though he must have heard the door open and close, he did not turn, but stood there as stiff and uncompromising of aspect as his sisters.

He had seen Hazel Thorne twice before, but in a gloomy room in London; and being of rather a preoccupied turn of mind, he had paid so little heed to her personal appearance that he would hardly have recognised her again. A new mistress had been required, and the customary correspondence had taken place; he had called at the institution, asked a few questions, and there was an end of the matter, the strong recommendations of the lady-principal being sufficient for the engagement to be decided on.

Hazel stood waiting for him to turn round, but the Reverend Henry Lambent remained gazing at the water-pipe for some few moments before coughing slightly to clear his throat. Then, in a voice full of haughty condescension, he began:

“I am glad to find that you arrived punctually. Miss Thorne, in accordance with the arrangements that were made; and I take this opportunity of saying a few words to you at this commencement of your career in Plumton.”

Here he stopped, and faced slowly round, allowing his half-closed eyes to rest indifferently upon the new mistress, who was standing facing the window, and upon whose rather pale care-worn face the light fell strongly as he turned.

Very plainly dressed in her well-fitting mourning, Hazel Thorne was one who could have claimed a second look from the sternest of mortals.

It was not that she was surpassing beautiful, and could boast of finely-chiselled nostrils, Juno-like brow, or any of the wonderfully entrancing features with which some novelists endow their heroines; Hazel was simply a sweet-faced, thoroughly English girl, but there was an expression in her eyes, a touching look so full of appeal that it even affected the cold, unimpassioned vicar, who remained silent for some moments as if wondering, and then hastily said:

“I beg your pardon. Miss Thorne, will you sit down!”

He placed a chair for her, and drew another forward from where it was half hidden behind the folds of the surplice but lately hung upon its proper peg, and, astonished at himself waited till Hazel had seated herself before following suit.

“That young man” seemed to have vanished from his thoughts, and the lecture he had intended to read the young schoolmistress upon the bad appearance of such meetings as those which had taken place that morning dropped from his memory, and his lips formed words that surprised him as much as his acts.

“I trust that you have found everything correct at—at the schoolhouse, Miss Thorne?”

“Quite, I thank you,” replied Hazel, with quiet dignity, and she entirely forgot that she was addressing her superior, and left out the “sir.”

“Of course everything is very strange and new to you at first; but er—er, you will soon feel quite at home with us, I hope.”

“Indeed, I hope so,” said Hazel earnestly. “The time has been so short as yet.”

“Yes—of course—so very short,” replied the vicar. “My sisters will call to-morrow, I have no doubt and see Mrs Thorne. I shall be down at the school in the afternoon. You saw Miss Burge, of course, this morning?”

“Oh yes. Miss Burge walked up to church with me.”

“And Mr William Forth Burge too, if I mistake not. Most admirable people, Miss Thorne. Great patrons of our schools. I trust that you will—er—er—try to—er—that is, endeavour to meet them in little matters, connected with the management of the children.”

“You may rely upon my trying to thoroughly fulfil my duties, Mr Lambent,” said Hazel quietly.

“Of course—to be sure, Miss Thorne, no doubt,” he said hastily; and as he spoke he wondered at himself more and more; “but I must not detain you, Miss Thorne. Er—allow me one moment, the curtain is rather awkward to one unaccustomed to the place.”

And, to the astonishment—the utter astonishment—of his sisters, who were standing as stiffly in the chancel as if they were a couple of monumental effigies, the Reverend Henry Lambent opened the door, passed out first, and then stood holding the curtain aside for Hazel to pass, which she did, bowing gravely and with quiet dignity to the two ladies before gliding along the nave and out of the door.

Neither of the sisters spoke, but stood, like the vicar, watching the new mistress leave the church.

At last Miss Beatrice turned.

“What excuse did she make, Henry?” she said.

“I—er—I beg your pardon, Beatrice?”

“I say, what excuse did she make? Really, her conduct is very, strange.”

“Excuse? Oh, of course, about her visitor,” said the vicar absently. “I er—I—on second consideration thought it would be better to ignore the matter. Perhaps she was not to blame.”

“Henry!”

“Beatrice, my dear,” said the vicar quietly, “I always abstain from having refreshments in

the vestry, but the morning service is long and I feel faint. Let us go home to lunch.”

Miss Beatrice had the first rule over the vicarage, her elder sister the second rule, and generally speaking, the vicar let them have matters entirely their own way; still, there were times when he took the reins in his own hands, and then it was dangerous to interfere.

This was one of the times when the vicar showed that he had a will of his own, and consequently the sisters exchanged glances and said no more.

Chapter Seven.

“What did I see in this Boy?”

Hazel was not destined to reach home without adventure, for before she had gone far she could see Mr Chute walking along very slowly, right at the bottom of the street, and evidently hoping that she would overtake him. But this was not the cause of the palpitation from which Hazel suffered, for, about halfway between the church and the schools, she saw Archibald Graves coming to meet her, walking very fast; and she had to prepare herself for the encounter that was now inevitable.

“At last!” he cried, eagerly, as he came up. “My dear Hazel, I thought I was never to see you.”

She took no notice of the proffered hand, but walked quietly on.

“Won’t you take my arm, Hazel?” he exclaimed. “Oh, don’t be so hard on a fellow. What have I done?”

Hazel turned her large earnest eyes upon him, and seemed to look him through and through, as, instead of answering his question, she put one to herself.

“What did I see in Archibald Graves, this thoughtless boy, who can come and ask me such a question after the agony I have suffered? What did I see in this boy to make me think I loved him with all my heart?”

Poor Hazel! It did not occur to her that a short two years since she was a light-hearted girl; and that since then she had grown into a deep, earnest woman, who had been baptised by sorrow, and who could only share the riches of her love with one who was all that was manly and true, and to whom she could look up with respect, even with reverence; whereas now, with his petulant boyish, injured air, Archibald Graves only filled her with something akin to disgust.

“I say, you know, Hazel,” he went on, “don’t be so hard on a fellow. The governor was dead against my keeping it up, you know, and he wanted me to give him my word not to see you any more; but at last I thought I must see you again, so I found out all about what you were doing, and where you were, and followed you down here; and ’pon my soul, when I saw you

leading that string of scrubs of school children to church, I did not know whether to laugh or cry.”

“Then Mr Graves is not aware of your visit down here, Archibald?” said Hazel quietly.

“By Jove, no! he would be in a wax if he knew.”

“Then why did you come?”

“Why did I come? Oh, I say Hazel,” he cried reproachfully, “I didn’t think you could be so hard upon me. You don’t know how I’ve been upset all about it. ’Pon my word, there were times when I felt almost ill.”

“Has he altered?” Hazel’s heart cried out within her, “or have I become worldly and cold, and, as he says, hard?”

“I say, you know, Hazel, you must give up all this wretched business. I shall tell the governor that I mean to keep to our old engagement, and he’ll come round some day; but you must give up the school teaching, as he’d never stand that, for he’s as proud as Lucifer. Come, I say, it’s all right again, isn’t it?”

“What did I see in this boy?” thought Hazel, as the indignant blood flushed into her cheeks, and then flowed back painfully to her heart. “Was he always as weak and thoughtless as this?”

“Oh, I say, mother, look here,” cried a shrill voice as they were passing an open cottage door; “that’s new teacher, and that’s her young man.”

“There, you hear,” whispered Hazel’s companion, laughing; “it was vulgarly put, but very true.”

“Archibald Graves,” said Hazel quietly, “have you not the common-sense to see that your visit here is putting me in a false position?”

“I know you are in a false position here,” he retorted angrily. “Who’s that fellow, and why does he take off his hat to you, and glare at me?”

“That is Mr Chute, the master of the boys’ school, and my fellow-teacher. This is my house, and I cannot ask you to come in. Do you wish me to think with a little less pain of our old acquaintanceship?”

“*Our* old love, you mean,” he cried.

“Our old acquaintanceship, Archibald Graves,” she replied firmly. “Love is too holy a word to be spoken of in connection with our past.”

“I—I don’t understand you,” he cried.

“You will when you have grown older and more thoughtful,” she replied. “Now good-bye.”

“Thoughtful? Older?” he blurted out. “I am old enough and thoughtful enough to know what I mean, and I won’t part like this.”

“Your presence here is liable to be seriously misconstrued,” said Hazel; “do you wish to do me a serious injury in the eyes of those with whom it is of vital importance that I should stand well?”

“Why, of course not. How can you ask me?”

“Then say ‘good-bye’ at once, and leave this place.”

“But I tell you I have come down on purpose to—”

“All that is dead,” she said, in a tone that startled him.

“Then you never loved me!” he cried angrily.

“Heaven knows how well!” she said softly. “But you killed that love, Archibald Graves, and it can never be revived.”

She had held out her hand in token of farewell, but he had not taken it; now she let it fall, and before he could frame a fresh appeal she had turned, entered the little house, and the door closed behind her.

Archibald Graves remained standing gazing blankly at the closed door for a few moments, till he heard the click of a latch, and, turning sharply, he saw that the schoolmaster was leisurely walking his garden some fifty yards away. He was not watching the visitor—nothing of the kind; but the flowers in the little bed required looking to, and he remained there picking off withered leaves with his new gloves, and making himself very busy, in spite of a reminder from his mother that dinner was getting cold; and it was not until he had seen the stranger stride away that he entered his own place and sat thoughtfully down.

“If she thinks I am going to be thrown over like this,” said Archibald Graves to himself, “she is mistaken. She shall give way, and she shall leave this wretched place, or I’ll know the reason why. I wonder who that round-faced fellow was, and where I can get something to eat? By Jove, though, how she has altered! she quite touches a fellow like. Here, boy, where’s the principal inn?”

“Say?”

“Where’s the principal inn?” cried the visitor again, as the boy addressed stared at him wonderingly, his London speech being somewhat incomprehensible to juveniles at Plumton All Saints.

“Dunno.”

“Where can I get something to eat, then?” said the visitor, feeling half amused, his difficulty with Hazel passing rapidly away.

“Somut to ee-yut. Why don’t yer go ho-um?”

“Hang the boy! Oh, here’s the round-faced chap. I beg your pardon, can you direct me to the best hotel?”

“Straight past the church, sir, and round into the market-place.”

“Thanks; I can get some lunch or dinner there, I suppose?”

“Ye-es,” said Mr William Forth Burge. “I should think so.”

“I came down from town by the mail last night, and walked over from Burtwick this morning. Strange in the place, you see.”

“May I offer you a bit of dinner, sir? I know London well, though I’m a native here, and as a friend of our new schoolmistress—”

“Oh, I should hardly like to intrude,” cried the young man apologetically.

“Pray come,” said the ex-butcher eagerly, for he longed to get the young man under his roof. He did not know why: in fact he felt almost hurt at his coming there that morning; and again, he did not know why, but he knew one thing, and that was that he would have given ten pounds that moment to know why Archibald Graves had come down that day, and what he said to Miss Thorne, and—yes, he would have given twenty pounds to know what Hazel Thorne said to him.

The result was, that he carried off the stranger to his handsome house, just outside the town, and soon after Archibald Graves was making himself quite at home, drinking the school-patron’s sherry, smoking his cigars, and getting moment by moment more fluent of tongue, and ready to lay bare the secrets of his heart, if secrets the facts could be called that he was prepared to make known to any one who would talk.

“Has he gone, Bill?” said Miss Burge, entering the drawing-room about eight o’clock that evening, and finding her brother standing before a glass and sprinkling himself with scent.

“Yes, he went a good hour ago.” And the speaker looked very solemn, and uttered a deep sigh.

“I wouldn’t disturb you, dear, at church time, as you had company; but, Bill dear—oh, how nice you smell!” and she rested her hands on his shoulders and reached up to kiss him.

“Do I, Betsey?”

“Lovely, dear; but do tell me what he said about Miss Thorne.”

Her brother’s forehead seemed to have gone suddenly into the corrugated iron business, as he turned his eyes upon his sister.

“He said—he said—”

“Yes, dear; please go on.”

“He said he had been engaged to her for two or three years, and that as soon as his father left off cutting up rough—”

“Cutting up rough, Bill? Did he say cutting up rough?”

“Yes, Betsey. I never cut up rough in my business, never. I always made a point of having the best Sheffield knives and steels, and my steaks and chops and joints was always pictures.”

“Yes, dear; but tell me: Miss Thorne is engaged to be married to this gentleman?”

“I suppose so,” said Mr William Forth Burge drearily. “It was always so, Betsey. I could get on in trade, and I could save money, and I always dressed well, and I defy the world to say I wasn’t always clean shaved; but I never did see a young lady that I thought was nice, but somebody else had seen her before and thought the same.”

“Oh, but we never know what might happen, Bill.”

“What’s the good of being rich? What’s the good of having a fine house? What’s the good of everything, if everything’s always going to turn out disappointment? Betsey,” he continued fiercely, “that chap thinks of nothing but hisself. He’s one of your cigar-smoking, glass-o’-sherry chaps, and he ain’t got a good ’art. Why, if you’d got a young man, Betsey, and he come and sit down here and talked about you as that chap did about our young schoolmistress, I’d ha’ punched his head!”

Miss Burge pressed her brother softly back into a chair, and patted his face, and smoothed his hair, and kissed him first on one cheek and then upon the other.

“You’re tired, Bill dear,” she said, “and didn’t get your nap after dinner. Where’s your handkerchief? Here, let me do it dear;” and taking her brother’s flaming handkerchief from his pocket, she softly opened it over his head and face as if she were about to perform a conjuring trick and bring out bowls of gold fish or something of the kind from beneath, but she did not: she merely left it on his head and went away on tiptoe, saying to herself:

“Poor Bill! he has got it again, and badly, too.”

Chapter Eight.

Mr Chute's Visit.

It was a busy morning with Hazel Thorne as she took her place in the large schoolroom, feeling that her responsibilities had now commenced in earnest. For there were no ladies to take classes now, the assistance coming from a pupil-teacher and four or five girls as monitors, against one and all of whom Feelier Potts entertained a deadly hatred, for the simple reason that she had been passed over, and they had all been chosen in her stead.

The discipline of the school had been fairly maintained, but Hazel was not long in finding out that there were plenty of young revolutionary spirits waiting their opportunity to test the strength of the new mistress, nor in seeing that Miss Feelier Potts would be one of the leaders in any small insurrectionary movement that might take place.

There was plenty to do that first morning—to feel the way, as it were; to find out what had been going on; how it was done; what the girls knew, and the hundred other little difficulties that a strange mistress would have to deal with on taking possession of a new post.

Monday morning too, and there were the school pence to be paid—hot, moist, sticky pennies, that had been carried generally in hot, moist, sticky hands. These had to be received and noted, and the excuses listened to as well.

“Mother hadn't got no change's morning, teacher”—“Pay next week, teacher”—“Mother says, teacher, as there's four on us, she oughtn't to pay more'n thruppens”—“Mother 'll call and pay when she comes by.” Then there was Sarah Ann Simms' case. Sarah Ann had not brought her penny, and the book showed that she had not brought it the week before, nor the month before; in fact, it seemed as if Sarah Ann was in debt for her schooling from the time she had commenced.

Upon Sarah Ann being questioned, she didn't know nothink, only that mother—who appeared to be ready to set all school rules, regulations, and laws at defiance—said she shouldn't pay.

Hazel Thorne was pondering upon this crux, when there was a tap at the door, and Mr Samuel Chute entered, smiling to say “Good morning.”

“I thought I'd just drop in, and see if there was anything I could do,” he said, upon shaking hands, after which he wiped the hand he had used upon his fair hair. “It's very awkward coming first to a school,” he went on, “and if you'll only send for me, or ask for anything, you shall have it directly. I hope you've got plenty of chalk.”

Hazel believed there was plenty, and promised to send and ask for assistance if any was required, wishing heartily the while that her visitor would go; but although it was evident through the thin partition that the boys were enjoying themselves in their master's absence, Mr Chute seemed in no hurry to depart.

“You'll have some trouble, I daresay,” he continued, rubbing his hands together, and looking

contemplatively at Hazel. "Some of the girls are like their brothers in my school. The young Potts' are a terrible nuisance."

"I daresay I shall be able to manage them by degrees," replied Hazel—

"Are you sure you have plenty of chalk?"

"I think there is an abundance of school necessities."

"Oh, no! Oh dear, no!" said Mr Chute, with a pitying smile. "You'll find lots of things wanting. They're very stingy over them; and if it wasn't for old Burge, I don't know what we should do. You are sure you have plenty of chalk?"

"Please, teacher, there's a whole boxful in the cupboard," said Miss Potts.

"Silence! How dare you speak when you are not asked?" said Mr Chute fiercely; and Miss Potts began to hurry away, terribly alarmed, back to her place, but watched her opportunity to turn and squint horribly at the visitor, to the great delight of the other girls—especially of Ann Straggalls the fat, who, poor girl, seemed to suffer from an infirmity; for no sooner did she see anything mirth-provoking than she exploded loudly, no matter where she was, into a boisterous laugh—a laugh that was a constant source of trouble to her; for which she had suffered endless punishments, besides having been ordered three times out of church by Miss Rebecca Lambent, who would rise spectrally above the red curtains of the organ-loft, and stand pointing at the door till the trembling girl had gone.

Ann Straggalls horrified Hazel upon this occasion by giving vent to one of her explosions, and then turning purple as she tried to hide her face.

"Ah, you'll have to punish her," said Mr Chute. "Oh, by-the-way, Miss Thorne—"

"If he would only go!" thought Hazel, for the girls were getting very lively and boisterous, seeing their teacher's attention taken off, and catching a little of the infection from beyond the partition shutters.

"I say, you'll have a deal of trouble over the school pence"—Mr Chute was a prophet in this case, though he did not know it—"they'll try all sorts of plans to get out of paying—a few of them will; but don't you be imposed upon by their excuses. It's only a penny a week, you know. There's the Simms's never will pay, and they ought to be turned out of the schools, for it isn't fair for some children to pay and some not, is it?"

"Of course not," replied Hazel. "Oh, why won't he go? Surely he must see that my time is wanted."

Just then the noise in the boys' school became furious, and Mr Chute made an effort to let his rebellious subjects know that, though invisible in body, he was present with them in spirit, by going on tiptoe across the school and rapping on one of the sliding shutters sharply with his knuckles.

The effect was magical, and he came back triumphant.

“That’s how I serve them,” he said, with a self-satisfied smirk. “They know I won’t stand any nonsense; and, I say, Miss Thorne, if you hear me using the cane, don’t you take any notice, you know. It’s good for them sometimes. You’ll have to use it yourself.”

“I hope not,” said Hazel quietly; and she glanced towards the door.

“Ah, but you will,” he said, laughing, and in profound ignorance of the fact that Feelier Potts was imitating his every action for the benefit of her class, even to going across and pretending to tap at the partition.

“I believe in kindness and firmness combined, Mr Chute.”

“So do I,” he said, as if lost in admiration. “That’s exactly what I said to Lambent; and I say, Miss Thorne, just a friendly word, you know. You back me up and I’ll back you up; don’t you stand any nonsense from Lambent and those two. They’re always meddling and interfering.”

“Those two?” said Hazel, thinking of Ophelia Potts and Ann Straggalls.

“Yes; Rebecca and Beatrice, Lambent’s sisters, you know. Rebel and Tricks we call them down here. They’re as smooth as can be to your face, and they go and make mischief to Lambent. You must have your eyes open, for they’re always telling tales. Beatrice is going to marry the young squire at Ardley, at least she wants to, and Rebecca wants old Burge, but he can’t see it.”

“You really must excuse me now, Mr Chute,” said Hazel. “I have so much to do.”

“Yes, so have I,” he said pleasantly; but he did not stir. “You are sure you have plenty of chalk?”

“Oh yes, plenty.”

“And slate-pencil? I believe the little wretches eat the slate-pencil, so much of it goes.”

“I will send for some if I want it,” said Hazel; “I must go now to those classes.”

“Yes, of course, but one minute. My mother wants to be introduced to your mother, as we are to be neighbours, you know, and if there’s anything household you want, mind you send for it.”

“Yes, certainly, Mr Chute.”—Oh, I wish he would go!

“May I bring my mother in to-night to see you?”

“Not to-night, please, Mr Chute; we are hardly settled yet.”

“No, of course not. Well, good-bye; I *must* go now.”

He held out his hand.

For some time past Miss Lambent and her sister had been waiting. They had entered the boys' school to leave a message, and for a while their presence had acted as a brake upon the spirits of the young gentlemen; but waves of noise soon began to rise and fall, growing louder as the time went on.

“Master's in the girls' school,” one of the boys had said. “Should he fetch him?”

“No, boy; go on with your lessons,” said Miss Beatrice; and she exchanged glances with her sister. Then they settled themselves to wait, standing like a pair of martyrs to circumstances, listening to the increasing noise, and at last marching together out of the boys' school and towards the girls'.

“Henry had better send for Mr Chute, and give him a good talking to,” said Miss Lambent.

“I formed my own impressions yesterday,” said Miss Beatrice. “These proceedings only endorse them. She will never do for Plumton.”

“Never!” said Miss Rebecca; and after an inquiring look, given and taken, the sisters entered the girls' school, to find Miss Feelier Potts standing up, gazing pensively at Ann Straggalls, as she held and pressed her hand in perfect imitation of the action of Mr Samuel Chute, who was taking a farewell of the new mistress as if he were going on a long voyage—never to return.

Chapter Nine.

Excitement at Plumton.

“I don't know what has come to Henry,” said Miss Lambent. “If I had been in his place I should have immediately called a meeting of the governors of the school, paid Miss Thorne, and let her seek for an engagement elsewhere.”

“I quite agree with you, Rebecca,” replied Miss Beatrice. “Henry is behaving weakly and foolishly in all these matters. But we cannot be surprised. He is so profound a thinker and so deeply immersed in his studies that these little matters escape him.”

“I think it unpardonable. Here is a strange girl—for she is a mere girl, and far too young, in my estimation—appointed to the school, and just because she has rather a genteel appearance, everybody is paying her deference. Henry is really absurd. He says that Miss Thorne is quite a lady, and that allowances should be made. No allowances are made for me.”

“Don't be angry, Rebecca.”

“I am not angry, Beatrice. I never am angry; but in a case like this I feel bound to speak. There is that absurd Miss Burge ready to praise her to one’s very face, and Mr William Forth Burge actually told me yesterday, when I went up to him to talk about the preparations, that we ought to congratulate ourselves upon having found so excellent a mistress. I haven’t patience with him.”

“Are the Cannings coming?” said Miss Beatrice, changing the conversation; and as she spoke, standing in the vicarage drawing-room, with her eyes half-closed, a faint flush came into her cheeks, and she looked for the moment a very handsome, graceful woman. A connoisseur would have said that she was too thin, but granted that it showed breeding and refinement while her dress was in perfect taste.

“Yes; Mrs Canninge told me yesterday that she should certainly drive over, and that she would persuade George Canninge to come. He ought not to want any persuasion, Beatrice,” and Rebecca accompanied her words with a very meaning look.

“Nonsense, dear! What attraction can a school-treat have to a gentleman like George Canninge?”

“He might find pleasure in proceedings that are watched over by his friends. And now look here, Beatrice, I am never angry, I never quarrel, and I never say cruel things, but I must say that I do not think George Canninge is so attentive to you as he used to be.”

“Hush, Rebecca,” cried Beatrice; “how can you speak like that? There is no engagement between us.”

“But there ought to be,” said Miss Lambent tartly. “Marriage is a subject upon which I have never thought for myself.”

“Rebecca!”

“Well, not directly,” replied the lady. “I may perhaps have given such a matter a thought indirectly, but in your case I have thought about it a great deal.”

“Pray say no more, Rebecca.”

“I must say more, Beatrice, for in a case like this, your welfare is at stake, and for my part, I do not see how George Canninge could do better than by making you mistress of Ardley.”

“My dear Rebecca!”

“It would be rather stooping on our side, for the Cannings are little better than traders; but Mrs Canninge is very nice, and I said to her, yesterday—”

“Surely, Rebecca, you did not allude to—to—”

“George Canninge and yourself? Indeed, I did, my dear. Mrs Canninge and I thoroughly understand one another, and I feel sure that nothing would please her better than for George Canninge to propose to you.”

Miss Beatrice sighed softly, and soon after the sisters went up to dress.

For it was a festival day at Plumton All Saints, being that of the annual school feast.

This school feast or treat was rather an ancient institution, and was coeval with the schools, but it had altered very much in its proportions since its earlier days, when the schoolmaster invested in a penny memorandum-book, and went round to all the principal inhabitants for subscriptions, which rarely exceeded a shilling, and had to be lectured by each donor upon the best way of teaching the children under his charge. Those treats first consisted of a ride in one of the farmers’ waggons as far as a field, where the children were regaled with very thin milk and water, and slices of large loaves spotted with currants, which slices were duly baptised in the milk and water, and called by the children—“cake.”

Then there was a great advance to a real tea in a barn, and again a more generous affair through the generosity of one vicar, who had the children all up to the vicarage, and after they had done no little mischief to his flower-beds, sent them home loaded with fruity cakes, and toys.

Then there was a decadence with a tendency towards thin milk and water and country buns, followed by a tremendous rise when Mr William Forth Burge came upon the scene; and the present was the second feast over which he had been presiding genius.

In preparation for this festival, probably for reasons of his own, the patron had gone about smiling a great deal, and rubbing his hands. He had obtained *carte blanche* from the vicar to do as he pleased, and it had pleased him to say to Miss Burge:

“Betsy, we’ll do the thing ’andsome this time, and no mistake. Money shan’t stand in the way, and I want Miss Thorne—and Mr Chute,” he added hastily, “to see that we know how to do things at Plumton.”

The result was that for a whole week the children nearly ran mad, and attention to object, or any other lessons, was a thing impossible to secure; and once every day—sometimes twice—Mr Chute was obliged to go into the girls’ school and confide to Miss Thorne the fact that he should be heartily glad when it was all over.

Hazel Thorne participated in his feelings, but she did not feel bound to go to the boys’ school to impart her troubles, having terrible work to keep her scholars to their tasks.

For to a little place like Plumton the preparations were tremendously exciting, and between school hours, and afterwards, the entrance to Mr William Forth Burge’s garden was besieged with anxious sightseers, the wildest rumours getting abroad amongst the children, who were ready to believe a great deal more than they saw, though they had ocular demonstration that a large marquee was being erected, that ropes were stretched between the trees for flags, that

four large swings had been made; and as for the contents of that marquee the most extravagant rumours were afloat.

One thing was notable in spite of the inattention, and that was the fact that the schools were wonderfully well filled by children, who came in good time, and who duly paid their pence, many of the scholars having been absentees for months, some since the last school-treat, but who were coming "regular now, please, teacher."

The morning had arrived when, after receiving strict orders to be at the schools punctually at eleven, fully half the expected number were at the gates by nine, clamouring for admittance; and at last the noise grew so loud that Mrs Thorne cast an appealing look at her daughter, and sighed.

"Ah, Hazel," she murmured, "if you had only listened to poor Mr Geringer, we should have been spared this degradation."

"Oh, hush, dear," whispered Hazel. "Pray say no more. Indeed I don't mind, and the poor children seem so happy."

"But I mind it, Hazel," sighed Mrs Thorne. "It is a degradation indeed. Of course you will not be expected to walk with the children as far as those people's?"

"Oh, yes," said Hazel, trying to speak lightly. "They are all going in procession with flags and banners."

"Flags *and* banners, Hazel?" exclaimed Mrs Thorne, with a horrified look.

"Yes, dear. Mr Burge wants to give the children a great treat, and there is to be a brass band that he has engaged on purpose. I have just had a note from Miss Burge. She says her brother wished to keep it a secret to the last."

"But not a regular brass band, Hazel?"

"Yes, dear. It will be at the head of the procession, and the children are to be marched all round the town."

"But not a brass band with a big drum, my dear? Surely not. Don't say with a big drum?"

"Really, mother, dear, I don't know," replied Hazel, bending down and kissing her. "I suppose so."

"Thank Heaven, that my poor husband was spared all this!"

"Oh, hush, dear," whispered Hazel piteously.

"But you will not stoop to walk round the town with them, Hazel? And surely you are never going to put that ridiculous bunch of cowslips in your dress?"

“Mother, dear,” said Hazel quietly, “I am the mistress of the girls’ school, and it is my duty to walk with them. I am going to wear the bunch of spring flowers, for they were brought for me by the girls, who will all wear a bunch like it. Here is a bouquet, though, that Mr Burge has sent for the mistress out of his greenhouse. I suppose I must carry that in my hand.”

“Oh, my poor girl! my poor girl!”

“Now, mother, dear mother, do not be so foolish,” said Hazel. “Why should I be ashamed to walk with my girls? Are we not living an honourable and independent life, and is it not ten thousand times better than eating the bread of charity?”

“Ah me! ah me!” sighed Mrs Thorne.

“Now, dear, you will dress and come up to the treaty and I will see that you are comfortable.”

“I come? No, no, no!”

“Yes, dear, Mr Burge begs that you will. Come, girls.”

This was called up the stairs to her little sisters, who came running down, dressed in white with blue sashes for the first time since their father’s death.

“What does this mean?” exclaimed Mrs Thorne.

“They are coming with me, dear, each carrying a great bouquet.”

“Never! I forbid it!” cried the poor woman.

“It was Mr Burge’s particular request,” said Hazel gently; “and, mother dear, you will nearly break their hearts if you forbid them now.”

“There, there, there,” sobbed Mrs Thorne; “it’s time I died and was taken out of your way. I’m only a nuisance and a burden to you.”

“Mother!”

Only that one word, but the way in which it was uttered, and the graceful form that went down upon its knees before her to draw the head she kept rocking to and fro down upon her breast proved sufficient to calm the weak woman. Her sobs grew less frequent, and she at last began to wipe her eyes, after kissing Hazel again and again.

“I suppose we must accept our fate, my dear,” she said at last. “I’m sure I do mine. And now mind this. Cissy—Mabel!”

“Yes, mamma! Oh, sister Hazel, isn’t it time to go?”

“I say you will mind this. Cissy—Mabel, you are to—But must they walk in procession with

those terrible children, Hazel?"

"Why not, dear? They will be with me, and what can be more innocent and pleasant than this treat to the poor girls? There, there, I know, for my sake, you will come up and lend your countenance to their sports."

"Well, well," sighed Mrs Thorne. "I'll try. But mind me, Hazel," she exclaimed sharply, "I'm not coming up with that dreadful woman, Mrs Chute. I am coming by myself."

"Yes, dear, I would," said Hazel.

"And mind this. Cissy and Mabel, though you are going to walk behind the school children and carry flowers, you are not to forget that you are young ladies. Mind that."

"No, mamma!" in duet.

"And—Oh dear me, Hazel, there is some one at the front door, and I've only got on my old cap. I really cannot be seen; I—Good gracious *me*, Hazel, don't let any one in."

Too late. Hazel had already opened the door and admitted little Miss Burge, who came trotting in with her face all smiles.

"I thought I should never get through the children," she panted; "and ain't it 'ot? How well you do look, my dear! Lavender muslin suits you exactly. And how are you, my bonny little ones?" she cried, kissing the two girls. "But there, I've no time to lose. The band will be here directly, and my brother is with the boys; and, Mrs Thorne, he sends his compliments to you."

Mrs Thorne had drawn herself up very stiffly in her chair, and was preserving a dignified silence, feeling offended at their visitor's want of recognition; but Mr Burge's compliments taught her that this patron of the school acknowledged her status in society, and she smiled and bowed.

"And he said that he hoped you would excuse his not calling to invite you himself, but—now, bless my heart, what was the rest of it?"

She looked in a perplexed way at Hazel, and then at the ceiling, as if expecting to read it there.

"Oh, I know—but he had been so busy over the preparations, and he hoped you would come and look on; and the pony carriage will be here to fetch you at twelve."

"I'm sure—really—I am greatly obliged to Mr Burge—"

"Mr William Forth Burge," said Miss Burge correctively.

"To Mr William Forth Burge for his kindness, and of course I shall be most happy."

Hazel's eyes had filled with tears at the quiet unassuming kindness of these people, and

she looked her gratitude at their visitor.

“My brother’s in such spirits, my dear, and he’s next door; and he said at breakfast that he was proud to say he came to Plumton Schools himself when he was a boy, and nobody should say he was too proud to march round the town with them to-day.”

“And—and is he going to walk in the procession. Miss Burge?” asked Mrs Thorne.

“That he is, ma’am,” said the little lady. “So I said to him at breakfast, ‘well, Bill,’ I said—you see I always call him ‘Bill,’ Mrs Thorne, though he has grown to be such a rich and great man. It seems more natural so—‘well, Bill,’ I said, ‘if with all your money and position you’re not too proud to walk with the boys, I won’t be too proud to walk with the girls.’”

“And—and are you going to walk with them, Miss Burge?” said Mrs Thorne, with trembling eagerness.

“That I am, ma’am,” cried Miss Burge, rustling her voluminous blue silk dress, “and I’ve come down to ask Miss Thorne if she would allow me to walk with her, and—Oh, my gracious! How it did make me jump!”

The cause of Miss Burge’s start was the preliminary *boom boom, boom* of Mrs Thorne’s horror, the big drum, for the band had been marched up silently to the front of the schools, and the next moment the place was echoing with the brazen strains.

Chapter Ten.

Mr Canninge Assists.

Mr William Forth Burge was gorgeous in the newest of frock-coats and the whitest of waistcoats, as he stood outside the schools watching the marshalling of the little forces, and then, glossy hat in one hand, orange handkerchief in the other, he gave the signal to start; and, with the excellent brass band playing its loudest, and the children for the most part bearing flowers or flags, the long procession started, to march up the High Street, round the market-place, past the church, and in and out of Bush Lane and Padley's Road, the boys cheering, the girls firing off a shrill "hurrah" now and then; and whenever the band ceased, either the boys or the girls were started in some simple school chorus, such as poor George W. Martin or Hullah wrote, to be sung ere long through the length and breadth of the land.

It was a simple affair, but well worth seeing, if only to watch the faces of the mothers and fathers of the children, ready at their doors to smile at "our Mary," or "little Jack," or "the bairns."

Mr William Forth Burge was perspiring everywhere—now in the front to stimulate the band, now standing still on a doorstep, hat in one hand, orange handkerchief in the other, till the whole procession, boys and girls, had passed, with a word for every one in turn, and looking thoroughly happy in the simplicity of his heart.

Mr Chute, on the contrary, was very dignified and stern, but ready to raise his best hat to Hazel whenever he had a chance.

At last the vicarage was reached, a halt called, and the children gave a hearty cheer, which brought out the vicar, now ready to join Mr William Forth Burge and walk with the schools, the town being passed.

There needed no fugleman to bring forth cheers from the children as they reached the gates of the garden, for here was a wonderful archway of evergreens and flowers, the work of the two gardeners, and beneath this they had hardly filed before numbers of the townspeople began to arrive. Then there was a carriage or two, and, assisted by the vicar's sisters, little Miss Burge had quite a reception on the green terrace in front of the drawing-room, the wives and daughters of the neighbouring clergy, who all wished they had a William Forth Burge in their own parishes, arriving to do honour to the event.

The grounds were very pretty, and only separated by a light wire fence from a large paddock, which, having been fed off by sheep, was as smooth as a lawn; and here, for the hour before dinner, the children were marched, and sang at intervals, the band taking its turn, playing popular airs.

Miss Lambent and Miss Beatrice had noticed the new schoolmistress with a couple of chilly bows, and then devoted themselves to the assistance of "dear Miss Burge;" while the

giver of the feast was busy in conference with Mr Chute about certain sports that were afterwards to take place.

"I don't see the Canninges carriage yet Beatrice," said Miss Lambent, in a whisper to her sister, as the ladies were strolling about the grounds and admiring the flower-beds, the conservatory, and grape-houses in turn.

"Do you think they will come?" whispered Beatrice, who looked rather flushed; but certainly the day was hot.

"She said they would. Dear me, how strange of Henry!"

The vicar had gone into the paddock, and, after raising his hat politely, was standing talking to Hazel at intervals between saying a few words to the boys and girls—words, by the way, which they did not wish to hear, for every eye was turned as if by a magnet towards the great tent, and the man and maidservants and assistants constantly going to and fro.

"Here they are at last," exclaimed Miss Lambent. "I told you so. Now, Beatrice, what do you say?"

"Nothing," replied her sister quietly.

"Then I say something. George Canninge wouldn't have come here to a children's school feast unless he had expected to meet some one particular."

The object of their conversation had just helped a tall, handsome lady, with perfectly white hair, to descend from a phaeton drawn by a splendid pair of bays. He was a broad-shouldered, sparely-made man of about thirty, with dark, closely-cut whiskers—beards were an abomination then—and keen grey eyes, which took in the whole scene at a glance, and, what was more, to find satisfaction as he took off and replaced his grey felt hat, and then, from habit, took out a white handkerchief and dusted his glossy boots.

"How absurd, mother! Thought I'd been walking," he said. "Bravo, Burge! He's doing it well. Hang it mother! I like that fellow."

"It's a pity, dear, that he is so vulgar."

"Oh, I don't know. He's frank and honesty and don't pretend to be anything more than what he is—a successful tradesman. Never saw a man less of a snob. Oh, there are the Lambents. I say, who's the lady talking to the parson?"

"I don't know, my dear," said Mrs Canninge, "unless it is the new schoolmistress."

"Nonsense: can't be. Oh, here's Burge! How are you, Burge? Glad you've got such a fine day for your treat."

"So am I, Mr Canninge, so am I. Thank you for coming, sir. Thank you for coming too,

ma'am. My sister is up by the house, and there's lunch in the dining-room, and you'll excuse me, won't you! I have such heaps to do."

"Excuse you, of course. And I say, Burge, your going to give the youngsters some fun, I hope?"

"Fun, sir? I mean to let them have a jolly good lark."

"Don't let Lambent get them together and preach at the poor little beggars."

Mr William Forth Burge's face expanded, and he showed all his white teeth.

"That's what I like sir. That's the genuine old English squire said that."

"Nonsense, Burge."

"Oh, but it is, Mr Canninge. I know what's what as well as most men; and, look here, sir, I mean them to thoroughly enjoy themselves to-day."

"That's right, and I'll help you."

"You will, sir?" cried the giver of the feast.

"To be sure I will; get up some races and that sort of thing."

"I've got it all down on a piece of paper here, sir; only you wait. Now, I must go."

"He is really very vulgar, George," said the lady; "but there is a bluntness about him that I do like after all. But hadn't we better go and speak to Miss Burge?"

"Come along then. Oh, there are the Lambents with her now."

The Cannings went up to little Miss Burge, the lady saluting her graciously, and the young squire very heartily; and then salutations were being exchanged with the Misses Lambent, Beatrice looking bright and handsome as George Canninge shook hands in a frank gentlemanly way, as a deafening clamour arose behind them, and, turning, there was the host wielding a great dinner-bell with all his might.

As he ceased, the children cheered, the band struck up, and the little processions were marched past the company on the terrace, the boys to one end of the marquee, the girls to the other, Hazel now at the head of her troop, looking bright and animated, excited slightly by the scene, and being admired more than she knew by those whom she passed.

As she came abreast of the group, she involuntarily raised her eyes, and they encountered a grave, earnest gaze from one whom she had never before seen; and in that brief moment she was aware that she was the object of a very scrutinising examination.

The next minute she had passed between the folds of the tent door, and was busy getting

her girls seated at the long table on one side, the boys occupying a second long table on the other side, both being covered with well-cooked hot joints, steaming potatoes, and, dear to all children's hearts, plenty of pies and puddings.

"Well, ladies," said Mr Cannings, "shall we adjourn to the tent?"

"Did you think of going in?" said Beatrice.

"To be sure," he said gaily. "I am going to help."

"Going to help!" said Miss Lambent.

"To be sure: I promised Mr Burge. Let me take you in. Miss Lambent."

Rebecca took a long breath and the squire's arm. She liked it, but she knew that Beatrice would be out of temper for hours after.

There was no cause for temper, though—for the squire, as he was always called in the neighbourhood, had no sooner led the elder Miss Lambent within the canvas walls, then he coolly forsook her, and went and placed himself behind a great sirloin of beef at one end of the girls' table, facing Mr William Forth Burge, who had the twin joint before him, over which his round red face was smiling pleasantly. The vicar had gone to one end of the boys' table, the master being at the other, while several of the principal tradesmen took their places in front of other joints.

"Now, boys and girls," cried the host, "are you all ready?"

The chorus of "yes!" was startling.

"Then silence for grace," roared the host; and then, rapidly, "What we're going to receive make us truly thankful. Amen. Lots of plates here!"

Before he finished, his great carving-knife was playing a tune in that skilful way peculiar to butchers, upon a silver-mounted steel, while the vicar looked aghast and George Cannings stooped down to hide a smile.

It was quite an insult when the vicar was present but in the innocence of his heart, Mr William Forth Burge was hoping the joints were done, and eager to begin.

"Now, gentlemen, carve away, please," he shouted. "Other ladies and gentlemen and servants, please pass the plates and 'taters. I want the youngsters to have a good dinner to-day. Now, Thomas," he cried to his coachman, who had just set down a pile of plates, "you lay hold of that—that spoon, and do nothing but ladle out gravy to every plate."

As he spoke, he was slicing off in the most skilful way prime sirloin of beef, and, smiling with delight, he said that it was done to a turn, as he called it.

"I chose every joint myself," he said to one. "Pass the plates quick. See that they have plenty of 'taters, ladies. Eat away, girls."

The visitors, after a few moments' awkward hesitation, turned themselves into waiters, and the carvers had a tremendous time, for quite two hundred hearty girls and boys were eating with all the enjoyment of their young healthy appetites.

"More! That's right!" cried the young squire. "I beg your pardon, Miss—I really don't know your name; I'm afraid I've splashed your dress."

"Pray don't mention it," said Hazel quietly, for she had been busily handing plates, looking brighter and happier than she had appeared for months.

"I'm quite envious of our host," said Canninge the next time Hazel brought a plate. "He carves beautifully, and I've hacked my joint to pieces."

"Send your knife up here, Mr Canninge," roared Mr W.F.B. from the other end of the table. "I'll give it a touch on my steel."

"Will you allow me?" said Hazel, who was the only waiter near.

"No, really, I could not think of—Well, if you will—"

"There."

He had paused to wipe the rather greasy handle upon his white handkerchief, and then, in passing the knife, their hands just touched—a mere touch, and Hazel had gone.

The meat had disappeared, the puddings and pies had followed, and, turned waiter now, the young squire had merrily passed along the plates, till the time for rising had nearly arrived, when accident once more placed him beside Hazel.

"Your girls have thoroughly enjoyed themselves, Miss Thorne," he said, for he had learned her name now from one of the elder children—Feelier Potts, to wit.

"Oh, most thoroughly," said Hazel, smiling brightly and with genuine pleasure. "It is delightful to see them so happy."

"Do you see that Beatrice?" whispered Miss Lambent from the other end of the tent.

"Yes."

"Grace next I suppose? Oh, there is my mother beckoning to me, Miss Thorne," said the squire hastily, "it is a pity to have so pleasant an affair spoiled. Would you mind hinting to Mr Burge that he should ask the vicar to say grace!"

"Oh, yes, I will," said Hazel, nodding to him.

“As if he were her equal,” said Miss Lambent indignantly; while, hurrying to the end of the table. Hazel was just in time to whisper to the host.

“Why, of course,” he said. “What a stupid! Thank you. Miss Thorne. Mr Lambent!” he cried aloud, “would you be kind enough to say grace?”

Out in the field then, with the sun shining, the band playing, and plenty of enjoyment for the schools, which were separated by a rope stretched from one end to the other. Races were run for prizes of all kinds, and, full of animation, while the vicar stood with his hands behind him patronisingly looking on, the young squire was the life and soul of the affair, and ready with a dozen fresh ideas to suggest to the host. There were prizes for the fastest runners, prizes for the slowest, for the first in and the last in, for jumps and hops, and the best singers, and the worst singers, scramblings, blindfold-walking, sports galore.

Hazel forgot her troubles, and with Miss Burge’s help she was always the centre, of some new sport or game; Cissy and Mabel being like a pair of attendant fairies, ready to be seized upon by Mr Canninge as the bearers of the prizes that were to be won.

“I never saw George so full of spirits before,” said Mrs Canninge to Rebecca Lambent as they sat in a garden-chair looking on.

“I should say he will have a bad headache afterwards,” replied that lady.

“Oh, no, he is fond of athletics and that sort of thing. Charming young person, your new schoolmistress, Beatrice dear,” she continued. “Very ladylike and well-spoken.”

“Yes, a very well educated person,” said Beatrice coldly.

“The squire’s a brick, that’s what he is, Betsey,” said the host, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief, about five o’clock. “I tell you what, I’m about tired out. Now, look here, you go in and get yourself a cup of tea, or you’ll be done up, and if you’re as wise as I take you to be, you’ll put just a pinch of ody-wee in the cup. It’ll be all over at six, and then well have a comfortable dinner.”

“But what are you going to do, Bill!”

“To do? I’m going to fetch that girl in to have a cup of tea with you. Bless her, she’s worked like a slave. No, I won’t it’s all right, I’ll take in her mother. Poor old lady, no one seemed to speak to her. Look at that now. That’s what I call a genuine English gentleman, Betsey. Here, hi! Mr Chute, that’ll do; now come up to the house, let them play by themselves. I say, Betsey, this has been a day!”

A day to be remembered, for Mr Chute was tightening his fists and scowling at one of the young Potts, wishing the while that he had a cane. Not that young Potts had been behaving so very badly, but his schoolmaster was annoyed, and some people when hurt look round at once for some one as a spleen-vent. He was suffering from the same pain that had sent a sting

through Beatrice Lambent, and made her sister frown.

For just as Mr William Forth Burge had told his sister his determination, George Cannings, the principal landholder and personage of those parts, the newly-elected magistrate on the county bench, had gone up to Hazel Thorne, raised his hat and said quietly:

“Miss Thorne, you look tired out. Will you allow me to take you into the house and get you some tea?”

“And she forgot herself,” cried Beatrice Lambent passionately, as she paced her room that night Hazel Thorne’s self-forgetfulness consisted in acting, like any unconscious girl would under the circumstances. She gave the speaker a grateful look full of innocence, and, taking his proffered arm, walked with him into Miss Burge’s drawing-room, where she was received with smiles.

Chapter Eleven.

Touching the Sensitive Plant.

It was Burns who wrote his wish that some power would give us the ability to see ourselves from other people’s point of view. If Hazel Thorne had received this gift she would not have remained so steeped in ignorance, but gazing at herself through Beatrice Lambent’s eyes, have seen that she had been guilty of an almost deadly sin.

For what could have been more heinous than for “a young person in her station in life,” as Miss Beatrice afterwards said, to presume to take the squire’s arm, an arm that Beatrice looked upon as sacred, and thought quite polluted by the touch of one who was only a schoolmistress, and consequently not likely to possess feelings similar to her own?

All the same, though, Hazel did touch the sacred limb, and allowed herself to be taken into the drawing-room, which Mrs Cannings had just entered, and was now presiding at a tea-table.

“You’ll let me do that for you, Miss Burge,” she had said. “You must be tired out.”

“Well, really and truly, Mrs Cannings, my poor legs do ache to such an extent,” said Miss Burge confidentially, “that I feel a’most ready to drop.”

“That you must, indeed,” said Mrs Cannings, smiling, as the little body toddled to a large cane arm-chair, and plumped herself down so vigorously that the cane chair uttered a loud protest, and after giving way in an elastic manner, kept on uttering little squeaks and creaks, somewhat after the fashion of Miss Feelier Potts, as it made efforts to recover itself.

Meanwhile little Miss Burge sat there smiling gratefully, and enjoying her rest, as she gently rocked herself to and fro rubbing her hands in regular twin motion backwards and forwards along her aching legs.

“You see, Mrs Canninge—and sugar, please—three lumps. Yes, I always take cream, it do improve the tea so—you see my brother takes so much interest in the schools, and he’d set his mind upon the boys and girls enjoying themselves, that it would have been a sin and a shame not to have done one’s best to help him; but, oh my! It has been a job.”

“I’m sure you must have worked like a slave, Miss Burge,” said Mrs Canninge, handing the tea, “and we ought all to be very grateful to you and your brother.”

“Oh, it isn’t me, my dear,” said Miss Burge (fortunately neither Miss Lambent nor Beatrice was at hand to hear Mrs Canninge addressed as “my dear”)—“it is all my brother. He hasn’t a bit of pride in him. He says, you know, Mrs Canninge, he first learned to read and write at Plumton School, and it’s been so useful to him that—”

“Excuse me. Miss Burge, I have not my best glasses with me, is not this Miss—Miss—?”

“Thorne, yes, Mrs Canninge, and it’s very kind of your son to bring the poor dear in to have some tea.”

Mrs Canninge looked rather curiously at Hazel Thorne, as her son brought her into the drawing-room. If she had been plain and ordinary looking, Mrs Canninge would have thought nothing of the incident; but then Hazel Thorne was neither plain nor ordinary, and, what was more, she did not seem in the slightest degree oppressed by the novelty of the situation, but chatted quietly to her companion, who was the more conscious of the two.

“Oh, here is my mother,” he said. “Mother dear, I have brought you an exhausted slave; pray feed and rest her, or she will be throwing off the Plumton chains, and escaping to some place where they will treat her better. Miss Thorne, this is my mother, Mrs Canninge.”

“I am very glad to know you, Miss Thorne,” said Mrs Canninge quietly; and Hazel looked her full in the eyes before lowering her own, and bending slightly, for there was a something in Mrs Canninge’s way that was different to her son’s. George Canninge had spoken to her as if she were his equal, while his mother had smiled, spoken kindly, and hastened to pour out some tea; but Hazel felt and knew that it was not in the same way as she would have spoken and acted towards one of her own set.

The shade of difference was very slight, but it was marked, and George Canninge noted it as well, though it was lost upon little Miss Burge, who turned to Hazel, and began to prattle away directly.

“Ah, that’s right, Mr Canninge, I am glad you have brought Miss Thorne in. She has been regularly fagged to death. I never did see any one work so.”

“Miss Thorne has been indefatigable,” said the squire; “and, by-the-way, Miss Thorne, I think your mamma is somewhere here. I’ll go and find her.”

Hazel was growing cold, but this little gentlemanly attention made her smile again as she bowed her thanks, and George Canninge was just leaving the room, when a familiar voice was

heard, and Mr William Forth Burge appeared with Mrs Thorne, handing her in very carefully, and talking loudly all the while, as he brought her into a place where he was sure there would be no draught, and then fetched her some tea and cake.

“Well, Mr Burge,” cried George Canninge, for he felt conscious that his mother was freezing the current of conversation, “what are we to call it, a success or a failure?”

Mr William Forth Burge opened his mouth and stared, but for a few moments no words came.

“I—thought it was a big success, Mr Canninge, sir,” he said at last. “I meant it to be, you know.”

“And so it is. It is the grandest and the jolliest school-treat I ever saw, and if the young dogs and doggesses are not—”

“Har—ha—ha—ha—ha—ha!”

“Why, what are you laughing at?”

“That’s a good one, sir. Young doggesses, sir,” roared Mr William Forth Burge; but only to become preternaturally solemn directly, as he saw that no one else even smiled.

“I was only going to say that if they don’t feel grateful for all this kindness, they—”

“Oh, there’s Mr Chute outside, I told him to come in and get a cup. You won’t mind for once, Mrs Canninge, and your son, will you? It’s a holiday-time, and I want everybody to be pleased.”

“Oh, certainly not, pray ask him in, Mr Burge,” said Mrs Canninge. “My son and I both wish the school people to thoroughly enjoy themselves. Miss Thorne, your cup is empty, pray let me get you some more tea.”

Hazel was about to decline, for Mrs Canninge’s words made her heart sink. She had felt so happy during the past two hours, and a warm feeling of gratitude had sprung up in her breast towards George Canninge for his gentlemanly courtesy and attention; but Mrs Canninge was, in that quiet way that some ladies can adopt, showing her that she belonged to a different grade of society, towards whom she was acting the part of lady patroness.

For the moment a feeling of resentment sprang up in her breast. She felt that Mrs Canninge was trying to give her a lesson—a lesson that she did not need.

The sensation of humiliation was, however, but momentary, and smiling to herself, she quietly made up her mind to show the lady patroness that she had not forgotten her position, and did not need the lesson.

The opportunity came instantly, for Mr William Forth Burge returned, bringing in poor Mr

Chute, who had been gnashing his teeth, this time with the teeth themselves, and growing more and more wroth at having been neglected. He had worked as hard as any one, but he was not taken into the drawing-room by young squires, and petted and made much of.

Neither of the Misses Lambent came and took his arm, for they were holding aloof altogether, and pretending to be deeply interested in the prizes won by Feelier Potts and Ann Straggalls. Taken altogether, Mr Chute was fast getting up to the point when people's indignation boils over. He was hungry, thirsty, tired, and suffering besides from a sudden attack of longing such as he had never felt before. He wanted to be beside Hazel Thorne, to talk to her, though had he been by her side not a word would have come. He wanted to look at her, and hear her talk. He wanted to breathe the same air that she was breathing, and to see her every act and look, and she had been carried off by young Mr George Canninge, while he, Samuel Chute, who was spoken of as such a clever master, and had been so strongly recommended, was left out in the cold.

Mr Samuel Chute felt in that disposition of mind which comes over most young men some time in their vealy stage, when the whole world is looked upon as going dead against them, because they cannot possess some one particular object; when they rapidly run over the various courses that seem alone open to them, and which embrace enlisting, going to sea, to the dogs, or plunging into a river or canal—at a time when a man is handy with a boat-hook to fish them out.

Mr Chute, then, was not happy, and although he had been asked to go up to the house to partake of some refreshment he would not go, but stalked off into the shrubbery, and gnashed his teeth for a whole minute amongst the rhododendrons, after which he went into a deeper shade where it was all laurels, and as there was no one looking, gave such a stamp upon the ground as hurt his foot in his new boot.

It was in vain that the band, invigorated by Mr William Forth Burge's beer, was playing its happiest air, and the big drum had run wild, the trombone following suit to such an extent that it was cutting and slashing about in a way that was dangerous to the boys, while the leading comet was leading indeed—half a bar ahead. It was in vain that sweet music sought to woo Mr Chute back to the lawn; for a whole five minutes he would not stir, preferring to suffer in solitude.

But Mr Samuel Chute was after all human, and in spite of himself he found that he was gradually drawn to the drawing-room window. Here he was seen by Mr William Forth Burge, who came out, seized and softened him; and as the schoolmaster was marched in he felt decidedly better, and began to think of condescending to live.

"May I give you some tea, Mr Chute?" said Mrs Canninge politely.

"If you please, ma'am," said Chute, who felt better still on noting that young Mr George Canninge was not seated at Hazel Thorne's side.

"Let's see: we must find you a seat, Mr Chute," said Mr William Forth Burge heartily, as he

glanced round.

“There is room here, Mr Burge,” said Hazel, moving a little farther along the settee, and Mr Chute’s ease was complete, for the tea he drank was the most delicious he had ever tasted in his life, and he could have gone on eating bread-and-butter for an hour.

He said very little, and Hazel Thorne had to make up for it by chatting pleasantly about the proceedings, till a message came by one of the boys, and Mr Chute was fetched away, leaving the new mistress to the tender mercies of the young squire—at least that is how he put it; but he felt as he told himself, quite a new man.

George Canninge came to Hazel’s side as soon as Chute had gone, and stood talking to her quietly, and in a way that would have satisfied the most exacting; but he had been dealing with a sensitive plant. At first she had seemed to rejoice in the warmth of his social sunshine, but Mrs Canninge had metaphorically stretched forth a rude hand and touched her leaves, with the result that they shrank and looked withered; and, try as he would, he found her quiet, distant and constrained.

“But she can be different,” he said to himself as at last Hazel rose, and, crossing to Miss Burge, asked her permission to go.

“Oh lor’, yes, my dear, go when you think best; for you must be terribly tired.”

Hazel assured her that she was greatly rested now, and bowing to Mrs Canninge she left the room, without disturbing her mother, who was holding Mr William Forth Burge with an eye, and recounting to him a long, true, and particular account of her early life, the position she had occupied, and the ages and dates of the various illnesses of all her children, including also the fact that her son Percy was growing wonderfully like what his father had been when she first met him at one of the Lord Mayor’s balls.

“And they do say,” sighed Mrs Thorne, “that my daughter is growing greatly like what I used to be.”

Meanwhile Hazel passed out into the grounds, where she was encountered almost directly by Beatrice Lambent, who, assuming utter ignorance of where the schoolmistress had been, exclaimed—

“Oh, you are there. Miss Thorne. Pray—pray get back to the children. My brother has been astonished at your having left them for so long.”

People fight with different weapons to those used of old, but they are quite as sharp.

Chapter Twelve.

Taken to Task.

There was too much sheer hard work at Plumton School for Hazel Thorne to have much time for thoughts of anything but business. She had seen no more of Archibald Graves, but she was never outside the house without feeling nervous and in full expectation of meeting him; but as the days wore on she began to hope that her firm behaviour had not been without its effect.

For a day or two she had felt agitated, and in the solitude of her own room she had more than once wept bitterly for her love, but they were tears such as are shed for the past and gone. There was no hope in them: they brought neither relief nor thought of the future. Hazel Thorne's sorrow was for a dead love, and she preferred to think of Archibald Graves as the ideal lover of her girlish heart, not as the real suitor who had come to her now that she was a woman, who had been tried in the fire of adversity, and been found base.

Hazel Thorne's business matters were two-fold—the business of the school, and the domestic affairs.

With the former she was rapidly progressing. The feeling of novelty had worn off and she no longer felt afraid of being able to maintain her position among so many girls, nor wondered what the pupil-teachers were saying whenever they whispered together; but she was afraid of Mr Samuel Chute, who would come round to the door much more often than necessary, to borrow something, or ask a question or two.

The domestic affairs were harder to get over because they appealed strongly to the heart, and scarcely a day passed without some new trouble.

To a young girl like Hazel, after the first pangs, there was enough elasticity to make her feel happy enough in her new home. The rooms were small, the furniture common, but there was always that pleasant feeling of seeing, so to speak, the place grow. Her woman's taste set her busily at work making little things to brighten the rooms. Now a few pence were spent in pots of musk for the windows. Next there was a large scarlet geranium in full blossom that cost the extravagant sum of sixpence; then blinds were made for the windows. A dozen such little things were done week by week, and as each triumph was achieved, and the place grew daily brighter and more tasty and refined, a feeling of satisfaction would come at times into her breast in spite of the wet-blanketism that was always being laid over everything by Mrs Thorne.

"It is not that I mind the humble cottage, and the pitifully mean furniture, Hazel, my dear," sighed Mrs Thorne, "anything would do for me. I am getting an old woman now."

"No, no, dear," said Hazel. "You are not old; and you are far better than you were."

"You don't know, Hazel. I alone feel the worm eating away at the bud of my life; but as I was saying, I don't mind; it is for you I think and weep."

"Then why think and weep, mamma dear?—there, you see I said mamma this time."

"Don't say mamma to please me, Hazel I am only your poor helpless, burdensome mother, now. You say, why think and weep? I will tell you: because it breaks my heart to see my child wasting herself here, and performing the most menial duties, when she ought to be taking her

place amongst the richest of the land.”

“I should be as happy as could be, dear, and I don’t mind the work, if you would only get quite well.”

“Well, Hazel? Never any more. Let me only see you satisfactorily married, and I shall be ready to die in peace.”

“No, no, no, dear!” cried Hazel; “and pray don’t say any more about such things.”

“I must my dear; but tell me, has Mr Graves been down again?”

“No, mother.”

Mrs Thorne sighed, as she always did at the word “mother.”

“Did I—I—tell you that I had had a letter from Mr Geringer?”

“No,” said Hazel quickly. “Surely you are not corresponding with him?”

“Oh, no, my dear; I only answered his letters.”

“Answered his letters?”

“Yes, my dear; he said he was coming down to see us, if I would give my consent, and of course I did.”

“Oh, mother, dear mother, how could you be so foolish?”

“Foolish, Hazel?”

“Yes, dear. He must not come. I could not see him. Why can he not leave me here in peace?”

“I—I—will not be spoken to like this by my own child!” cried Mrs Thorne. “It is cruel; it is wicked of you, Hazel. You not only degrade me to this terrible life, but you speak to me as if I were so much dirt under your feet. It is cruel; it is disgraceful; it is base.”

“Mother, dear mother,” cried Hazel, whose face was aflame with mortification.

“No, no, don’t touch me; don’t come near me; I cannot bear it. Foolish? What have I done that Heaven should have given me such a cruel child?”

By this time Hazel’s arms were round her mother’s neck, and her cheek laid upon her bosom, but it was long before Mrs Thorne would consent to the embrace, and leave off sobbing and wringing her hands.

“When you might be rolling in your carriage, and have every luxury in the land.”

“But I want us to be independent, dear. We might be so happy here.”

“Happy?” exclaimed Mrs Thorne, with a hysterical laugh. “Happy—here?”

At last after similar scenes she would grow weary and forgive her child for her cruelty, and there would be a little peace, giving Hazel an opportunity to attend to some domestic work, and to devote an hour to the teaching of her little sisters; but there would be tears shed at night, and a prayer offered up for strength and patience to conquer in the end.

The school affairs went steadily on, and the girls settled down and began to forget the excitement of Mr William Forth Burge’s party. That gentleman called once during school-hours, shook hands very warmly, and stopped talking till Hazel thought he would never go.

Miss Burge came regularly on week-days and petitioned to be allowed to take a class sometimes—a petition that was of course granted, but not with very satisfactory results, for poor little Miss Burge’s discipline was of the very mildest nature, and as she preferred taking the class that held Miss Feelier Potts and Ann Straggalls, the attention of the mistress had to be very frequently called to maintain order.

“I really don’t know how you do it, my dear, I don’t indeed,” said the little lady; “the girls all like you, and yet they seem afraid of you as well. I declare I quite shrink from you when you look so stern.”

“I hope you like me as well, Miss Burge,” said Hazel, smiling.

“That I do indeed, my dear, and so does my brother. He’s always talking about you. I declare, my dear, I’m quite surprised sometimes to find how much he thinks about you.”

“It is very kind of Mr Burge,” said Hazel naïvely; “and as he is so proud of the schools, pray assure him that I will spare no pains to get the girls well forward by the examination day.”

“I needn’t tell him anything of the sort,” said Miss Burge; “he knows you will, and he told Mr Lambent that we ought to be very glad to have got such a mistress for our schools.”

“You are too partial, Miss Burge,” said Hazel, smiling.

“That I *am not!*” said the little lady in the most decisive of tones; “and now I must go, and I’m going to call in on your mamma, and try and cheer her up a bit, poor soul, for it must be very lonely for her while you are in the schools and, lor! if here ain’t the two Misses Lambent.”

There was a very affectionate greeting at the door, and then Miss Burge went out, and the two Misses Lambent came in, looking very stiff and uncompromising as soon as they were alone with Hazel.

“How do you do. Miss Thorne?” said Miss Lambent in a very chilling way; and Miss Beatrice echoed her words, and finished their freezing as they fell.

“Are you going to take a class, Beatrice?” said Miss Lambent.

“No, sister, I thought that I would say a few words to Miss Thorne, unless you would prefer speaking.”

“No, sister, I think you had better speak,” said Miss Lambent austere; “and—tut—tut—tut! I extremely regret this! such a thing never occurred in the school before. Miss Thorne, I will not trouble my brother by making any report of this, but I must request you to preserve better discipline in the school.”

“Discipline, ma’am! I thought the girls were very quiet.”

“I must request that you do not speak to me, the vicar’s sister, in so haughty a tone, Miss Thorne.”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am; I wish to be respectful,” said Hazel humbly.

“But your ways are not respectful, and I must point out to you that both upon week-days and Sundays the behaviour of the girls has not been good. I distinctly saw that child putting out her tongue at me—that girl—Potts, I think, is her name.”

“I will certainly speak to the child, ma’am,” said Hazel quietly, though a feeling of indignation made the blood flush to her cheeks.

“I request that you do, and also punish her severely, Miss Thorne,” continued Miss Lambent who, being wound up, felt that this was a favourable opportunity for going on striking.

“And now, as I am speaking, I will make a few remarks to you upon a subject that I was about to leave to my sister.”

“I will speak to Miss Thorne upon that matter, sister,” said Miss Beatrice.

“As I am speaking to Miss Thorne, I will continue, sister,” replied Miss Lambent. “The fact is, Miss Thorne, my sister and I entertain the most sincere wish for your welfare.”

Hazel bowed.

“And it is only after mature deliberation that we have come to the conclusion that it is our absolute duty as Christian ladies to speak to you—”

“Upon matters that very nearly concern your position as the schoolmistress—”

“Of Plumton All Saints,” said Miss Lambent. “Excuse me, sister, I prefer speaking to Miss Thorne myself.”

Hazel looked from one to the other, wondering what was the head and front of her offending.

“The fact is, Miss Thorne, my sister and I sincerely wish—most sincerely I may say—wish that you may be successful here, and in due time—say in due time—if such an affair should be in progress, marry in accordance with your station in life and—Hush, Miss Thorne! Do not speak, I insist. I see that you are growing angry, so I beg that you will be silent, and receive my words—our words—as being meant for your benefit.”

“I do not understand you, madam,” said Hazel, in spite of the prohibition.

“Then I will speak more plainly—we will speak more plainly, Miss Thorne, and tell you that your conduct since you have been here has not been marked by the discretion that should be a decided feature in the acts of a young person in your position.”

“Madam, I—!”

“Silence, Miss Thorne!” cried Miss Beatrice; and the young mistress’s cheeks were now aflame with indignation. “I will finish, sister Rebecca,” she continued. “For your own sake we wish you to be more guarded, and to remember what is expected of a young person in your position. From the very first Sunday that you came. Miss Thorne, we have noted a tendency—innocent enough, no doubt—towards trying to attract the attention of the other sex.”

“Indeed, madam—”

“Silence, Miss Thorne, and once more I beg that you will not adopt that haughty tone when addressing the vicar’s sisters.”

Hazel remained silent, and just at that moment, as ill-luck had it, the door opened and Mr Chute stepped in, saw the ladies, and stepped out again.

“You see,” said Miss Beatrice with triumph in her tones, as the sisters exchanged meaning glances, while Hazel maintained an indignant silence, “such things are not seemly in any schoolmistress, and certainly not in the mistress of Plumton All Saints’ School.”

“There was the gentleman on the first Sunday,” said Miss Lambent cutting in so as to preclude her sister speaking; “Mr Chute comes in a great deal too often; we did not at all approve of your conduct when Mr Canninge spoke to you at the school treat; and, taken altogether, my sister and I felt it to be our duty to—”

At that moment there was a sharp tap at the door, and two of the bigger girls rushed to open it, orders being forgotten as “teacher” was so busy, and Feelier Potts triumphed, throwing open the door, and revealing the round, smiling features of Mr William Forth Burge—features which ceased to smile as he realised the fact that the vicar’s sisters were there.

“Oh, isn’t Miss Burge here?” he said.

“No, sir, plee, sir. Miss Burge goed ever so long ago.”

“Oh, thank you. Good-day,” said Mr William Forth Burge hastily; then raising his hat he

walked on, and the door closed very slowly. Miss Feelier Potts finding an opportunity to make a face at a passing boy through the last six inches of slit between door and jamb, to which the young gentleman replied by throwing a stone with a smart rap against the panels.

Miss Lambent's eyes nearly closed, and as the girls buzzed and went on with their lessons, staring hard the while. Hazel Thorne was asking herself whether this would be the last week of her stay in Plumton, for she felt that after this indignity it would be impossible for her to retain her post. Her heart beat fast, her cheeks were alternately white and scarlet with shame and mortification, and her goaded spirit rose as she longed to sharply chastise those who degraded her by their unwomanly charges with their own weapon—the tongue.

But she could not speak—she dared not for fear that the anger and indignation that were choking her should find vent in hysterical sobs and tears.

This she could not bear, for it would have been humiliating herself before her tormentors. No; she felt that they might say what they liked: she would not stoop to answer; and seeing that they had the poor girl at their mercy, the sisters took it in turns to deliver a lecture upon the unseemly behaviour of a young person in her position, exhorting her to remember the greatness of her charge, and the probabilities of the girls taking their cue from their mistress.

Of course, Miss Lambent did not make use of the objectionable theatrical word *cue*—it is doubtful whether she had ever heard it but she managed to express the petty vindictive spite that she felt against the young mistress for her grievous sin in receiving so much attention from Mr William Forth Burge, whose vulgarity she was quite ready to forgive, should he have made her an offer; and Beatrice's eyes flashed as she felt her own pulses thrill with satisfaction at the way in which she was metaphorically trampling under foot this impertinent stranger who had dared to take Mr Canninge's arm.

“And now. Miss Thorne,” said Miss Lambent, in conclusion, “we will leave you to think over what we have said, and we trust that it will have due effect.”

“Making you see how foolishly you have behaved,” put in Miss Beatrice.

“And that you will take it as a warning. Here is a book that we have brought you. Take it, read it and inwardly digest its beautiful teachings. Good morning.”

Hazel took the book mechanically, and her eyes lit upon its title—“The Dairyman's Daughter.” Then she started and coloured painfully again, beneath the searching, triumphant glances of the sisters, who seemed to glory in her humiliation, for once more there was a quiet tap at the door, the latch clicked, and Miss Lambent said to herself, “Another gentleman.”

She was quite right. Another gentleman stepped into the school—his mission to see Miss Thorne.

Chapter Thirteen.

The Vicar's Symptoms.

The Reverend Henry Lambent was born when his mother was in very bad health, and the consequence was that he had to be brought up "by hand," which in those days meant by spoon, and, as the reader is most probably in utter ignorance of the process, it shall be described, as even the wisest may have something to learn, and there is always a possibility that information, however small, may some day be of service.

In bringing up by hand—i.e. by spoon—take a moderate portion of rusks, tops and bottoms, nursery biscuits, captain's biscuits, or similar highly-baked farinaceous preparation, boil soft, add milk and sugar to suit baby's taste—for babies have taste, and can appreciate sweets and show disgust at bitters as well as the best of us—then mix and beat to the consistency of cream, and by testing on the lips get it to the right heat—just moderately warm. Next, take the baby, lay it softly upon its back; coo, simmer, and talk soft broken English to it while a diaper bib is placed neatly beneath its chin, tightly, so as to confine the arms and fists as well; then take the preparation, about half a small teaspoonful at a time, make believe to eat it yourself by putting it in your mouth, and taking it out again, so as to be certain that it will not burn, and then apply it to the baby's lips.

(*Note.*—This placing in the feeder's own mouth has been objected to on the plea that it will drive an observant baby frantic, making it imagine that it is about to be robbed of its rights; but the plan is to be commended on the ground of safety.)

Do not be in a hurry, nor yet be appalled at the difficulty and slowness of the operation, for as a rule seven-eighths of the preparation gets spread over baby's cheeks and chin, portions even reaching to the wrinkles of the neck; for here is where a clever feeder shines in the deft management of the spoon, which is inserted here, drawn there, and all with the delicacy of a barber with a keen razor, till every moist portion has been scraped away, and has disappeared through the little pink buttonhole-like apology for a gate which leads to the road to digestion. Keep up the cooing and repeat.

This is the genuine old-fashioned way, dating from a very early year after the world's creation. In fact, it seems evident from the discovery of bone spoons, roughly fashioned, in caverns, that some of the cave-dwellers practised it, the preparation used for nurturing the very early baby being most probably marrow out of an auroch's leg-bone, or, maybe, the brains of the megatherium, which may account for the wisdom that has come down from our ancestors, who knew everything, while we are ignorant in the extreme.

Now we have changed all that, as the French say, and the very modern babe is supplied with somebody's patent infants' food, out of which everything noxious has been eliminated. Such preparations are advertised by the dozen, and when cooked there is no more old-fashioned spoon, but the food is placed in a peculiarly shaped bottle fitted with hose and branch like a small fire-engine, from the indiarubber tube of which baby imbibes health very seldom. For what with neglect in cleaning the apparatus, putrescent particles of milk, fermenting yeasty paste, and the like, the infant becomes an infant prodigy if it manages to escape the many disorders incidental to early childhood, and can be exhibited as a specimen brought up by the bottle,

which slays as many as that effected by people of larger growth.

No unwashed feeding-bottle slew the Reverend Henry Lambent, for your modern hookah-pattern food imbiber had not been invented when he was born. He was reared as aforesaid, honestly by hand, but his nurse must have made a mistake in the packets from which she obtained his supplies, and in place of biscuit, ground arrowroot, or semolina, have gone in the dark and used the starch with an effect that lasted even unto manhood.

Stiffness is a mild way of expressing the rigidity of the Vicar's person. Rude boys made remarks about him, suggesting that he had swallowed the poker, that he was as stiff as a yard of pump-water, and the like. Certainly he seemed to have come of an extremely stiff-necked generation, as he stalked—he never used to walk—down the High Street towards the schools.

The Reverend Henry Lambent had been taking seidlitz powders every morning since the school feast. Not that he had feasted and made himself ill, for his refreshment on that day had consisted of one cup of tea and a slice of bread-and-butter—that was all at the feast; but since then he had been nervous, hot-blooded, and strange. He had had symptoms of the ailment before the day of the school-treat, but they had been more mild; now they had assumed an aggravated form, and the seidlitz powders brought him no relief.

And yet he had tried them well, telling himself that he was only a little feverish, and had been studying a little too hard. He had taken a seidlitz powder according to the direction for use as printed upon the square, flat box—that is to say, he had mixed the contents of the blue paper in a tumbler of cold spring water, waited till it dissolved, then emptied in the contents of the white paper, stirred, and drunk while in a state of effervescence. He had dissolved the contents of the blue paper in one glass of water and the contents of the white paper in another glass of water, poured one into the other, and drunk while in a state of effervescence. He had dissolved the contents of the papers again separately, and drunk first one and then the other, allowing the effervescence to take place *not* in the tumbler. Still he was no better, and he almost felt tempted to follow the example of the Eastern potentate who took the whole of the contents of the blue papers first, and then swallowed the contents of all the white papers afterwards; but history tells that this monarch did not feel any better after the dose, so that the Reverend Henry Lambent was not encouraged to proceed.

He was not seriously bad, and yet he was, if this paradoxical statement can be accepted. He was mentally ill for the first time in his life of the complaint from which he suffered, and he was trying hard to make himself believe that his ailment was bodily and of a nervo-febrile cast.

The Reverend Henry Lambent's attack came on with the visible appearance of a face before his eyes. If he sat down to read, it gazed up at him from the book, like a beautiful illustration that filled every page. He turned over, and it was there; he turned over again, and it was still there. Leaf after leaf did he keep turning, and it was always before him.

He set to work at his next week's sermons, and the manuscript paper became illustrated as well with the same sweet pensive face, and when he read prayers morning and evening, it seemed to him that he was making supplication for that face alone. He preached on Sundays,

and the congregation seemed to consist of one—the owner of that face, and to her he addressed himself morning and afternoon. If he sat and thought it was of that face; if he went out for a constitutional, that face was with him; and when at least a dozen times he set off, as he felt in duty bound, to visit the schools, he turned off in another direction—he dared not go for fear of meeting the owner of that face.

At meal-times, when he ate but little, it seemed to be that face that was opposite to him, instead of the thin, handsome features of his sister Rebecca; and if he turned his gaze to the right there was the face again instead of the pale, refined, high-bred Beatrice. He went to bed, and lay turning from side to side, with that countenance photographed upon his brain, and when at last toward morning he fell asleep, it was to dream always of that pensive countenance.

The Reverend Henry Lambent grew alarmed. He could not understand it. He had never given much thought to such a matter as marriage on his own account. He knew that people were married, because he had joined them together scores of times, and he knew that generally people were well-dressed, looked very weak and foolish, and that the bride shed tears and wrote her name worse than ever she had written it before. But that had nothing to do with him. He stood on a cold, stony pedestal, which raised him high above such human weaknesses—weaknesses that belonged to his people, not to him.

At last he told himself that it was his duty to resist temptation, and that by resistance it would be overcome. He realised that his ailment was really mental, and after severe examination determined to quell it by bold endeavour, for the more he fled from the cause the worse he seemed to be. It was absurd! It was ridiculous! It was a kind of madness, he told himself; and again he walked over to the schools, determined to be firm and severe. Then he told himself this feeling of enchantment would pass away, for he should see Hazel Thorne as she really was, and not through the *couleur de rose* glasses of his imagination.

He started then, and walked stiffly and severely down to the schools, his chin in the air and a condescending bow ready for any one who would touch his hat; but instead of going, as he had intended, straight to the girls, he turned in and surprised Mr Chute reading a novel at his desk while the boys were going on not quite in accordance with a clerical idea of discipline.

The result was a severe snubbing to Mr Chute, and the vicar stalked across the floor to go into the girls' school; but just then he heard a sweetly modulated voice singing the first bars of a simple school ballad, and he stopped to listen.

He had heard the song hundreds of times, but it had never sounded like that before, and he stood as if riveted to the spot as the sweet, dear voice gained strength, and he knew now that just at the back of Mr Chute's desk one of the shutters had been left slightly open, so that if he pleased that gentleman could peer into the girls' school.

The vicar did not know how it was, but an angry pang shot through him, and a longing came over him to send Mr Chute far away and take his place, teaching the boys, and—keeping that shutter slightly down—listening always to the singing of that sweet, simple lay.

And then he stood and listened, and the boys involuntarily listened too, while their master failed to urge them on, as he too stood and forgot all but the fact that was being lyrically told of how—

“Down in a green and shady bed,
A modest violet grew;
Its stalk was bent, it hung its head
As if to hide from view.”

And, as they both listened, the Reverend Henry Lambent and Samuel Chute felt that Hazel Thorne was in some way identified with that modest violet hiding from view down in shady Plumton All Saints, diffusing a sweet perfume of good works, as the song went on to tell in a way that went straight to both their hearts.

Then their eyes met.

Directly after the sweet tones ceased, and the tune was commenced again in chorus by the singing class, the modest violet now becoming identified with the strident voice of Miss Feelier Potts who absolutely yelled.

The vicar went straight out, turning to the left as he reached the path instead of to the right, for he could not visit the girls' school then; and he walked home, telling himself that the disenchantment was complete—there was that open shutter—his strange feelings for Hazel Thorne were at an end—and he paced his study all the evening, his bedroom half the night, with the sweet air and words of that simple school song repeating themselves for ever in his ears.

“Why, Henry, what is the matter?” cried Beatrice Lambent the next morning, as she came upon her brother in the dining-room, waiting for her to make his coffee.

“Matter?” he said, flushing scarlet like a girl. “Matter?”

“Yes! you singing? I never heard you sing before in your life.”

“Was I—was I singing?” he said huskily.

“Yes, that stupid, hackneyed violet song, that the children shriek at the schools.”

“Was I? Dear me, how strange! To be sure—yes. The children were singing it while I was talking to Mr Chute yesterday. We could hear it through the partition.”

Chapter Fourteen.

“Henry!”

That same day the Reverend Henry Lambent walked straight down to the girls' school, telling himself that he was quite disenchanted now, and that he could talk to Miss Thorne as calmly as if she were a perfect stranger. The feverish fit had passed away, and he could laugh at the little bit of folly; and hence it was that he kept on thinking of modest violets and sweet perfume, and the face of Hazel Thorne was always before him, gazing at him with her sweet pensive eyes that always seemed so full of trouble and care. And as he walked he began thinking of what joy it would be to try and soothe the trouble away from those eyes, and make them look love and tenderness; and then he started, and felt what an American would call “mighty bad,” for George Canninge rode by him on horseback, looking very frank, and manly, and handsome. He did not rein in, but cantered on with a cheery “good morning,” and as soon as he had passed a pang of jealousy shot through the vicar's breast, worse far than that which he had felt upon the previous day.

“He has been to call at the school,” he thought; and he determined on his own part not to go; but his legs appeared to take him on against his will, and he found himself making excuses for Hazel Thorne.

“She could not help it, perhaps,” he thought. “At any rate it is my duty to go, and I ought to check her if she is receiving such a visitor as this.”

Then, with heavily beating heart, he reached the entrance to the girls' school, passing through the gate slowly, and listening to the bleating noise from the boys' side, with the occasional short, sharp barks that Mr Chute was uttering like a sheepdog driving his flock along the dry and dusty roads of education towards the green and pleasant pastures of Academia.

The Reverend Henry Lambent paused for a few moments to compose himself, and then, wondering at his want of confidence, he entered the schools as we have seen.

The change that came over him instantly was startling. A moment before he had expected to be alone with Hazel Thorne, the girls counting for nothing—he could speak in their presence, and say all he wished—and he had felt a curious feeling of diffidence and pleasure pervade his breast. Now all was altered. He was not to be alone with Hazel Thorne, for his sisters were there, and he needed no showing that there had been a scene, while his heart told him that his sisters had been taking Miss Thorne to task for receiving a visit from George Canninge; perhaps they had come and found him there.

He glanced at Hazel, who stood looking pale and indignant with the little book in her hand, and from her to his sisters, who both seemed nervous and excited, consequent upon the encounter that had taken place.

“You here?” he said wonderingly.

There was nothing to wonder at, for it was a matter of course that the sisters should visit the school, and there was no need for explanations; but both brother and sisters were agitated, and Rebecca broke out with:

“Yes; we came down to have a little conversation with Miss Thorne upon the subject of—”

“Speak lower, Rebecca,” said the vicar; “we do not wish the children to hear.”

“Exactly, dear Henry,” continued Rebecca. “We came down to advise Miss Thorne, and to —”

“Tell her it was not seemly for her to receive so many gentlemen visitors,” said Beatrice.

“Then Mr Canninge has been here!” said the vicar involuntarily.

“Indeed no, I hope not,” cried Rebecca, while Beatrice turned paler than usual. “Why did you say that?”

The vicar felt that he had made a false move, and he regretted it.

“I met him just now. I thought he might have had a message from Mrs Canninge.”

“We have been speaking seriously to Miss Thorne,” continued Rebecca: “and after a little show of indignation I think she has seen the folly of her ways, and is ready to take our good counsel home to her heart. I am glad that you came, for you can endorse our words. Miss Thorne, after our preparation of the soil, will be ready to hear.”

The Reverend Henry Lambent had turned to Hazel as these words were spoken, and their eyes met. He was not a clever reader of the human heart but he saw the shame and humiliation which the poor girl suffered, for there was an indignant protest in her look—a look that seemed to say: “I am a helpless woman and have done no wrong. You are a gentleman; protect me from these cruel insults, or I must go.”

“We have also given her a book to read and study,” continued Miss Lambent, “and that and our words—”

“I am afraid that you have chosen a very bad time for making an appeal to Miss Thorne, Rebecca,” said the vicar, interrupting, in low, grave, measured tones; “and I am not sure but that the interference was uncalled for.”

“Henry!” ejaculated Beatrice, as Hazel cast a grateful look at her brother.

“Miss Thorne, will you allow me to look at that book?” continued the Reverend Henry, taking it from her hand. “Yes, as I thought. It is most unsuitable to a young”—he was going to say “person,” but he changed it to “lady of Miss Thorne’s education. It is such a book as I should have given to some very young girl just come into our service.”

“Henry!” ejaculated Beatrice again, for it was all she could say in her astonishment.

“I think this interview must be rather painful to Miss Thorne,” he continued quietly, “and we will not prolong it. I was going to question some of the girls, Miss Thorne, but—another time. Good-day.”

He bowed and walked to the door, waiting there for his sisters to pass, which they did with heads erect and a severe, injured expression, quite ignorant of the fact that they were being imitated by Miss Feelier Potts, for the benefit of her class. Then he looked once at Hazel, and saw that there were tears in her eyes as she gazed after him.

He went out then, ready to do battle with fifty sisters, for Hazel’s look had clothed him with moral armour *cap-à-pie*.

Chapter Fifteen.

“She’s Mine!”

“Mr Lambent treats me with respect,” reasoned Hazel one afternoon when the soreness had somewhat worn off, leaving a feeling that perhaps after all it would be possible to stay on at Plumton All Saints.

She had been very low-spirited for some time, but as she recalled the quiet, gentlemanly manner of the vicar, she felt relieved, and wished she had said a few words of thanks, making up her mind to atone for the omission at the first opportunity, and then setting so busily to work that her troubles were temporarily forgotten.

While she was very busy, a lad arrived with a note from Miss Burge, asking her to come up to the house to tea and talk over a proposal Mr William Forth Burge had made about the schools, and ending with a promise to drive her back in the pony-chaise. Hazel hesitated for a few moments, but she did not like to slight Miss Burge’s invitation, so she wrote back saying that she would come.

Then the girls had to be dismissed, and the pence counted up and placed in a canvas-bag along with the money received for the month’s coal and blanket club, neither of the amounts being heavy as a sum total, but, being all in copper, of a goodly weight avoirdupois.

Just as the bag was tied up and the amounts noted down, there was a light tap at the door, and Mr Chute stepped in, glancing quickly up at the slit made by the half-closed partition shutters to see if it was observable from this side.

“I just came in to say, Miss Thorne—well, that is odd now, really.”

Hazel looked her wonder, and he went on:

"It's really quite funny. I said to myself, 'the pence will mount up so that they will be quite a nuisance to Miss Thorne, and I'll go and offer to get them off her hands.'"

"Thank you, Mr Chute, I won't trouble you," replied Hazel.

"Trouble? Oh, it's no trouble," he said, laughing in a peculiar way. "I get rid of mine at the shops, and I can just as easily put yours with them, and of course it's much easier to keep shillings than pence; and then when you've got enough you can change your silver for gold."

"By-the-way," said Hazel, "when do we have to give up the school pence and club money?"

"Only once a year," said Mr Chute, who was in high glee at this approach to intimacy. "You'll have to keep it till Christmas."

"Keep it—till Christmas! What! all that money!"

"To be sure! Oh, it isn't much. May I—send your—coppers with mine?"

Hazel paused for a moment, and then accepted the offer, the schoolmaster noting in his pocket-book the exact amount, and waiting while Hazel went into the cottage to fetch the other sums she had received, the whole of which Mr Chute bore off in triumph, smiling ecstatically, and exclaiming to himself as soon as he was alone:

"She's mine!—she's mine!—she's mine!"

After which he performed a kind of triumphal dance around the bags of copper, rubbing his hands with satisfaction at this step towards making himself useful to Hazel Thorne, until Mrs Chute came into the room, and asked him what he meant by making such a fool of himself.

Mrs Chute was a hard-looking little woman, with fair hair and a brownish skin, and one who had probably never looked pleasant in her life. She was very proud of her son, "My Samoowel," as she always persisted in calling him, in despite of large efforts upon the part of that son to correct her pronunciation; and she showed her affection by never hardly speaking to him without finding fault, snapping him up, and making herself generally unpleasant; though, if anybody had dared to insinuate that Samuel Chute was not the most handsome, the most clever, and the best son in the world, it would have been exceedingly unpleasant for that body, for Mrs Chute, relict of Mr Samuel Chute, senior, of "The Docks," possessed a tongue.

What Mr Samuel Chute, senior, had been in "The Docks," no one ever knew, and it had not been to any one's interest to find out. Suffice it that, after a long course of education somewhere at a national school in East London, Mr Samuel Chute, junior, had risen to be a pupil-teacher, and thence to a scholarship, resulting in a regular training; then after a minor appointment or two, he had obtained the mastership at Plumton School, where he had proved himself to be a good son by taking his mother home to keep house for him, and she had made him miserable ever since.

"Why, what are you thinking about, Samoowel, dancing round the money like a mad

miser?"

"Oh, nonsense, mother! I was only—only—"

"Only, only making a great noodle of yourself. Money's right enough, but I'd be ashamed of myself if I cared so much for it that I was bound to dance about that how."

Mr Chute did not answer, so she went on:

"I don't think much of these Thornes, Samoowel."

"Not think much of them, mother?"

"There, bless the boy, didn't I speak plain? Don't keep repeating every word I say. I don't think much of them. That Mrs Thorne's the stuck-uppest body I ever met."

"Oh no, she's an invalid."

"I daresay she is! But I'd have every complaint under the sun, from tic to teething, without being so proud and stuck-up as she is. I went in this afternoon quite neighbourly like, but, oh dear me! and lor' bless you! she almost as good as ast me what I wanted."

"But—but I hope you didn't say anything unpleasant mother?"

"Now, am I a woman as ever did say anything unpleasant, Samoowel? The most unpleasant thing I said was that I hoped she was as proud of her daughter as I was of my son."

"And did you say that mother?"

"Of course I did, and then she began to talk about her girl, and grew a little more civil; but I don't like her, Samoowel. She smells of pride, 'orrid; and as for her girl—there—"

Mr Samuel Chute did not stop to hear the latter part of the lady's speech, for just then he caught sight of the top of a bonnet passing the window, and he ran into the next room, so as to be able to see its wearer going along the road towards the market-place.

"What is the matter, Samoowel? Is it an acciden'?" cried Mrs Chute, running after him.

"No, no, nothing, mother," he replied, turning away from the window to meet the lady. "Nothing at all!"

"Why, Samoowel," she cried, looking at him with an aspect full of disgust, "don't tell me that—you were staring after that girl!"

"I wasn't going to tell you I was looking after her, mother," said the young man sulkily.

"No, but I can see for myself," cried Mrs Chute angrily. "The idea of a boy of mine having no more pride than to be running after a stuck-up, dressy body like that, who looks at his poor

mother as if she wasn't fit to be used to wipe her shoes on, and I dessey they ain't paid for."

"Mother," cried the young man, "if you speak to me like that you'll drive me mad!"

"And now he abuses his poor mother, who has been a slave to him all her life!" cried the lady. "Oh, Samoowel, Samoowel, when I'm dead and cold and in my grave, these words of yours'll stand out like fires of reproach, and make you repent and—There, if he hasn't gone after her," she cried furiously; for, finding that her son did not speak, she lowered the apron that she had thrown over her face, slowly and softly, till she found that she was alone, when she jumped up from the chair into which she had thrown herself, ran to the window, and was just in time to see Mr Samuel Chute walking quickly towards the town.

"He don't have her if I can prevent it!" cried Mrs Chute viciously, and the expression of her face was not pleasant just then.

But Samuel Chute neither heard her words nor saw her looks, as a matter of course, for he was walking steadily after Hazel, wondering whither she was bound.

It was the last thing in the world that he would do—watch her, but all the same he wanted to know where she went, and if it was for a walk, why he might turn up by accident just as she was coming back; and then, of course, he could walk with her, and somehow, now that he had so far been taken into her confidence in being trusted to change the school and club money for her, it would be easy to win another step in advance.

"I lay twopence she walks out with me arm-in-arm before another month's out," he said triumphantly; "and mother must get over it best way she can."

All this while Hazel was some two hundred yards ahead, for the schoolmaster did not attempt to overtake her, but merely noted where she went, and followed.

"She's turned off by the low road," said Samuel Chute to himself. "She's going by old Burge's. Well, that is the prettiest walk, and—of course, I could go across by the footpath, and come out in the road this side of Burge's, and meet her, and that would be better than seeming to have followed her."

Acting upon this idea, Samuel Chute struck out of the main street and went swiftly along a narrow lane, and then by the footpath over the meadows to the road, a walk of a good mile and a half before he was out into the winding road that led by Mr Burge's.

"She'll come upon me here, plump," he said with a laugh. "I wonder what she'll say, and whether she'll look at me again in that pretty, shy way, same as she did when I took the school pence! Hah, things are going on right for you, my boy; and what could be better?"

There was no answer to his question, so Samuel Chute went on making arrangements, like the Eastern man with his basket of crockery ware.

"I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll put both the old ladies together in one house, while we live

in the other. Nothing could be easier. I say, isn't it time she was here?"

He glanced at his watch, and it certainly seemed to be time for Hazel to have reached as far. She was not long, however, in appearing now round the bend of the road, looking brighter and more attractive than Samuel Chute had seen her yet, for there was a warm flush in her cheek, and her eyes were sparkling and full of vivacity. But in spite of this the schoolmaster drew his breath through his teeth with a spiteful hiss, and as he leaned a little forward and stared at Hazel Thorne, his countenance assumed the same ugly look, full of dislike and spite, that had been seen in his mother's face only a short time before.

Chapter Sixteen.

A Match-Making Mamma.

"Don't you think, George, that dear Beatrice looks rather pale and thin?" said Mrs Canninge.

"Who—Beatrice Lambent?" said the young man, raising his eyes from his paper at breakfast.

"Yes, dear; very thin and pale indeed."

"Now you mention it yes, of course; but so she always did."

"Slightly, George; and there was a delicacy in the tinting of her skin—liliaceous, I might say, but she was not pale."

"Bravo, dear! That's a capital word. Do for a Tennysonian poem—"the Lay of the Liliaceous Lady."

"I was speaking seriously, my dear," said Mrs Canninge stiffly. "I beg that you will not make those absurd remarks."

"Certainly not, dear; but liliaceous is not a serious way of speaking of a lady."

"Then I will not use it, George, for I wish to speak to you very seriously about Beatrice Lambent."

The young man winced a little, but said nothing. He merely rustled his newspaper and assumed an air of attention.

"I don't think that dear Beatrice is well, George."

"Tell Lambent to send her off to the seaside for a good blow."

"To pine away and grow worse, George."

“To the interior, then, mother.”

“To still pine away, George.”

“Try homeopathy, then. Like cures like. Send her into Surrey amongst the fir-trees—pine to cure pine.”

Mrs Canninge sipped her coffee.

“Or get Miss Penstemon to give her a few pilules out of one of her bottles—the one she selected when I came down on the Czar last year at that big hedge.”

“When you have ended your badinage, my dear son, I shall be ready to go on.”

“Done. Finis!” said George Canninge promptly.

“I have been noting the change in dear Beatrice for some time past.”

“I have not,” said the young man. “She always was very thin and genteel-looking.”

“Extremely, George; but of late there has been a subdued sadness—a pained look in her pensive eyes, that troubles me a good deal, for it is bad.”

“Perhaps she has some trouble on her mind, dear. You should try and comfort her.”

“I could not comfort her, my dear. The comfort must come from other lips than mine. Hers is a mental grief.”

“Why, you don’t mean to say that she is in love?” said George Canninge, laughing.

“I mean to say that the poor girl is suffering cruelly from a feeling of neglect, and it grieves me very, very much.”

“Send the swain for whom she sighs to comfort her, my dear mamma.”

“That is what I am seeking to do, George,” said the lady, looking at him meaningly. “Don’t you think it is time you threw off this indifference, and ceased to trifle? You are giving pain to a true, sweet woman.”

“I! I giving pain to a true, sweet woman? Absurd! My dearest mother, do you for a moment suppose that I ever thought seriously about Beatrice Lambent?”

“It has been one of my cherished hopes that you did, George, and I know that she feels your cool indifference most keenly.”

“Nonsense, dear!” he cried, laughing; “why, what crotchet is this that you have got into your head?”

“Crotchet?”

“Yes, dear—crotchet.”

“I am speaking in all seriousness to you, my son. George, your behaviour to Beatrice Lambent is not correct.”

“My dear mother,” said the young man firmly, “do you mean to tell me that you honestly believe Beatrice Lambent cares for me?”

“Most assuredly, George.”

“Poor lass, then! That’s all I can say.”

“Why, George, have you not led her on by your attentions for these many months past?”

“Certainly not! I have been as civil and attentive to her as I have been to other ladies—that is all. What nonsense! Really, mother, it is absurd.”

“It is not absurd, George, but a very serious matter.”

“Well, serious enough, of course, for I should be sorry if Miss Lambent suffered under a misunderstanding.”

“Why let it be a misunderstanding, George? Beatrice is handsome.”

“Ye-es,” said the young man, gazing down at his paper.

“Well born.”

“I suppose so.”

“Thoroughly intellectual.”

“Let’s see: it’s Byron, isn’t it, who makes ‘hen-pecked-you-all’ rhyme to ‘intellectual’?”

“George!”

“My dear mother.”

“Beatrice is amiable; has a good portion from her late uncle—in fact, taken altogether, a most eligible *partie*, and I like her very much.”

“But, my dear mother,” said the young squire, “it is a question of my marriage, is it not?”

“Of course, my son.”

“Then it would be necessary for me to like her as well—from my commonplace point of

view, to love her.”

“Certainly, my dear; and that I believe at heart you do.”

“Then, your dear, affectionate, motherly heart is slightly in error, for I may as well frankly tell you that I do not like Beatrice Lambent, and what is far more, I am sure that I should never love her enough to make her my wife.”

“My dear George, you give me very great pain.”

“I am very sorry, my dear mother, but you must allow me to think for myself in a matter of this sort. There: suppose we change the subject.”

He resumed, or rather seemed to resume, the reading of his paper, while the lady continued her breakfast, rather angry at what she called her son's obstinacy, but too good a diplomatist to push him home, preferring to wait till he had had time to reflect upon her words. She glanced at him now and then, and saw that he seemed intent upon his newspaper, but she did not know that he could not keep his attention to the page, for all the while his thoughts were wandering back to the tent in Mr William Forth Burge's grounds, then to the church, and again to the various occasions when he had seen Hazel Thorne's quiet, grave face, as she bent over one or other of her scholars.

He thought, too, of her conversation when he chatted with her after he had taken her in to tea, and then of every turn of expression in her countenance, comparing it with that of Beatrice Lambent, but only to cease with an ejaculation full of angry contempt, “I shall not marry a woman for her pretty face.”

“Did you speak, my dear!” said Mrs Cannings.

“I uttered a thought half aloud,” he replied quietly.

“Is it a secret, dear?” she said playfully.

“No, mother; I have no secrets from you.”

“That is spoken like my own dear son,” said Mrs Cannings, rising, and going behind his chair to place her hands upon his shoulders, and then raise them to his face, drawing him back, so that she could kiss his forehead. “Why, there are lines in your brow, George—lines of care. What are you thinking about!”

“Beatrice Lambent.”

“About dear Beatrice, George? Why, that ought to bring smiles, and not such deep thought-marks as these.”

“Indeed, mother! Well, for my part, I should expect much of Beatrice Lambent would eat lines very deeply into a fellow's brow.”

“For shame, my dear! But come,” cried Mrs Canninge cheerfully, “tell me what were your thoughts, or what it was you said that was no secret.”

“I said to myself, mother, that I should never marry a woman for the sake of a pretty face.”

Mrs Canninge’s mind was full of Hazel Thorne, and, associating her son’s remark with the countenance that had rather troubled her thoughts since the day of the school feast, her heart gave a throb of satisfaction.

“I know that, George,” she exclaimed, smiling. “I know my son to be too full of sound common-sense, and too ready to bear honourably his father’s name, to be led away by any temporary fancy for a pleasant-looking piece of vulgar prettiness.”

Mrs Canninge stopped, for she knew at heart without the warning of the colour coming into her son’s face, that she had gone too far; and she felt cold and bitter as she listened to her son’s next words.

“I do not consider Beatrice Lambent’s features to be vulgarly pretty,” he said.

“Oh no, of course not, George; she is very refined.”

“I misunderstood you, then,” said George Canninge coldly. “But let us understand one another, my dear mother. I find you have been thinking it probable that I should propose to Beatrice Lambent.”

“Yes, dear; and I am sure that she would accept you.”

“I daresay she would,” he replied coldly; “but such an event is not likely to be brought about for Beatrice Lambent is not the style of woman I should choose for my wife.”

He rose and quitted the room, leaving Mrs Canninge standing by the window, looking proud and angry, with her eyes fixed upon the door.

“I knew it,” she cried; “I knew it. But you shall not trifle with me, George. I am neither old nor helpless yet.”

Chapter Seventeen.

Touched.

George Canninge went straight into his study and threw himself into a chair, to lie back, his brows knit, and his eyes fixed upon one particular spot in the pattern of the paper of the room.

Then he began to think hard, and his thoughts were like one of those glorious pieces of music, in which a great composer takes some lovely, heart-stirring melody as his theme, and then weaves it in and out through the whole composition; the ear is attracted to other beauties,

and fresh subjects are constantly being evoked, but the artist never forgets the sweet enthralling air which is ever-recurring, and seems to give character to the whole.

Always the same; think how he would of other matters, there was Hazel Thorne's sweet face, and her soft eyes looking up at him at every turn.

"Am I in love?" he said at last, asking himself the question in a calm, matter-of-fact way. "This seems very absurd, and if any one had told me that I should be thinking of nothing but a little schoolmistress day and night, I should have asked him if he took me for a fool.

"Fool! Am I a fool? Let's argue it out. Hazel Thorne. Hazel, what a peculiar name!—well. Hazel Thorne is a schoolmistress, and if I asked her to be my wife, always supposing that she would accept me, the people would say that I was mad—that I threw myself away.

"Why?

"Because she is a schoolmistress and works for her living, strives hard to keep her mother and sisters, and I don't suppose has money to spare for a fashionable dress.

"Bah! What a creature for a man—a gentleman of birth and position to love—a girl who works hard, is self-denying and patient, and cannot dress well. I'm afraid I am very mad indeed. But that is from a society point of view. Let's take another.

"Hazel Thorne is refined, sensitive, perfectly ladylike to my mind, very sweet—very beautiful with those soft appealing eyes, and that rather care-worn, troubled look; she is evidently a true woman, and one who would devote herself thoroughly to the man who won her heart. If I could win her I believe she would think more of me than of her dresses and jewellery, horses and carriages, and consider that her sole aim in life was to make me happy—if I could win her."

He sat with his eyes half-closed for a time.

"No, I don't believe that," he said aloud. "I don't believe that she would accept me for the sake of my position. I believe from my heart that she would refuse me, and if she does—well, I shall try."

There was another long pause, during which the thought-weaving went on, with the face of Hazel Thorne ever in the pattern; and at last as if perfectly satisfied in his own mind, he rose and sighed, saying:

"Yes; there's no doubt about it: I am what people call 'in love.'"

He went to the window and stood leaning against the side, gazing out at the pleasant park-like expanse, but seeing nothing but the face of Hazel Thorne, as in a quiet, dreamy way he recalled the past.

Suddenly a pang shot through him, and his brow grew rugged, for he remembered a

conversation he had heard between Beatrice Lambent and his mother, wherein the former had said, *à propos* of the new mistress, that the vicar had been rather displeased with her for receiving the visit of some gentleman friend so soon after she had come down.

"I shall hate that woman before I have done," he said angrily, and, crossing the room, he rang the bell sharply and ordered his horse.

George Canninge's was no calf-love. He was a sterling, thoughtful man, quietly preparing himself to make his position in his country's legislature; and yet the coming of Hazel Thorne had changed the whole course of his life. He found himself longing to see her, eager to meet and speak, but bound by his sense of gentle deference towards the woman who occupied so high a position in his esteem to avoid doing anything likely to call forth remark to her disparagement.

George Canninge mounted and rode off, leaving the care of his body to his horse, and for the next three hours he was in a kind of dream. He rode right away out into the country, and then returned, to come back to himself suddenly, for there, the living embodiment of his thoughts, was Hazel Thorne coming towards him, and in an instant all the determinations that he had made vanished into space.

His horse seemed to realise his wishes, for it stopped, and the rider dismounted, threw the rein over his arm, and advanced to meet the object of his thoughts, whose colour was very slightly augmented as he raised his hat and then extended his hand.

"I have not had the pleasure since the day of the school feast. Miss Thorne," he said; and then, as if it were quite natural, they stood talking of indifferent matters for a few minutes, and Hazel let fall that she was going up to Miss Burge.

"I'll go with you," he said quietly. "I like those people; they are so thoroughly genuine. Money has not spoiled Burge. He's as honest as the day."

Just then, somehow, Hazel began to think that if Archibald Graves had been speaking of the Burges he would have been sure to have turned them into ridicule and laughed at their vulgar ways.

George Canninge had no hidden thought, no object to serve in speaking of the successful tradesman as he did; but if he had studied a speech for a month he would not have found one more suited to win favour with his companion.

As they walked on, it did not occur to Hazel at first that she was being guilty of a very serious lapse in the eyes of the people in Plumton All Saints. It was so natural for a gentleman to speak to her quietly and courteously, that for the time being she forgot all about her position in life, and that this act was one that would cause a grave scandal in the little community. King Cophetua loved a beggar-maid, and when the lords and ladies of the court found that she was good as she was fair, they all applauded their monarch's choice; but that took place in the land of romance. The meeting of Hazel Thorne with young Squire Canninge came about in the road leading out of Plumton All Saints, and as they walked together towards Mr Burge's handsome

villa, they were seen of several people who could talk, and who did talk, about “such shameful goings on;” they were seen of Samuel Chute, who turned green as he shrank back out of sight, but followed them afterwards at a distance; and finally they were seen of Miss Burge, who suddenly shouted into her brother’s private room:

“Oh, Bill, do come and lookye here! Miss Thorne’s coming up the drive along with young Mr Squire Canninge. Muffins and marmalade ’ll do for her, but there’s nothing in the house to ask him to eat but cold mutton.”

Chapter Eighteen.

The Rev. Henry’s Temptation.

Now it so happened that the Rev. Henry Lambent, who had been greatly troubled in his mind of late concerning what he called parish matters, was out that very day making a few calls.

The parish matters that troubled him were relative to the schools, about which he thought more than he had ever thought before. In fact if he had not allowed his thoughts to dwell upon them, they would have been directed thereto by his sisters, who had reminded him several times about the unsatisfactory state of the girls’ school.

“I suppose it is useless to say so now, Henry,” said Miss Lambent, “since the new mistress is to be made the *protégée* of every one in the place, but I think the sooner she is dismissed the better. If she is not sent about her business there will be a great scandal in the place, as sure as my name is Rebecca. What do you think, Beatrice?”

There was a minute’s pause before Beatrice replied, and then her words were uttered in an extremely reserved manner.

“I prefer to say nothing upon the question, for I do not think this young person of sufficient importance for us to allow her to disturb the harmony of this peaceful home.”

The vicar winced a little, and Beatrice saw it Rebecca’s weapon was clumsy, coarse, blunt and notched; its effect upon him was that of a dull blow. The weapon of Beatrice, on the contrary, was keen and incisive. It inflicted a sharp pang, and it was venomous with spiteful contempt, that rankled in the wound after it was made. The effect was to produce a couple of red spots on his cheeks, but he said nothing; he merely thought of “this young person” as he had thought of her a good deal of late, and by comparison his sisters seemed to be petty, narrow-minded, and spiteful. He was greatly exercised in mind, too; and had he been a Roman Catholic priest he would probably have submitted himself to fastings and other penitential exercises. As it was, he sat alone and thought and combated the strange ideas that had taken possession of him of late. He trampled them beneath his feet—he would not even give them a name; but so sure as he—he, the Reverend Henry Lambent, M.A., vicar of Plumton All Saints, went into the retirement of his study to quell the fancies that he told himself were beneath his

dignity as a teacher of men and a gentleman, he thought of Hazel Thorne, and her face became to him an absolute torture.

The idea was absurd, he knew it was ridiculous, and not to be thought of for a moment, and consequently he thought of it for hours every day; dreamed of it every night. It was his first waking thought in the morning; and in the quietude of the late evening, when he was seated alone, he found himself filling the chair before him with a well-known figure, and seeing the face smile upon his as the red lips parted, and sweet and pure, the simple little school song of the violet in its shady bed floated to his listening ears.

He told himself that it was absurd, and laughed at it, but it was a dismal kind of mirth that echoed hollowly in his ears, startling him, for he fancied that the laughter sounded mocking, and he began to recall the old legends that he had read about holy men being tempted of the emissaries of the Evil One, and of the strange guises they had been said to assume for the better leading of their victims astray.

Was he—he asked himself—being chosen for one of those terrible temptations? Was he to be the object of one of their assaults?

For the moment he was ready to accept the idea; but directly after, his common-sense stepped in to point out how weak and full of vanity was such a fancy. And he then found himself thinking of how sweet and ladylike Hazel Thorne was in all her dealings with the school children—how gentle and yet how firm! And if she could be so good a manager of these children, what would she not be as a wife!

He could not bear the thought, but cast it from him, and half angrily he wished that Hazel Thorne had never come to the town; but directly after, his pale handsome face lit up with a smile, his eyelids dropped, and he began thinking of how bright his life had seemed ever since Hazel Thorne had come.

“Good-day, Mr Chute. Yes, a nice day,” he said, as he came suddenly upon the schoolmaster, gnashing his teeth as usual, but ceasing the operation upon finding himself suddenly face to face with his vicar, who bowed gravely after replying to his salutation, and passed on.

“Why, he isn’t going there too, is he?” said Chute, looking over his shoulder. “I hope he isn’t. No, I don’t—hope he is. Why am I not asked there too?” he exclaimed angrily, as he saw the vicar pass in at the Burges’ gate. “It’s a shame, that it is; and no more favour ought to be shown to the mistress than the master. But I won’t have it. I won’t stand it. She shan’t talk to Canninge, and I’ll speak to her about it to-night. I consider her as good as mine, and it’s abominable for her to be going where I’m not asked, and talking to the gentry like this. Gentry, indeed! Ha, ha, ha! I don’t think much of such gentry as Mr Burge: a nasty, fat, stuck-up, red-faced, common, kidney-dealing, beefsteak butcher—that’s what he is!”

Strange to say, Mr Chute did not feel any better for this verbal explosion, but after casting a few angry glances at the house that was tabooed to him, he turned back into the fields, and

began, in a make-believe sort of manner, to botanise, collecting any of the simple plants around, and trying to recollect the orders to which they belonged, but always keeping within sight of Mr Burge's gates.

"There'll be a regular row about this, and I hope Lambent will give her a few words of a sort," he muttered. "It will prepare her for what I mean to say to her to-night. I'll give her such a lesson. I shall divide my lesson into three parts," he went on, speaking mechanically. "How many parts shall I divide my lesson into!—Oh, what a fool I am!—What's this? Oh, it's a cress. Belongs to the cruciferous family, and—Hang the cruciferous family! It's too bad. I won't stand it. There'll be a regular scandal about her talking to the young squire. I don't mind, of course; but I won't stand it for the sake of the schools. A girl who has been trained ought to know better. You wouldn't catch a master trained at Saint Mark's going on like that with girls."

And then somehow, with a bunch of wild flowers in his hand, Mr Chute's thoughts ran back to certain Saturday afternoons, when three or four students somehow found themselves in the neighbourhood of Chelsea, meeting accidentally with three or four other students who did not wear coats and waistcoats; and in the walks that followed parsing was never mentioned, a blade-board and chalk never came into their heads, neither did they converse on the notes of an object lesson, or ask one another what was the price of Pinnock's Analysis, or whether they could make head or tail of Latham's Grammar.

"But I was only a boy then," said Mr Chute importantly. "Now I am a man."

Chapter Nineteen.

Visitors to the Burges.

It was quite like old days, Hazel thought, as George Cannings walked beside her up the drive to Mr William Forth Burge's door. There was no assumption of gallantry, not a word but such as a gentleman would have addressed to a friend. But he chatted to her pleasantly and well; laughed about the enjoyment of the school children, their great appreciation of the feast; and introduced the general topics of the day, drawing Hazel out so that, to her surprise, she found herself answering and questioning again, as if George Cannings were some pleasant friend whom she had known for years.

"Ah, Miss Burge, how are you!" he cried cheerily. "I found Miss Thorne on the way here, and I thought I ought to come and say a word as well, for I've not seen you since the feast."

"I'm so glad you did come, Mr Cannings," said the little lady, shaking hands very warmly, as she led the way into the drawing-room after kissing Hazel affectionately. "You don't know how we have talked about you."

"Slanders behind my back. Miss Burge!"

"Bless my heart, sir, no. Why, it was all about how you did go on and help at the school

feast, making such fun and games for the poor children; and it all seemed so strange.”

“Strange, Miss Burge!” said Canninge. “May I ask why!”

“Because we’d always heard that you were so proud and ’orty like, sir, when you’re really about the nicest gentleman I ever met.”

“Do you hear that Miss Thorne!” he cried merrily. “There, I shall go home as proud as a peacock. Oh, here’s Mr Burge. What do you think your sister says!”

“That we’re very glad to see you, Mr Canninge, sir; and what will you take!”

“Nothing but courteous words, Mr Burge, after your sister’s compliment. She says that I am really about the nicest gentleman she ever met.”

“And she means it too, sir. She never says anything she does not mean. She’s done nothing but talk ever since about the way you pleased those children, sir, at the feast.”

“Well, poor little things, why shouldn’t we try and give them a treat now and then—a real treat! I like to see them work hard at school, and work hard when they play, not taken out to be marched up and down, and disciplined, and made miserable. Miss Thorne, you must forgive me if I am going against your views.”

“Indeed, you are not,” replied Hazel. “I am very new and inexperienced over teaching, but I thoroughly believe in hearty, wholesome play being a necessary part of a child’s education.”

“Hear, hear! Hee-ar!—hee-ar!—hee-ar!” cried Mr William Forth Burge, beating the drawing-room table loudly with a book.

“I quite agree with Miss Thorne there,” said Canninge; “and as to what I did the other day—well, really, I enjoyed it as much as the children.”

“So did I, Mr Canninge, sir,” cried Burge. “It was a regular treat, sir; and they shall have another and a better feast next year, please God I live.”

“No, no, fair-play’s a jewel, Burge,” said Canninge heartily. “None of your haughty millionaire assumption.”

Burge stared.

“They shall come up to Ardley next time, and I’ll see if I can’t beat you.”

“What! you’ll have the schools up to your place, sir, next year!”

“To be sure I will; and I’ve got an idea in my head that will take the shine out of your treaty for I’ll have a display of fireworks.”

“There, Betsey, I never thought of no fireworks; and we might have had a regular show off.

I never thought of them. Oh!"

"You could not have made the children happier, Mr Burge, if you had remembered the fireworks," said Hazel, coming to the rescue. "They thoroughly enjoyed themselves."

"Well, I meant 'em to. Miss Thorne; I meant 'em to, indeed."

"I agree with Miss Thorne," said Cannings, "and my first step will be to come here for your help."

"And you shall have it too, sir, hearty; that you shall."

"You will come and take off your things now, my dear," said Miss Burge then. "Mr Cannings will excuse us, I'm sure; and, bless me, if here isn't Mr Lambent coming up the drive."

George Cannings felt disposed to go, but thought he would stay, and waited; while the bell was heard to clang, the steps of the servant followed, and a short colloquy was heard, resulting in the vicar leaving his card, and turning away.

"Why, he ain't coming in," said Mr William Forth Burge, running to the door, and then halfway down the drive.

No; he would not come in, the vicar said quietly. Not to-day. He only wished to know if Miss Burge was well, and he walked away, frowningly thinking of George Cannings's horse, which he knew well by sight, as the groom was walking it slowly up and down by the entrance to the stable-yard.

He had not seen it till he was close up, and he felt disposed to turn back, but it was too late. He had heard from the servant that Hazel Thorne was present as well, and he parted from the giver of school treats soon afterwards, feeling bitter at heart and low-spirited more than he could account for at the time.

"He wouldn't come in," said Mr William Forth Burge, hurrying back into the drawing-room panting and looking warm. "I told him you was here."

"Busy, perhaps," said George Cannings quietly, though he told himself directly after that it was an absurd remark, for if the Reverend Henry Lambent had been busy he would not have devoted the day to making calls.

"Well now, you must excuse us, Mr Cannings, for brother will talk to you while we go upstairs."

"I must ask you to excuse me too," said George Cannings, rising and thinking of the vicar's visit, which it was certainly strange should have been paid at the time Miss Thorne was there. "My horse is hot, and I must not leave him any longer. I met Miss Thorne on the way, and the sight of her reminded me of my want of civility in not coming sooner. Now I'll say good-day. Miss Burge, I shall never forget your compliment."

“Which it was not a compliment at all, sir, but just what I honestly thought,” replied Miss Burge, shaking hands.

“Then I shall esteem the remark all the more,” he said, smiling, and delighting the little lady by his frankness and hearty way. Then, turning to where Hazel was standing:

“Good-day, Miss Thorne,” he said; and there was something so frank and matter-of-fact in the way in which he shook hands that Hazel’s eyes brightened; and he went away, mounting at the door, and walking his horse down to the gate, with stout Mr William Forth Burge holding on by the mane, and talking loudly the while.

George Cannings’s replies sounded manly and ready enough, but all the time he was thinking of Hazel Thorne’s sweet ingenuous smile, and he rode away at a brisk canter, as if he meant to go over Samuel Chute, seeing only that there was some one by the side of the road, for he was picturing that smile, and more than once he repeated to himself the words:

“Only a schoolmistress!”

Then, after a pause, as he was well clear of the town:

“Well, what of that? It is a most worthy pursuit and she is a thorough lady in every word and look.”

Chapter Twenty.

The Coming Struggle.

Was there ever a young schoolmaster or mistress yet who did not view with a strange feeling of tribulation the coming of inspection day, when that awful being, Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools for such and such a district, is expected down to make his report and add to or deduct so many pounds sterling from the teacher's pay?

Of course we do these things better now; but there have been cases where the appointment of school inspector has been given to a gentleman who owed his elevation, not to the fact that he was a thorough scholar, a man who had always taken great interest in the education of the masses, a student of school management, a man of quick intellect apt to seize upon the latent points, ready to suggest, to qualify, and help the master or mistress upon whose teaching for the past year he was about to report, gifted with the brain-power that would enable him to appreciate the difficulties of the task, and ready to see that the boys and girls of Pudley Claypole really had not the quickness of the *gamins* and *gamines* of Little Sharp Street, Whitechapel Road—but to the accident of his having friends, if not at Court, at all events with some high official—his sisters, his cousins, or his aunts—then in power.

Now, no one could have found fault with the gentlemanly demeanour of Mr Slingsby Barracombe. Miss Lambent said it was a pleasure to have him at the vicarage, and quite made a break in the dulness of their life, for he discoursed of society in town, his high connections, the state of the country; and he could sip tea and talk family matters with the vicarage ladies like a woman. He was a man of excellent presence: his hair very slightly touched with grey, and in that stage when, as he parted it down the middle, you could not decidedly have said whether it was a very broad parting or a suggestion of growing bald.

Sometimes your school inspector is a reverend M.A. Mr Slingsby Barracombe was not, but he dressed as much like a clergyman as he could, and his clothes were all made by one of the first clerical tailors in town.

Mr Barracombe's uncle's wife's sister had married a gentleman whose brother was in the Ministry; and, somehow, Mr Slingsby Barracombe was named as likely to obtain the appointment of Inspector of Schools, did obtain it and went on afterwards merrily inspecting and reporting for his district after a fashion for which he ought to have had a patent, since it was essentially his own.

"You will endeavour to have as large an attendance as you can. Miss Thorne," said the vicar. "Her Majesty's inspector will be here on Thursday, and I shall feel it deeply if you do not receive a highly commendatory report."

"We hope—my sister and I—Miss Thorne," said Miss Lambent with asperity, "that the girls will acquit themselves well. Some of their needlework has of late been terribly full of gobble stitches."

“And so disgustingly grubby,” put in Miss Beatrice.

“That it has not been fit to be seen. Pray—pray—I implore you. Miss Thorne—pray be more energetic with the girls.”

“Don’t you bother yourself, my dear,” said Miss Burge. “My brother says he hopes the girls will all show up well, for your sake as well as the school’s; but don’t you bother yourself, my dear. You’ve just worked like a slave and done no end. Now let it all slide. If the girls answer well, they do; if they don’t answer well, they don’t. ’Taint your fault, so don’t you worry. We’re both coming to the inspection, and my brother says if there’s any nonsense and fault-finding with the inspector he shall give him a bit of his mind. He don’t believe in inspectors, don’t Bill. He says there was never any inspectors in his time that he knows of, and if all the boys turn out as well as he did, there won’t be much to grumble about; so don’t you fidget, but take it as coolly as you can.”

“I say, how are you getting on!” said Mr Chute, popping his head in at the door. “Can’t stop, because I expect Lambent; and if I do come in, it will be cats. You know.”

“Cats? I know?” said Hazel, staring at the lumpy front of Mr Chute, and noticing that his hair seemed to have come up more than ever.

“Yes, of course—cats! I mean Becky and Beatrice—Rebel and Tricksy. I call them the cats. Don’t tell ’em I called ’em so; but I’m not a bit afraid of that. Don’t feel nervous about the inspection, do you?”

“I do feel a little nervous Mr Chute.”

“So does my mother. She’s in a regular fidget for fear I shouldn’t do well; but as I said to her, what does it matter? When a man has done his best with his school, why, he can’t do any better, can he?”

“No; certainly not,” replied Hazel, for Mr Chute was gazing at her in his peculiarly irritating way, his head a little on one side and his nose pointing, as if he meant to have an answer out of her if it was not soon forthcoming.

“I think my boys are all well up, and if they don’t answer sharp they’ve got me to deal with afterwards, and they’ll hear of it, I can tell ’em. But don’t you mind. Old Barracombe isn’t much account. He always asks the same questions—a lot he has got off by heart, I believe. I always call him the expector, because he expects answers to questions he couldn’t answer for himself.”

“I hope the children will acquit themselves well,” said Hazel. “Oh, I don’t think I shall bother myself much about it. I shall take precious good care that they have clean hands and faces, that’s about all.”

Just then Mr Chute popped back outside the door, as if he were part of a pantomime trick, and Hazel breathed more freely, thinking he had gone; but he popped in again, smiling and

imitating his visitee more and more by assuming to take her into his confidence, and treating her as if she were combining with him in his petty little bits of deception.

“There’s nobody coming. I looked right up the street, and I could have seen that stalking post Lambent if he had been a mile off.”

If Hazel had asked him if he could see the Misses Lambent he would have been happy; but she did not, though Mr Chute waited with a smile upon his face but a goodly store of bitterness in his heart, for he kept on thinking of George Cannings, and that gentleman who came down upon the first Sunday and caused him such a pang.

Hazel, however, did not speak. She stood there, not caring to be rude, but longing to ask him to go, and with that peculiar itching attacking her fingers which made her wish to lift the Testament she had in her hand to well box his too prominent ears.

Just then Mr Chute popped out again, and once more Hazel’s heart gave a throb of relief, for it was troubled now by the idea that Mr Chute was growing attached to her, and there was something so horrible as well as ludicrous in this, that she shrank from him whenever he appeared. But Mr Chute was not gone; he came back directly with a great bunch of flowers grasped in his two hands and held up to his breast and over which he smiled blandly.

“They’re not much of flowers for you to receive. Miss Hazel, but I thought you’d like a few to put in water—and *you might like to accept them for my sake.*”

Mr Samuel Chute did not say those last words, though it formed part of the speech he had written out when he planned making that offering of flowers, and promised the boys who had gardens at home a penny apiece for a bunch, which bunches had been rearranged by him into a whole, and carefully tied up with string.

The bunch was laid down outside the door when he first entered, and at last brought in and held as has been stated.

Hazel felt ready to laugh, for there was a smirk upon Mr Chute’s face, and a peculiar look that reminded her of a French peasant in an opera she had once seen, as he stood presenting a large bunch of flowers to the lady of his love. There was a wonderful resemblance to the scene, which was continued upon the stage by the lady boxing the peasant’s ears and making him drop the huge bouquet which she immediately kicked, so that it came undone, and the flowers were scattered round.

Of course this did not take place in the real scene, for, after the first sensation relating to mirth, Hazel felt so troubled that she was ready to run away into the cottage to avoid her persecutor.

For was there ever a young lady yet who could avoid looking upon an offering of flowers as having a special meaning? The pleasant fancy of the language of flowers is sentimental enough to appeal to every one who is young; and here was Mr Chute presenting her with his first bouquet, a very different affair, so she thought, to the bunches of beautiful roses brought

from time to time by Miss Burge.

“Just a few flowers out of our garden, my dear,” the little lady said, without any allusion to the fact that her brother had selected every rose himself, cutting them with his own penknife, and afterwards carefully removing every spine from the stems.

What should she do? She did not want Chute’s flowers, but if she refused them the act would be looked upon almost as an insult, and it was not in Hazel’s nature to willingly give pain. So she rather weakly took them, thanked the donor, and he went away smiling, after giving her a look that seemed, according to his ideas, to tell her that his heart was hers for ever, and that he was her most abject slave.

Hazel saw the glance, and thought that Mr Chute looked rather silly; but directly after repented bitterly of what she had done, and wished that she had firmly refused the gift.

“And yet what nonsense!” she reasoned. “Why should I look upon a present of a few flowers as having any particular meaning? They are to decorate the school for the inspection, and I will take them in that light.”

Acting upon this, she quietly called up Feelier Potts and another of the elder girls who were whispering together, evidently about the the gift, sent them to the cottage for some basins and jugs, and bade them divide the flowers and put some in water in each window, a proceeding afterwards dimly visible to Mr Chute, who did not feel at all pleased.

Chapter Twenty One.

Inspection Day.

“I should put on my best silk this morning, Hazel,” said Mrs Thorne, unrolling the broad white strings of her widow’s cap and rolling them the reverse way to make them lie flat.

“Put on my best silk, dear!” said Hazel, aghast.

“Now, that is what I don’t like in you, Hazel,” cried Mrs Thorne dictatorially. “You profess to be so economical, and grudge every little outlay for the house, but directly I propose to you anything that affects your personal vanity you are up in arms.”

“My dear mother, you mistake me.”

“Oh, dear me, no, Hazel. I may be a poor, suffering, weak woman, but I have not lived to my years through trouble and tribulation without being able to read a young girl’s heart. That silk is old-fashioned now, I know, but it is quite good enough for the purpose, and yet has sufficient tone about it, having been made by a first-class dressmaker, to let the inspector see that you are a lady.”

“My dear mother,” began Hazel.

“Now, don’t interrupt me, Hazel. I do not often interfere, but there are times, as I told Mr Lambent when he called last, when I feel bound to make some little corrections in your ways. You must let Her Majesty’s inspector see that you are a lady, and who knows what may happen! He may be so struck by the fact that he finds a real lady in charge of this school that he will feel bound to make you an offer of marriage. Mr Lambent assured me that he was a very gentlemanly man and tolerably young. By-the-way, Hazel, have you noticed how very kind and attentive Mr Lambent is?”

“Yes, mother. He is very good and considerate, and thanked me yesterday for the efforts I have made with the school.”

“Quite right; so he ought. But as I was saying about Her Majesty’s inspector, you must let him see that you are a lady by birth and education.”

“My dear mother, I think the inspector must find that the majority of schoolmistresses are ladylike, and of course highly educated.”

“I am talking about my daughter,” said Mrs Thorne, who had great difficulty in getting her cap-strings to lie flat. “I wish you to impress upon him, Hazel, that you are a lady; in fact I feel it to be my duty to speak to him myself.”

“My dearest mother!”

“Now, pray do not be so rash and impetuous, my dear,” said the lady, bridling. “The best way would be to ask him to come into the drawing-room and hand him a little refreshment—a glass of wine and a biscuit.”

“But you forget that we are living in a cottage now. The inspector will be staying with Mr Lambent and he will get what refreshment—”

“Hazel, don’t be obstinate. I know what I am saying. Oh no, I don’t forget that I am living in a mean and sordid cottage with contemptible windows,” she cried, with an irritating shake of the head, and a querulous ring in her voice that jarred to Hazel’s heart. “I know that this room is merely what you call a parlour by construction; but the fact of your mother—*your* mother occupying it, my child, makes it a drawing-room. You will put on your silk dress, Hazel?”

“No, mother; I am going to put on the clean grasscloth,” said Hazel quietly. “The other would be unsuitable for the school, and the dark silk would show the dust and chalk.”

“Was ever woman troubled with such a wilful girl before!” moaned Mrs Thorne. “Oh, dear me!—oh, *dea-ar* me!”

She declined to be comforted, and Hazel remained obstinate absolutely refusing to go to the school in silk attire, but wearing an extremely simple, closely-fitting, grasscloth dress, with plain white collar and cuffs, and looking dreadful—so Miss Lambent afterwards said to her

sister; a prejudiced statement, for if ever there was an exemplification of the proverb regarding the needlessness of foreign ornament it was in Hazel Thorne's appearance that day.

As a rule she was disposed to be pale, but the excitement consequent upon the important event had brought the colour into her cheeks, and she looked brighter than she had for months.

Mr Chute's flowers were on the sills of the windows, the room had been well sprinkled and swept, there was not a vestige of a cobweb to be seen, and the girls had assembled in strong force, there having been a theory in the school that an inspection meant tea and cake afterwards, a theory that Feelier Potts, basing her remarks on experience, strongly opposed; but the children mustered all the same, and in many cases suffering a good deal from hair oil, applied so that patches of their foreheads shone and invited comparison with the rest of their faces.

Mr William Forth Burge was one of the first arrivals, and he paused with his sister upon the doorstep, to unfold a clean orange silk handkerchief, and have a loud blow, like a knight of old seizing the bugle at the castle-gate.

"How nice you do look, Bill!" said little Miss Burge, smiling at him tenderly, as she raised her hand to the latch.

"Do I, Betsey! Am I all right! Do I look well!"

"Beautiful!" said Miss Burge enthusiastically. "There ain't a wrinkle about your back, nor sides, nor nowhere."

"That's right!" he exclaimed. "I was rather afraid, for they're precious tight, Betsey; and the coat feels as if it would give way about the arms."

"But see how it shows off your figure, Bill dear," said the little lady; "and you are getting a bit too stout."

"Ye-es, I s'pose I am; but it don't matter, Betsey, so long as the 'art's in the right place. Come along."

They entered, and their greeting to Hazel was very warm. Soon after there was a buzz of voices heard outside, when the colour disappeared from the cheeks of the young mistress, for she knew that the crucial time had come. There was a sharp tapping at the door directly afterwards, and one of the elder girls went to open it, Hazel continuing her work with the classes, in support of the very old fiction that the inspector would come and take school and scholars quite by surprise.

Then the door was thrown open, and a little scene enacted on the threshold, the ladies drawing back to allow so important a personage as Her Majesty's inspector to enter first, and Mr Slingsby Barracombe drawing back in turn with the vicar, to allow Miss Lambent and her sister to take precedence.

After a little hesitation, and a few words, the ladies entered, smiling, the gentlemen followed, and Hazel advanced to meet them, when there was the sound of wheels, a carriage stopped, steps were let down, and George Canninge handed out his mother, walked with her to the school, and entered.

Salutations, introductions, and a buzz of conversation followed, during which time Hazel felt in agony. Why had Mr Canninge come? she asked herself. She did not know why, but his presence unnerved her, and she dreaded disgracing herself in his eyes.

“We thought we should like to be present,” said the young squire. “I hope Mr Barracombe will not consider us in the way.”

On the contrary, he was delighted to see present any of the patrons of the school, and said so as soon as he knew the social status of the Cannings; after which he asked to be excused, smiled, bowed, and turned to the task he had in hand. Then George Canninge shook hands warmly “with those dreadfully vulgar folks, the Burges,” as Mrs Canninge said, while she kept an eye upon her son and the schoolmistress in turn.

As a rule the Rev. Henry Lambent was the great man at the schools, but upon this occasion he sank into a very secondary position, following the inspector with a stiff kind of deference, as Mr Slingsby Barracombe raised his glasses to his eyes, balanced them upon his nose, looked at Hazel gravely for a few moments, and then bowed formally without a word, before taking off his glasses and holding them behind him with both hands as if they were hot, while he marched about the school.

National school children are at such times supposed to be all intent upon their lessons, and never to raise their eyes to look at visitors, especially such an awe-inspiring personage as an inspector; but it would be just as reasonable to expect a pinch of steel filings to refrain from turning towards a magnet plunged in their midst. Certainly the girls in Hazel Thorne’s charge followed the inspector, their eyes taking in every movement and Feelier Potts’s malicious features almost involuntarily moulding themselves into an excellent imitation of the peculiarities of his face.

When Mr Barracombe had solemnly walked round the school once, with the Reverend Henry Lambent hat in hand, behind him, and the other visitors forming themselves into a deferential audience, who watched him as if he were going through some wonderful performance, he said, with a loud expiration of his breath—

“Hah!” an ejaculation that might mean anything, and one that committed him to naught.

“Is—ah, this your first class. Miss—ah—ah—”

“Thorne,” said Hazel quietly. “No, sir, this is the second.”

“Thorne, ah—exactly. Yes, I see—ah. Yes, needlework—ah. Stand.”

The girls in the first class stood up smartly, and Feelier Potts’s thimble flew off, went

tinkling across the floor, and was flattened beneath one of Ann Straggalls's big feet.

"Oh, you see if I don't serve you out for that," began Feelier loudly, her face scarlet with rage.

"Hush! silence! How dare you, child?"

"Well, but she's squeedged it flat."

"Silence, girl!" exclaimed the inspector indignantly. "Back to your place."

Hazel turned crimson as she hurriedly took Feelier Potts by the arm, and in her excitement and dread of a scene, knowing as she did the fearless nature of the girl, she said softly—

"Be a good girl, Ophelia, and I will give you a new thimble."

There was quite a sensation during this little episode. Miss Lambent whispering to her sister, who nodded and shook her head, Mrs Canninge looking with raised eyebrows at the first class through her gold-rimmed glasses, and little Miss Burge furiously shaking her fat forefinger at "that naughty child." There was a hearty laugh on its way to George Canninge's lips, but, seeing the pain the chatter was causing Hazel, he checked his mirth and remained serious.

Mr Barracombe seemed to be in doubt as to whether he ought not to expel Feelier Potts there and then, and as she resumed her place he frowned at her severely, the culprit looking up at him with a most mild and innocent aspect, till he turned his gaze upon another pupil, when Feelier began nodding at Ann Straggalls and uttering whispered menaces of what she would do as soon as they were out of school.

Then all eyes were turned to the inspector, who unfolded some printed blue papers, and after coughing to clear his voice, searched in his waistcoat pocket, and brought out a gold pencil-case, which required a good deal of screwing about before it would condescend to mark. Having pinched his nose between his glasses, he commenced examining the needlework, of which he was evidently a good judge, and doubtless knew the difference between hemming, stitching, tacking, herring-boning, and the other mysterious processes by which cloth, calico, and other woven fabrics are held together.

Then there was an entry made upon the blue paper, and the inspector looked severely through his glasses at Ann Straggalls.

"Can you tell me, my good girl, how many yards of long-cloth would be required for a full-sized shirt?"

Ann Straggalls allowed her jaw to drop and stood staring hard at the querist for a few moments, and then, like that certain man in the scriptural battle, she drew a bow at a venture, but she failed to hit the useful under garment in question, for she eagerly replied "twelve."

"Next girl," said the inspector.

“Eight.”

“Next girl.”

“Sixteen.”

“Next.”

“Twenty.”

“Next. How many yards of long-cloth would be required for a full-sized shirt?”

The next was Feelier Potts, whose eyes were twinkling as she answered—

“Mother always makes father’s of calico.”

“Very good, my girl; then tell me how many yards it would take.”

“Night shirt or day shirt?” cried Feelier sharply.

“Day shirt,” replied the inspector severely; and George Canninge became red in the face as the disposition to laugh grew stronger.

“Wouldn’t take half so much to make one for my brother Tom as it would for—”

“Silence!” exclaimed the inspector, and Feelier Potts pretended to look very much alarmed, drawing her eyes together towards her nose and nearly making Ann Straggalls titter as the inspector stooped for a fresh entry.

Hazel’s attention was here taken up by another class, for, being left unattended, the girls began to grow restive.

“Now,” said the inspector, “I will ask you another question, my good girls. Can any one tell me what proportion the gusset bears to the whole shirt? The girl who knows put out her hand.”

Miss Rebecca had been hoping that Mr Slingsby Barracombe would enter upon some other branch of education; but he clung to the needlework, and smiled approvingly as half-a-dozen, and then two more hands were thrust out.

“Well,” he said, “suppose you tell me.”

“Three yards,” said the first girl.

“You do not apprehend my question, my good child,” said the inspector blandly. “I asked what proportion the gusset bore to the whole of the shirt.”

“Please, sir, I know, sir,” said Feelier Potts, who was standing with her hand pointing straight at the visitor.

“Then tell us,” said the inspector, smiling.

“Four yards!” cried Feelier triumphantly.

“I said what proportion, my good girl; do you not know what I mean by proportion?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, what!”

“Rule o’ three sums, same as boys learn.”

“Tut-tut-tut! this is very sad,” said the inspector, shaking his head, a motion that seemed to be infectious, for it was taken up by Miss Rebecca, communicated to Miss Beatrice, and then caught up by little Miss Burge, whose head-shaking was, however, meant to be in sympathy with Hazel.

“I wish he’d let me ask the girls some queshtuns, Betsey,” whispered Mr William Forth Burge, as he saw the inspector’s pencil going; “I could make them answer better than that.”

But the visitor had no intention of choosing a deputy, and he went on asking several more questions of a similar class, relating to cutting out and making up, not one of which produced a satisfactory answer; and the vicar looked very grave as he saw entries that he knew to be unfavourable made with the gold pencil-case.

Then the girls had to read, and got on better; but as soon as the inspector began to ask scriptural questions the class appeared to have run wild, and the answers were of the most astonishing nature. Simple matters of knowledge that they knew perfectly the day before, seemed to have passed entirely out of the girls’ minds, and they guessed and answered at random. Sometimes a correct reply was given, but whenever it came to the turn of Feelier Potts, if she did happen to know, she managed to pervert the answer.

She told the inspector in the most unblushing manner that during the plagues of Egypt the children of Israel suffered from fleas, and had rice in all their four quarters. Corrected upon this, she asserted that these same people crossed the Red Sea on a dry day. The class was asked why Moses struck the rock, and Feelier whispered an answer to Ann Straggalls, who eagerly replied—“Because it was naughty.” Due to the same mischief-loving brain, another girl asserted that the ark of the covenant contained Shem, Ham, and Japhet; that it was a pillar of salt that went before the wanderers in the desert; and that it was the manna that was swallowed up during the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

Taken altogether, the children did not shine in Scripture history.

Slates were passed round with a good deal of clatter, and then a question was propounded.

“How many pounds of butter at one-and-fourpence per pound can I buy for eight shillings?”

Ann Straggalls, after a great deal of staring at the ceiling and biting at her pencil, proved it to be forty. Feelier Potts rapidly dashed the pencil to her slate, screwed up her forehead, and made some figures, finishing off by carefully watching that no other girl should see, and smiling triumphantly at those who had not finished; but when it came to show slates, Feelier displayed a large pound with the figure 2 following certain other figures, which did not show how she had arrived at this result.

“This is very sad,” said the inspector. “My good children, you cannot properly apprehend my questions. Do you know what I mean by ‘apprehend’?”

Out flew Feelier Potts’s hand like a semaphore, and she pointed straight at the top button of the inspector’s waistcoat.

“I—ah, don’t think, my good child, that you know,” said the inspector. “You answer at random.”

“No, sir, plee, sir; I know, sir.”

“Know what? What did I ask?”

“Plee, sir, what ‘apprehend’ means. I know, sir.”

“Good girl; quite right,” said the inspector, smiling, “Tell us, then, what ‘apprehend’ means.”

“Policeman taking up tipsy man,” cried Feelier excitedly.

George Canninge could not resist this, but burst out into a hearty roar of laughter, and then turned his back, for Feelier Potts was at once struck with the idea that she had said something good, and joined in the mirth, till she caught the inspector’s eye glaring at her balefully, when the laughter froze stiff and she began to squint so horribly that Mr Slingsby Barracombe turned away in disgust to say to the vicar—

“Most extraordinary child this!”

George Canninge’s laughter came to an end also very suddenly, for, as he stood wiping his eyes, he found that Hazel Thorne was looking in his direction with so much pain and annoyance expressed in her countenance that he bit his lips, and his eyes said plainly, if she could have read the glance, “Pray forgive me; it was very foolish.”

Just then the inspector took out another sheet of paper, and moved on to a different class, that which Hazel had been keeping in order, and here, in due rotation, he tried the children in the various subjects they had been learning with a most melancholy effect. The timid children he seemed to freeze; others he puzzled by his peculiar way of asking questions; while, again, others he made stare at him in a way that plainly indicated that they did not understand a word he said.

Mr Barracombe, however, paid little heed to this, but went on putting queries, and making

notes most industriously, while the sisters stood tightening their lips, till George Canninge came and joined them, when Beatrice, who had been growing more and more acid every minute, began to beam once more, and made remarks to him about the school.

“I am so sorry that the children are answering in this absurd way. I take great interest in the schools, and come down and teach, so that it seems like a reflection upon me.”

“They don’t understand him,” said George Canninge impatiently.

“I’m afraid they do,” replied Beatrice quickly, for she could not resist the temptation to say something unpleasant, “but they are so backward.” She meant to have said “badly taught,” but hesitated at the last moment.

“Well, what can you expect?” said Canninge. “The inspector asks too much of children of their class. Why, they could not answer his questions in a first-class school.”

“But this is a first-class school, Mr Canninge,” cried Rebecca sharply.

“Hush, dear; Mr Barracombe is asking the second class some geography questions;” and as they listened they caught the end of an inquiry about the Ouse—its source, tributaries course, and the chief towns upon its banks.

“Well, hang me if I could tell him,” said Canninge; “and I shall be surprised if the children do.”

He was not surprised, for no satisfactory answer came. The children told the inspector the capital of England readily enough, and the names of the principal rivers; but his way was so strange to them that for the most part the little things did not comprehend his questions, and Hazel’s heart sank as she sighed for the apparent density that had fallen upon the different classes.

Everything went badly: the writing from dictation was terrible, and the sentences made of the words read out by the inspector were horribly void of meaning. The Reverend Henry Lambent’s face grew more troubled, the ladies whispered together, and the buzz of the school seemed to Hazel to make her dizzy, as she strove hard, with her nerves strained by excitement, to keep the different classes in order, while every time she thought of the ordeal that had to come, she turned sick with misery, and longed for the end of the day.

“I should like to punch his ’ead, Betsey,” whispered Mr William Forth Burge at last. “What’s the good of asking them children a queshtun like that! They can’t make out a word he says.”

“Hush! Don’t interfere, Bill. It might make Miss Thorne more nervous. Pore dear, she do look bad.”

“I don’t know as I shan’t interfere,” whispered back the great man of Plumton. “I consider that I’ve got a bit of a voice in this school, and I don’t see no fun in this chap going away saying that everything’s wrong when I know it ain’t. How can he tell, just coming strange among the

bairns, and asking a few queshtuns anyhow like! If they don't answer 'em he sets it down they can't, when I know all the time they can."

"But you'll make it worse for Miss Thorne," whispered little Miss Burge; "and she's worried to death as it is."

"Well, I don't want to do that," he said sulkily; and he held his tongue whilst class after class was examined, even those children who were tried in catechism mixing the answers up in the most absurd way, or staring helplessly in the speaker's face.

"I don't care," whispered Mr William Forth Burge at last; "he don't know how to ask queshtuns, and for two pins I'd tell him so; now then."

"Oh don't, Bill dear; it would not be gentlemanly. Pray do be quiet."

"Look here, then; if Lambent asks me up to dinner to meet that chap, I shan't go."

"Hush, Bill! She's going to give the girls, a hobject lesson."

For the crucial time had come, and about forty of the elder girls had been faced and marched into the gallery to sit opposite their teacher, while the visitors rearranged themselves—the Misses Lambent with an air of long-suffering, the vicar with an air of intense trouble upon his face, while Mrs Cannings looked vexed, and the Burges disappointed and cross.

The inspector seated himself at one of the desks and commenced a fresh sheet of paper, while, saving the subdued buzz in the various classes, a painful stillness was in the room, and Hazel felt her heart throb heavily, and plainly heard its beats.

She took a simple subject, and began in a low, trembling voice, which sounded pained and husky, while the intensity of her nervousness was patent to all present; but after she had been going on for a minute or two, to her great relief George Cannings rose and left the schoolroom.

The girls were beginning to answer better now, and Hazel felt her courage rise a little; but her heart sank and she began to tremble again as she heard the door open once more, a step crossing the floor, and coming to where she was speaking. The next moment George Cannings said—

"One moment, Miss Thorne. You are hoarse and tired."

As he spoke there was the pleasant gurgle of cold water being poured into a glass, and Beatrice turned pale with the rush of blood to her heart as she saw the young squire thoughtfully hand the glass to Hazel, who took it, giving him a grateful glance as she did so, and then drank the refreshing fluid with avidity.

"I will take the glass," he said in the most quiet, matter-of-fact way; and then Hazel felt as if a new spirit had been sent into her veins. It was so gentle and thoughtful an act, coming as it did when she was faint and sick with the heat and agitation; and, turning to her classes, she felt

a strength within her that seemed to her astonishing.

She went on with the lesson, and her faltering voice grew stronger, her questions clearer and more incisive; she described and painted in vivid colours to the children the object she had made the theme of her lesson; and in another few moments as if by a sympathetic touch, the children were *en rapport* with her; their young cheeks flushed, their eyes were full of eagerness, and there was an excited burst of answers every time she spoke, clearer and brighter and plainer. Word-painting in the simplest and cleverest touches, simplicity and yet vivid colouring. The teacher had forgotten self, the nervousness had gone, and a quarter of an hour passed rapidly by as Hazel, in her ambition to prove that the children over whom she had worked so hard were not the dunces they had seemed, explained her subject, making it geographical, historical, and orthographical as well, till when at last, after an admirable finish, she stood there flushed, her eyes brightened and turned to the inspector as if to ask for further commands, Mr William Forth Burge “forgot himself”—so Miss Lambent afterwards put it—for he burst out with a hearty—

“Brayvo! brayvo! brayvo!” clapping his hands loudly; and this infected George Canninge, who joined in the applause.

“A capital lesson,” he said aloud; “a capital lesson, indeed.”

Mr Lambent smiled, and bowed to Hazel, saying softly—

“Very good indeed.”

“Ah—yes,” said the inspector, rising; “I must say—a very good lesson. Miss Thorne; and I hope by the time I come again I may find the girls considerably advanced. At present—I will say no more. Good morning.”

There was a polite procession formed, and the visitors slowly passed through the door, the gentlemen seeing the ladies off first, but not until little Miss Burge had trotted back to whisper to Hazel—

“You did it beautiful, my dear,” and then hurried away.

Hazel hardly grasped her words, for George Canninge had turned to bow as he went out, and the glance he then gave set her trembling as she stood with one hand resting upon the desk; for it seemed to her that every one must have seen that look, and she began to ask herself if she was mad to let that man's presence fill her with thoughts that seemed to agitate her strangely.

Chapter Twenty Two.

A Lesson in Teaching.

After the plain manner in which the Reverend Henry Lambent had shown himself disposed to take the part of the young schoolmistress against his sisters, the attacks made by Rebecca and Beatrice were not so open; but they found many little ways of displaying in a petty spirit that they were by no means her friends.

Ladies by birth, it was hardly to be expected that they should stoop to pettiness, but years of residence in a little country place with few people of their own class for associates, and that mutual friction which is an imperceptible popular educator in manners, had made them what they were, and disposed to grow more little of mind as the years went on. Their lives were too smooth and regular, too uneventful. A school examination, a blanket club, and a harvest festival, were the great points of their existence, and though they visited in the parish, and were supposed to make themselves acquainted with the cares and sorrows of the poor, their calls were made in a perfunctory spirit, and they did not possess that simple power of appealing to the heart which wins the confidence of rich and poor. Unfortunately, then, they grew narrower as their years became more, and, at the same time, from the want of some good, genuine, honest troubles to take them out of themselves, acidity began to cark and corrode their natures, and work a considerable change. If Rebecca Lambent had met with a man who possessed good firm qualities and been married, she would doubtless have turned out a quiet matronly body, ready to smile at trifles, and make the best of things; but unfortunately the right *he* had never presented himself, and Rebecca had become a thorough district-visiting old maid, as narrow as could be, and ready to look upon a child who had not read "The Pilgrim's Progress" as on the high road to destruction.

Beatrice Lambent's heart was still tender. Rebecca said that she quite hated men. Beatrice thought the declaration quite suitable, as far as her sister was concerned, but her own hatreds were directed at the other sex, and Hazel Thorne was made the scapegoat in her eyes to bear the sins of others. For as the days glided by, she felt a growing dislike to the young schoolmistress, who was always committing some grievous error, her last being that of accepting the glass of water offered to her by George Canninge.

It would be going far to say that Beatrice Lambent would gladly have put poison in that water had she dared, but certainly she would gladly have dashed it in the recipient's face.

It was terrible to her that George Canninge—the hope to which her somewhat ardent imagination was now clinging as probably the last likely to come in her way—should take so much notice of this stranger girl, finding in her an attraction that asked from him the attentions he would in an ordinary way have paid to the vicar's sister; and more than once she had shed tears on Mrs Canninge's breast, when that lady bade her be of good cheer, and not to take any notice of these acts.

"It is a mere nothing, my dear Beatrice," said Mrs Canninge. "George is naturally very chivalrous, and he seems to have taken it into his head that this girl needs his help and protection."

"But it is so cruel to me," sighed Beatrice. "If you could let him think it caused me pain, he might not act so again."

“My dear child,” replied Mrs Canninge, “you do not know my son so well as I. Poor boy, he is very headstrong, and fond of asserting himself. Depend upon it if I were to attempt to lead him towards you, the consequences would be disastrous. We should be setting him from sheer obstinacy towards this girl, who by-the-way appears to me to be either very innocent and weak, or else crafty and clever to a degree.”

“But surely you cannot think she dare aspire to a thought of your son wishing to be attentive to her.”

“Oh no, my dear child. That would be impossible. But there, do not trouble yourself about it. You will see that George has forgotten all about her in a few weeks.”

Beatrice promised that she would not trouble, but went on growing more exercised in spirit day by day. She took herself to task also about several little acts of pettiness in which she had detected herself, and made a vow that she would not be so contemptible again, but preserve towards Hazel Thorne a ladylike dignity of manner that would be more in keeping with her position as sister of the vicar of Plumton All Saints.

Human nature is, however, very weak, and the nature of Beatrice Lambent was a little weaker. She had always her sister Rebecca at her elbow—a lady who was rapidly becoming the incarnation of old-maidish pettiness and narrow-minded local policies—and strive how she would, Rebecca’s constant droppings kept wearing a nature which, though desirous of being firm, was not hardened like unto stone.

The sisters attended the schools with their old readiness and every now and then, as if something within prompted her to be constantly watching for a chance of attack, Beatrice found herself making unpleasant remarks to or of Hazel Thorne and then going home angry and bitter, as she realised how ladylike and quiet the schoolmistress remained under every attack.

For, calling up the whole strength of her character, Hazel had determined to persevere. She had several times been so cruelly mortified by the treatment of the sisters that she felt that she must go; but this was her first school, and she knew that she was bound to stay there a sufficient time to obtain good testimonials for a second.

The vicar came down on the day following the examination, and told her that the inspector had expressed himself greatly disappointed at the state of the school.

“I am sorry to say, Miss Thorne, that he casually let drop his intention of speaking rather hardly respecting our state, which—I am afraid I must tell you his exact words.”

“If you please, sir,” said Hazel quietly; and she raised her eyes with the strange effect of making him lower his, and speak in a quick, indirect way.

“He said that the state the school was the more to be deplored from the fact that we had secured a young lady of evident power of teaching. The object lesson, he said, was most masterly, and therefore—”

The vicar stopped and raised his eyes for a moment to meet the dear, candid look that seemed to search his soul.

“Pray tell me all, sir.”

“I—I hesitate. Miss Thorne,” he said, “because I do not think the inspector’s opinion was just.”

“I thank you, sir,” said Hazel gravely.

“He—he suggested that you could not be giving your heart to your work, and that in consequence the children were far more backward than in either of the neighbouring schools.”

“It must be from want of ability, sir,” said Hazel; “for I cannot charge myself with neglecting my duties in the slightest degree.”

“Exactly. I am sure of it. I know you have not, Miss Thorne. I merely repeat the inspector’s words as a kind of duty, and I leave it to you to make any alterations you may think best in the direction of your teaching, for I sincerely hope that we may have a better account to show on Mr Barracombe’s next visit.”

He smiled gravely, bowed, and went away with a longing desire to shake hands, but this he kept down, and walked hurriedly home.

The vicar’s sisters were not so agreeable in their remarks upon their first visit after the inspection. They did not attack Hazel with rebuke upon the poor way in which the girls had shown up, but condoled with her in that peculiarly aggravating manner adopted by some women towards those they do not admire.

“We were so sorry for you, Miss Thorne,” said Rebecca; “my heart quite bled to see how badly the children answered.”

“And it seemed to me such a pity,” said Beatrice, “that they will be so inattentive to the many orders you must have given them about their needlework. Did it not strike you as being exceedingly grubby?”

That word “grubby” was brought out in a way that was absolutely wonderful. The pronunciation was decidedly Parisian in the rolling of the r, and Miss Beatrice seemed to keep the word upon her tongue, turning it about so as to thoroughly taste how nasty it was before she allowed it to pass forth into the open air.

“The girls do make their work exceedingly dirty before it is done,” said Hazel quietly. “I deeply regretted, too, that they should have answered so badly. I am afraid that it was often from their not understanding the questions.”

“Oh, I don’t think that, Miss Thorne,” said Rebecca, with a kind of snap. “You’ll excuse me, I set it down to their ignorance.”

“And yet, Miss Lambent, I next day asked the girls as many of the inspector’s questions as I could recall, and they answered them with the greatest ease.”

“Oh, really, Miss Thorne, I cannot agree with you there,” said Beatrice, with an unpleasant smile. “If they could answer you, why could they not answer the inspector?”

“From inability to understand him, ma’am.”

“I could understand every question. Rebecca, could not you!”

“Every word, sister. I thought Mr Barracombe singularly clear and perspicuous. The very model of a school inspector.”

Hazel bowed.

“I shall try very hard to make them more ready in their answers by another time,” she said with humility.

“I hope you will, I am sure, Miss Thorne,” said Beatrice, “for it must have been very painful to you, even as it is to us, to know that you have had a bad report of your school. May we—do you object to our taking a class each for a very little while?”

“Which class would you like, ma’am?” said Hazel gravely, in reply.

“Oh, whichever you please, Miss Thorne; we never like interfering between the mistress and her pupils, and wish to be of help so as to get the children on—do we not, Rebecca?”

“Decidedly, Beatrice. To help you. Miss Thorne: certainly not to usurp your position. I thought if we could take a class for you now and then in Scripture history it might be useful to you. Perhaps—I say it with all deference. Miss Thorne, to one who has been trained—you are not so strong in Scripture history as we are.”

“I feel my weakness in many subjects, Miss Lambent,” replied Hazel.

“Oh no, don’t say that,” said Beatrice, with a flash of her cold blue eyes. “You are so very clever. Miss Thorne. We were quite struck by your object lesson. But Scripture history, you know. We have been always with our brother, and we have made it so deep a study that it has come natural to us to have all these theological matters at our tongues’ ends. Catechism, too—I think, Rebecca, we remarked that the girls were much behind in ‘Duty towards my Neighbour’ and ‘I desire.’”

“Very much so, Beatrice; and ‘Death unto Sin’ was dreadful.”

“So was ‘To examine themselves,’” said Beatrice. “I think, Miss Thorne, we might be of some assistance there.”

“I shall be very glad of your help. Miss Lambent,” said Hazel, who was quite unmoved.

“Pray do not think I resent or should resent your coming at any time. No amount of time could be too much to spend upon the children.”

“That’s her nasty, cunning assumption of humility,” thought Beatrice. “She hates our coming, but she dare not say so.”

“Is there any other branch where we might assist you, Miss Thorne?” asked Rebecca. “There are so many girls, and you are—you will excuse me for saying so—you are very young, and I could not help noticing—pray before I go any farther fully understand that we would not on any account interfere. As you must have seen, our brother the vicar objects to the proper duties of the schoolmistress being interfered with.”

Hazel hid her mortification, bowed, and Rebecca went on—

“I could not, I say, help noticing that the girls displayed a want of discipline.”

“Yes; I noticed that with sorrow,” said Beatrice, giving Hazel a look of tender regret.

“And I thought if we could help you to impress upon the children more of the spirit of that beautiful lesson in the Catechism—”

Miss Lambent drew herself up stiffly, closed her eyes, stretched out one hand in a remarkably baggy glove, and recited loudly enough for the girls to hear—

“‘To submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters. To order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters.’ Would you object, Miss Thorne, to the girls all repeating that aloud?”

Hazel signed to the girls to stand, when there was a rush up like a human wave, and in all pitches of voice the familiar portion of “My duty towards my Neighbour” was repeated several times over after Miss Lambent who waved her hands like a musical conductor, and gave peculiar cadences to her voice as she went on over the sentences again and again, in happy unconsciousness that Feelier Potts was saying, “Oh, Goody me! Oh, Goody me!” in constant iteration, instead of the prescribed forms, and making Ann Straggalls laugh.

“I think that will do,” said Miss Lambent, smiling. “If we can make the children thoroughly take to heart, and then digest mentally the beauty of those orderly words, the discipline of the school will be greatly improved.—Sit!”

The order coming from fresh lips, some of the girls sat down, while some remained standing, and, just as Miss Lambent repeated her command with a shrill intonation, Hazel made a sign with her hand, and every girl resumed her place.

“Now, once more,” cried Miss Lambent; “stand!”

The girls rose readily, and the lady who strongly objected to any interference with the mistress, shook her head, and cried—

“Sit!”

The girls resumed their seats this time pretty well, and rose at the word of command.

“There, you see. Miss Thorne, it is soon done. I think you will be able to get them well in order in time. Oh, by-the-way, Beatrice, did you say anything to Miss Thorne about punishing Potts?”

“No; I thought you meant to mention it. Will you do so now?”

“You will speak to her upon the subject, I will go and take the juvenile class.”

As she spoke, Rebecca went off to the lower end of the schoolroom, while Beatrice *hemmed* to clear her voice.

“My sister thinks that Ophelia Potts ought to be severely punished, and held up as an example to the whole school, Miss Thorne. Of course you have punished her?”

“No, I have not punished her, Miss Lambent; but I have talked to her a great deal.”

“Not punished her, Miss Thorne! Dear me, I am surprised. The girl was most rude and impertinent on the inspection day. I really wonder that you have not punished her severely. She sets a bad example to the whole school.”

At that very moment the young lady in question was behaving most dramatically, copying every motion of Miss Lambent, who was gesticulating and shaking her head a good deal while teaching the juvenile class; but catching Hazel’s eye, the girl bent at once over her slate.

“Ophelia Potts.”

“A most absurd name, Miss Thorne! Why could not they call her Jane or Sarah?”

“Parents have curious fancies in the names they give their children, ma’am,” replied Hazel. “This girl is of a singular disposition, and I cannot help thinking that punishment would harden her.”

“But you saw how she behaved, Miss Thorne. Why do you say that?”

“The girl is of a very affectionate disposition, and I think I can win her over by kindness. She is very clever, and one of my best pupils, and I think in time she will be all I could desire.”

“I must beg to differ from you. Miss Thorne,” said Beatrice, shaking her head. “I have known Ophelia Potts four years, and I am perfectly sure that nothing but severe castigation will ever work a change in her. But of course that is for you to decide. My sister and I could not think of interfering. We only wish, as you are so young, to offer you a few suggestions, and to be of whatever service we can.”

“I am very grateful. Miss Lambent—”

“Miss Beatrice Lambent, if you please,” said the lady in corrective tones. “My sister is Miss Lambent.”

“Miss Beatrice Lambent,” said Hazel gravely; “and I shall always strive to avail myself in every way of your and your sister’s assistance.”

“She is as deceitful as can be,” said Beatrice spitefully, as they were walking home. “That abominable humility makes me feel as if I could box her ears, for it is all as false as false.”

“Henry is perfectly stupid about her,” replied Rebecca. “He thinks her a prodigy; but mark my words, Beatrice, he’ll find her out before long, and bitterly repent not having sent her about her business at once.”

“I can’t imagine what Henry is thinking about,” sighed Beatrice; “but he will find out his mistake.”

Somewhere about this time Hazel had dismissed the girls, and told Feelier Potts to stop back, an order which that young lady obeyed for a few moments and then made a rush for the door.

“Ophelia!”

The girl’s hand was already on the latch, and in another moment she would have darted through; but Hazel Thorne’s quiet voice seemed to affect her in a way that she could not understand, and letting her hand fall to her side, she hesitated and turned.

“Come here, Ophelia.”

The girl hung back for a moment, and then, as if drawn to the speaker, she approached in a slow, half-sulky, defiant way, gazing sideways at her teacher, and seeming ready to dart off at a word.

“She’d better not hit me,” thought Feelier. “I won’t never come no more if she do. I’ll soon let her know, see if I don’t.”

By this time she was close up to Hazel, who, instead of looking at her in a mending way, smiled at the girl’s awkward approach and suspicious gaze.

“You think I am going to punish you, Ophelia, do you not?”

“Yes, teacher; Miss Lambent told you to.”

“Miss Lambent said that you deserved punishment for behaving badly in school, but I told her that there was no need, for I am going to ask you to help me, Ophelia, and not give me more work to do. There are so many girls, and if they are tiresome, my work grows very, very hard.”

“The girls are very tiresome, please, teacher.”

“Then why don’t you help me in trying to keep them quiet? You do know so much better.”

The girl looked up at her with one eye, and a general aspect as if some progenitor had been a magpie.

“I mean it, Ophelia. You are a quick, clever girl, and know so much better. It grieves me when you will play tricks, and make my work so hard.”

“Please, teacher, may I go now? Mother wants me.”

“You shall go directly, Ophelia; but I want you to promise me that you will be a better girl.”

“Please, teacher, mother leathers the boys if they don’t get home in time for dinner, and dinner must be ready now.”

“You shall go directly, my child; but will you promise me?”

“If I don’t get home to dinner, teacher, I shan’t be ’lowed to come ’safternoon.”

“Then you will not promise me, Ophelia?”

The girl gave a half-sulky, half-cunning look at the speaker, and then, taking a weary nod of the head to mean permission, she darted away, and the schoolroom door closed after her with a loud bang.



Chapter Twenty Three.

Nosegays are not always Sweet.

“Please, teacher, I’ve brought you some flowers.”

Hazel Thorne turned round, to find that the speaker was Feelier Potts, who was holding up a goodly bunch of roses, snapdragons, rose bay, and other homely flowers tied up with some considerable amount of taste, save that the band which held the blossoms against a good background of ribbon grass was a long strip of flannel list, that made the bunch bulky and strange.

There was a curious, half-defiant, half-smiling look in the girl’s face, as she handed the nosegay, and Hazel hesitated for a moment, and looked severe, for it was as if the flowers were meant as a peace-offering or bribe, to act as a passport in connection with Miss Feelier Potts’ evasion on the previous day.

Feelier saw the look, and was drawing back the nosegay with her expressive young face full of chagrin, but she brightened directly as her teacher smiled, took the flowers, smelt them, and said—

“How sweet! Thank you, Ophelia. Will you be kind enough to go indoors for me, and ask for a jug of water to place them in?”

“Yes, teacher,” cried the girl excitedly, and she rushed off, to come back with the jug, into which the flowers, after being relieved of their flannel outer garment, were placed, and then stood upon the corner of the desk, while from time to time that morning Feelier’s eyes twinkled as she glanced at the post of honour occupied by her present, and then gazed triumphantly round at her fellow-pupils, whispering every now and then—

“I gave teacher them flowers.”

Mr Samuel Chute also saw those flowers through the opening between two shutters, and he noted how from time to time Hazel went to her desk and smelt the roses. This fired him with the idea that he must make Hazel the offer of another bouquet himself, and he concluded that, by the way in which those flowers were received, he might tell how his love affairs were likely to prosper.

For they did not seem to progress so well as he could wish. Time back he had determined that the last person in the world for him to marry would be a schoolmistress. His idea was to “marry money,” as he termed it, a notion highly applauded by Mrs Chute, who gave it as her opinion that her son was a match for any lady in the land. But when the new mistress rose upon the horizon of his view he altered his mind, and concluded not only that he would marry a schoolmistress, but that *the* schoolmistress he would marry was Hazel Thorne.

“You do as you like, Samuel, of course,” said Mrs Chute; “but to my mind she’s not good enough for you. But you do as you like.”

Mr Chute made up his mind that he would do as he liked, and among the things he determined to do as he liked about was the giving of a bouquet, only he did not know how to compass it; for flowers of a superior kind were not plentiful at Plumton All Saints, and the only way to obtain anything at all chaste was to apply to Mr Canninge’s gardeners at Ardley, or to Mr William Forth Burge’s, or the rectory.

This was awkward but unavoidable, and, besides, he said to himself. Hazel Thorne would never know whence they came.

So Mr Chute made a mental note *re* flowers, and then went on with his lesson-giving, while Feelier Potts, who was wonderfully quiet and well-behaved, went on dilating about her present and rejoicing in the grand position of donor of flowers to the manager of the school.

How quickly passing are our greatest joys. Just as Feelier was confiding to a girl in the second class, now seated back to back, that she gave teacher them flowers, there was a loud dab at the panel of the door, and directly after a rattling of the latch, as a fierce-looking woman walked straight in, exclaiming loudly—

“Where’s my gal? I want that gal of mine.”

Feelier Potts saw the stout fierce-looking woman, whose aspect indicated that she had been washing, enter the schoolroom, and knew perfectly well who she was and what she wanted, but Feelier sat perfectly still, and ready to disown all relationship, probably from a faint hope that she might rest unseen; but it was not to be, for, as the stout woman raised her voice and exclaimed again, “Where’s my gal?” fat Ann Straggalls, with the most amiable of intentions, and prompted by a notable desire to do the best she could to oblige, exclaimed loudly—

“Please, Mrs Potts, Feelier’s here. Oh—oh! Please, teacher, Feelier—oh my! oh!”

Ann Straggalls was howling loudly, for, just as she finished her announcement of Feelier’s whereabouts, that young lady threw out one youthful leg, and delivered a sharp kick on Ann Straggalls’ shin, the kick being the sharper from the fact that the class of boot worn by the Potts family was that known as “stout” and furnished with nails.

“What is the matter here?” exclaimed Hazel, hurrying to the spot.

“Oh, it’s that gal of mine,” said Mrs Potts, also hurrying up from another direction. “You just come here, miss.”

“Please, teacher, Ann Straggalls’s been telling tales.”

“Please, teacher, she ki-ki-kicked me.”

“You come here, miss,” cried Mrs Potts, who had not the slightest veneration in her nature;

and she made a grab at her daughter, who avoided it by a backward bound over the form upon which she had been seated, and keeping several girls between her young person and her irate mamma.

“Mrs Potts, I presume?” said Hazel.

“Yes, my name’s Potts, and I’m not ashamed of it neither,” said the woman. “I want my gal.”

“Will you have the goodness to come to the door and speak to me?” said Hazel. “I cannot have the discipline of the school interrupted like this, Mrs Potts.”

The irate lady was about to make an angry retort, but that word “discipline” was too much for her. Mrs Potts had a husband whose weakness it was to have “bad breakings out” at times. Not varieties of eczema, or any other skin disease, but fits of drunkenness, when he seemed to look upon the various branches of his family as large or small kinds of mats, which it was his duty to beat, and, from his wife downwards, he beat them accordingly whenever they came within his reach. The consequence was, that from time to time he was haled before the magistrates, and cautioned, and even imprisoned, the justices of the peace telling him that as he was so fond of disciplining he must receive wholesome discipline himself, and considerately upon the last occasion giving him a month.

Now Mrs Potts objected to marital punishment, but it was short if not sweet, and when it was over Potts went to work. She objected, however, much more to magisterial punishment, because it fell upon her. If Potts was fined, she suffered in the housekeeping money by running short, and if on the other hand he was sent to prison, while he was lying at ease and fed on bread and water, a pleasantly lowering diet for a man of his inflammatory nature, she had to set to work and earn by the hard use of soap, soda, hot water, and much rubbing, the necessary funds to buy food for the youngsters’ mouths.

Discipline, then, had a very important ring to her ears, and she became amenable directly to the quiet words of authority, following Hazel meekly to the door, going through the process of wiping a pair of very crinkly, water-soaked hands upon her apron the while.

“Another time, Mrs Potts, if you will knock at the door, I will come and talk to you, for, as the mother of children, you must know how necessary it is to preserve discipline amongst the young.”

“Which well I know it, miss; but I’m that aggravated with that limb of a gal, that if I don’t take it out of her I shall be ill.”

“What is the matter, then!” cried Hazel.

“Matter, nuss? Why, everything’s the matter when that gal’s got her own way. Here did I tell her, only this morning, that, as I’d got to stop at the wash-tub all day, she must stay at home and look after the little bairn, and what does she do but take my scissors and cut off every flower there was, and tie ’em up and slip off. I didn’t know where she’d gone to, till all of

a sudden I thought it might be to school; and here she is. And now I would like to know what she did with them flowers.”

“Flowers!” said Hazel, as a thought flashed across her mind.

“Well, there now, if that ain’t them upon your desk, nuss! That’s my love-lies-bleeding, and London-tuft, and roses. Oh, just wait till I get hold on her. Did she bring ’em to you, miss?”

“Yes, Mrs Potts; she brought me the nosegay. I am very sorry that she should have done such a thing without asking leave.”

“I ain’t got much about the house that’s nice to look at,” said the woman, gazing wistfully at the flowers; “and she’s been and cutten it all away. But only just wait till I get her home.”

“Don’t punish the girl, Mrs Potts,” said Hazel quietly. “I think it was from thoughtlessness. Ophelia knew I was fond of flowers, and brought them for me. I will talk to her about it. Indeed I am very sorry that she should do such a thing.”

“Well, miss, if so be as you’re fond o’ flowers, and will give her a good talking to, why I won’t say no more about it. Ah, you bad gal!”

This was accompanied by a threatening gesture from the stout lady’s fist, which, however, did not seem to cause Miss Feelier Potts much alarm, that young personage only looking half defiantly at her parent, and as soon as the latter’s eyes were removed, indulging herself by making a few derisive gestures.

“You will take the flowers back with you, Mrs Potts. I am very sorry.”

“Which I just won’t, miss, so now then,” said the woman sharply. “If you like flowers, miss, you shall have ’em; and if you could make a better gal of that Feelier, I’m sure there ain’t nothing I wouldn’t do for you. And now, as my water’s all getting cold, I must be off!”

“But you said that you wished Ophelia to come home and help you. I don’t like the girls being kept away, but of course it is her duty to help you at a time like this. Ophelia Potts.”

“Yes, teacher; please I wasn’t talking,” said Feelier sharply.

“Come here.”

“No, no, miss, you let her ’bide, and when I’m gone just you give her a good talking to.”

“And you will not punish her, Mrs Potts?”

“No, miss, I’ll leave it all to you;” and, quite tamed down by the quiet dignity of the young mistress, Mrs Potts returned to her soap and soda, and the little “bairn” that Feelier was to attend enjoyed itself upon the doorstep, off which it fell on an average about once every quarter of an hour, and yelled till it was lifted up by its mother’s wet hands, shaken, and bumped down

again, when it returned to its former sport with its playthings, which consisted of four pebbles and an old shoe, the former being placed in the latter with solemn care, and shaken out again with steady persistency, the greatest gratification being obtained therefrom.

Meanwhile Hazel had an interview with Feelier, who listened attentively to “teacher’s” remarks anent the objectionable plan of stealing other people’s goods when a present is intended in another direction, all of which Miss Feelier quietly imbibed, and, mentally quoting the words of common use with her brothers, she said, “She’d be blowed if she’d bring teacher any more flowers, so there now!” while on being allowed to go back to her place she solaced herself by giving Ann Straggalls a severe pinch on the arm, and making her utter a loud cry.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Mrs Thorne Discourses.

“Ah, my child, when will you grow wise?” said Mrs Thorne one day when Hazel, making an effort to master her weariness, was bustling in and out of the room with an apron on, her dress pinned up, and her sleeves drawn up over her elbows, leaving her white arms bare.

“Grow wise, dear! What do you mean?”

“Leave off doing work like a charwoman day after day, when you might be riding in your carriage, as I told Mrs Chute only this afternoon.”

“You told Mrs Chute so this afternoon, mother! Has she been here?”

“Of course she has, Hazel,” cried Mrs Thorne with asperity. “Do you suppose because I am humbled in my position in life I am going to give up all society? Of course I look upon it as a degradation to have to associate with a woman like Mrs Chute—a very vulgar woman indeed; but if my daughter chooses to place me in such a position as this I must be amiable and kind to my neighbours. She is a very good sort of woman in her way, but I let her know the differences in our position, and—yes, of course I did—told her that my daughter might be riding in her carriage now if she liked, instead of drudging at her school; for I’m sure, though he did not say so, Edward Geringer would have kept a brougham for you at least, if you would only consent, even now, to be his wife. Why, only last week he said—”

“Mother, have you heard from Mr Geringer again?” cried Hazel, whose cheeks were crimsoning.

“Of course I have, my dear child. Why should I not hear from so old a friend? He said that if you would reconsider your determination he should be very, very glad.”

“But you did not write back, mother?”

“Indeed I did, my dear. Do you suppose I should ever forget that I am a lady? I wrote back

to him, telling him that I thought adversity was softening your pride, and that, though I would promise nothing, still, if I were a man, I said, in his position, I should not banish hope."

"O mother, mother! how could you write to him like that?" cried Hazel piteously.

"Because I thought it to be my duty," said Mrs Thorne with dignity. "Young people do not always know their own minds."

Hazel turned away to busy herself over some domestic task, so that her mother should not read the annoyance in her face.

"Mrs Chute is a very weak, silly woman, Hazel, and I feel it to be my duty to warn you against her, and—and her son."

Hazel could not trust herself to speak, but went on working with her fingers trembling from agitation, and the tears dimming her eyes.

"She has been in here a good deal lately during school-hours, and she has got the idea into her head that you have taken a fancy to Mr Samuel Chute."

The little milk jug that Hazel was wiping fell to the floor with a crash.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, do be more careful, Hazel," cried Mrs Thorne angrily. "There's that broken now, and, what with your breakages and those of the children, it is quite dreadful. Of course she owned that her son was very much attached to you; but that I knew."

"You knew that, mother!" said Hazel, who was very pale now; and any one but the weak woman who was speaking would have understood the conflict between anger, shame, and duty going on in her breast.

"Of course I did, my dear. Do you suppose I do not know what men are, or that I am blind, I have not reached my years without being able to read men like a book," she continued with complacency. "I have seen Master Chute's looks and ways, and poppings into the girls' school; but as soon as his mother spoke I let her know that she need not expect anything of that sort, for I told her that my daughter would look far higher than to a national schoolmaster for her husband."

Hazel felt that she must rush out of the room and go upstairs to give free vent to the sobs that were struggling for exit, but making an effort to master the mortification from which she suffered, she stayed and listened as her mother prattled on with a quiet assumption of dignity.

"No, 'my dear Mrs Chute,' I said—and I must give the poor woman credit for receiving my quiet reproof with due submission and a proper sense of respect for me—'no, my dear Mrs Chute,' I said, 'you have been very kind to me, and my child is most grateful to your son for his attentions and the help he has been to her in giving her hints about the school and the children. Friends we may continue, but your son must never think of anything more. He must,' I told her, 'see for himself that a young lady of my daughter's position and personal attractions might look

anywhere for a husband, and that already there were several who, even if they had not spoken, evidently were upon the point of doing so. Mr William Forth Burge was certainly very much taken by your ladylike manner; and that I had noticed several peculiar little advances made by the vicar; while a little bird told me that there were more impossible things than that Mr George Canninge might propose for your hand.' I would not stoop to mention what I had seen in several of the tradespeople here, but either of those three would be an eligible match for my daughter, and therefore I said, 'Mr Samuel Chute must, as a man full of common-sense, largely increased by education'—I said that, Hazel, as a stroke of diplomacy to soften the blow—'Mr Samuel Chute must see that such an alliance as he was ready to propose would be impossible.'

"It is a great responsibility, a family," said Mrs Thorne, lying back in her chair and gazing meditatively at her fingertips. "Percy is a great anxiety—he is always wanting money, and I am only too glad to keep on good terms with Mr Geringer, who really does keep the boy somewhat in order. Though certainly, Hazel, you might do worse than marry Edward Geringer. Perhaps he would be wiser if he married me," she said with a simper; "but of course middle-aged men prefer young girls. Yes, Hazel, you might do worse than many Edward Geringer. He is not young; in fact, he is growing elderly. But he would leave you all his money; and a handsome young widow with a nice fortune and no incumbrances can marry again as soon as she pleases.

"Ah, dear me! dear me!" she went on with a sigh, "what a different fate mine might have been if you had not been so squeamish, Hazel, and I had had better health! But there, I will not murmur and repine. I have only one thought, and that is to see my children happy. By the way, it is of no use for you to make any opposition: those two girls must have new frocks and hats—I am quite ashamed to see them go out—and Percy wants five pounds. What in the world he can want five pounds for, I'm sure I don't know; but he says I cannot understand a young fellow's wants in a busy place like London. I've had—let me see—five and seven are twelve, and five are seventeen, and ten are twenty-seven, and ten are thirty-seven—thirty-seven pounds of Edward Geringer on purpose for that boy, and I hardly like to ask him for more. Percy is a very great anxiety to me, Hazel; and if Mr George Canninge should take it into his head to propose for you, my dear, he could so easily place your brother in some good post. He might make him his private secretary, and give him charge of his estates. Who knows? And—Bless the child, what is the matter?"

Matter enough: Hazel had sunk in a chair by the little side-table, her face bowed down into her hands, and she was weeping bitterly for her shame and degradation, as she silently sobbed forth an appeal to Heaven to give her strength to bear the troubles that seemed to grow thicker day by day.

Chapter Twenty Five.

The Vicar is Sympathetic.

Faint, pale, and utterly prostrate after a long and wearisome day in the school, heartsick at

finding how vain her efforts were in spite of everything she could do to keep the attention of her pupils, Hazel Thorne gladly closed her desk, and left the great blank room, where three of the girls were beginning to sprinkle and sweep so as to have the place tidy for the following day.

The air had been hot and oppressive, and a great longing had come over the fainting mistress for that homely restorative, a cup of tea; but in spite of herself, a feeling of bitterness would creep in, reminding her that no such comfort would be ready for her, leaving her at liberty to enjoy it restfully and then go and take a pleasant walk somewhere in the fields. For she knew that the probabilities were that she would find the little fire out, and the dinner-things placed untidily upon the dresser, awaiting her busy hands to put away, after she had lit the fire and prepared the evening meal.

There would be no opportunity for walking; the household drudgery would take up her time till she was glad to go to bed and prepare herself for the tasks of another day.

To make matters worse, Mrs Thorne would keep up a doleful dirge of repining.

“Ah, Hazel!” she would say, “it cuts me to the heart to see you compelled to go through all this degrading toil—a miserable cottage, no servant, and work—work—work like that dreadful poor woman who sewed herself to death in a bare garret. Oh, I’d give anything to be able to help you; but I’m past all that.”

“I don’t mind it a bit, dear,” Hazel would cry cheerfully, “I like to be busy;” and if ever the thought crossed her mind that her mother might at least have kept the little house tidy, and the children from mischief, or even have taught them to perform a few domestic offices for the benefit of all concerned, she crushed it down.

All the same her life was one of slavery, and needed no embittering by her mother’s reproaches and complaints. Of late she had grown very cold and reserved, feeling that only by such conduct could she escape the criticism of the many watchful eyes by which she was environed. There was very little vanity in her composition, but she could not help realising the truth of her mother’s remarks, and this induced her to walk as circumspectly as she possibly could.

Turning languidly, then, from the school on this particular afternoon, she was about to enter her own gate, when she became aware of the presence of Mr Chute who hurried up with—

“You haven’t given me your pence to change for you lately. Miss Thorne. I haven’t offended you, have I?”

“Offended me, Mr Chute? Oh no,” she replied. “I will count them up to-morrow, and send in the bag to your school.”

“Oh, no; don’t do that,” he said hastily. “Girls are honest enough, I dare say, but you shouldn’t put temptation in their way. I’ll come in and fetch them. I say, what a lovely afternoon it is!”

“Yes, lovely indeed!” replied Hazel, “but the weather seems tiring.”

“Oh, no, it ain’t,” he said sharply. “That’s because you’re not well.”

“I’m afraid I’m not very well,” said Hazel; “I so soon get tired now.”

“Of course you do. That’s because you don’t go out enough. You ought to have a good walk every day.”

“Yes; I believe I ought,” replied Hazel.

“It’s going to be a lovely evening,” said Mr Chute.

“Is it?” said Hazel wearily.

“Yes, that it is. I say—it’s to do you good, you know—come and have a nice walk to-night.”

“Come—and have a walk!” said Hazel wonderingly.

“Yes,” he said excitedly, for he had been screwing himself up to this for days; “come and let’s have a walk together. I—that is—you know—I—’pon my soul, Miss Hazel, I can’t hardly say what I mean, but I’m very miserable about you, and if you’d go for a walk along with me to-night, it would do me no end of good.”

“Mr Chute, I could not. It is impossible,” cried Hazel quickly.

“Oh no; it ain’t impossible,” he said quickly; “it’s because you’re so particular you won’t. Look here, then—but don’t go.”

“I must go, Mr Chute; I am tired, and I cannot stay to talk.”

“Look here: will you go for a walk to-night, if I take mother too!”

Hazel had hard work to repress a shudder as she shook her head.

“It is very kind of you,” she said quietly; “but I cannot go. Good afternoon, Mr Chute.”

“You’re going in like that because you can see Lambent coming,” he said in a loud voice, and with his whole manner changing; “but don’t you get setting your cap at him, for you shan’t have him. I’d hang first; and, look here, you’ve put me up now—haven’t I been ever since you came all that is patient and attentive?”

“You have been very kind to me, Mr Chute,” said Hazel, standing her ground now, and determined that he should not see her hurry in because the vicar was coming down the street.

“Yes, I’ve been very kind, and you’ve done nothing but trifle and play with me ever since you saw how I loved you.”

“Mr Chute, you know this is not the truth!” cried Hazel indignantly. “I have tried to behave to you in accordance with my position as your fellow-teacher.”

"Then you haven't, that's all," he cried fiercely. "But you don't know me yet. I'm not one to be trifled with, and there ain't time to say more now, only this—you've led me on and made me love you, and have you I will—there now! Don't you think you're going to hook Lambent, or Canninge, or old Burge; because you won't. It's friends or enemies here, so I tell you, and I'll watch you from this day, so that you shan't stir a step without my knowing it. I'm near enough," he added with a sneer, "and when I'm off duty I'll put mother on.—Oh, I say, Hazel, I *am* sorry I spoke like that."

"Good-day. Miss Thorne," said the vicar, coming slowly up with a disturbed look in his face. "Good-day, Mr Chute."

"Day, sir," said Chute, standing his ground, while the vicar waited for him to go.

"You need not wait, Mr Chute," said the vicar at last; and the schoolmaster's eyes flashed, and he was about to make an angry retort; but there was something in the cold, stern gaze of the clergyman that was too much for him, and, grinding his teeth together, he turned upon his heel and walked away.

"Mr Chute is disposed to be rude, Miss Thorne," said the vicar with a grave smile, as he laid his gloved hand upon the oak fence and seemed to be deeply interested in the way in which the grain carved round one knot. "I beg that you will not think me impertinent, but I take a great interest in your welfare. Miss Thorne."

"I do not think you impertinent, sir," she replied; "and I have to thank you for much kindness and consideration."

"Then I may say a few words to you," he said gravely; and there was an intensity in his manner that alarmed her.

"I beg—I must ask"—she began.

"A few words as a friend. Miss Thorne," he said in a low, deep voice, and the grain of the oak paling seemed to attract him more than ever, for, save giving her a quick glance now and then, he did not look at her. "You are very young. Miss Thorne, and yours is a responsible position. It is my duty, as the head of this parish, to watch over the schools and those who have them in charge. In short," he continued, changing from his slow, hesitating way, "I feel bound to tell you that I could not help noticing Mr Chute's very marked attentions to you."

"Mr Lambent," began Hazel imploringly.

"Pray hear me out," he said. "I feel it my duty to speak, and to ask you if it is wise of you—if it is your wish—to encourage these attentions? It is quite natural, I know—I do not blame you; but—but after that which I saw as I came up, I should be grateful, Miss Thorne, if you would speak to me candidly."

Hazel longed to turn and flee, but she was driven to bay, and, after a few moments' pause to command her voice, she said firmly—

“Mr Chute’s attentions to me, sir, have been, I own, very marked, and have given me much anxiety.”

“Have given you much anxiety?” he said softly, as if to himself.

“When you came up, Mr Chute had been making certain proposals to me, which, as kindly as I could, I had declined. Mr Lambent,” she added hastily, “you said just now that I was very young. I am, and this avowal is very painful to me. Will you excuse me if I go in now?”

He raised his eyes to hers at this, and she saw his pale handsome face light up; and then she trembled at the look of joy that darted from his eyes, as, drawing himself up in his old, stiff way, he raised his hat and saluted her gravely, drawing back and opening the gate to allow her to go in, parting from her then without another word.

Chapter Twenty Six.

A Surprise.

Hazel’s first impulse was to hurry up to her room, but to her astonishment, she became aware of the fact that her mother had been watching both interviews, by her manner, for she was standing inside the room door, and throwing her arms round her daughter she kissed her on both cheeks.

There was another surprise for Hazel though, for a loud voice exclaimed—

“Oh, I say, Hazel, ar’n’t you going it? I shall tell Geringer you’re going to marry the parson.”

“Percy! You here!” she cried, completely ignoring his words.

“Looks like it, don’t it? I say, how jolly white you’ve got.”

“Have you asked for a holiday, Percy!” she said, responding to his caress, and noting at the same time how tall and manly he was growing, for he was passing from the tall, thin boy into the big, bony, ill-shaped young man, with a hoarse voice and a faint trace of down upon his lip and chin.

At the same time she noted a peculiarly fast, flashy style of dress that he had adopted, his trousers fitting tightly to his legs, his hair being cut short, and his throat wrapped in a common, showy-looking tie, fastened with a horseshoe pin.

“Have I asked for a what?” he said, changing countenance a little—“a holiday? Well, yes, I suppose I have—a long one. Eh, ma?”

He looked at Mrs Thorne as if asking for help, and she responded at once.

“I wouldn’t let Percy come into the school, my dear, but let him wait till you came out,” she

said. "The fact is, Hazel, my dear, the poor boy has been so put upon and ill-used at the place where he consented to act as clerk, that at last, in spite of his earnest desire to stay there for both our sakes, my dear—I think I am expressing your feelings, Percy?"

"Right as the mail!" he replied quickly.

"He felt that as a gentleman he could submit no longer, and so he has left and come down."

"Left and come down?" said Hazel mechanically, as she thought of the narrowness of her present income, and the impracticability of making it feed another hearty appetite as well as those at home.

"Yes; they were such a set of cads, you know," said Percy, sticking a cheap glass in one eye and holding it there by the brow. "Regular set of cads, from the foreman down to the lowest clerk."

"Did you have a quarrel with your employer, Percy?" said Hazel gravely.

"I don't know what you mean by having a quarrel with my employer, Hazel," replied the boy. "I told him that he was a confounded cad, and that I wouldn't stand any more of his nonsense."

"What had you been doing, Percy?"

"Doing?—doing? Why, nothing at all. It was impossible to get on with such a set of cads."

"There must have been some reason for the quarrel," said Hazel.

"Really, my dear, this is very foolish of you," cried Mrs Thorne quickly. "You do not understand these things. For my part, I think Percy has done quite right. It was bad enough for the poor boy to have to submit to the degradation of going to work, without putting up with the insults of a—of a—a—"

"Set of cads, ma," said the lad.

"Yes, my boy—cads," said Mrs Thorne, getting rid of the word with no little show of distaste.

"I think, mamma, that out of respect to Mr Geringer, who has been so kind to us, you ought to write to Percy's employer."

"Haven't got an employer now, so you can't write to him," said the boy sharply. "Nice sort of a welcome, this, from one's own sister. If I'd known it was coming to this, I'd have jolly soon gone down Charles Street."

"Charles Street! Oh, my dear Percy, pray, pray don't think of going there!" cried Mrs

Thorne. "What is going down Charles Street?"

"Going to enlist, mamma—taking the shilling."

"Oh, my boy!—oh, Percy!"

"Well, what's the good of coming down here to have your own sister turn dead against you, like the confounded cads at the office."

"I do not turn against you, Percy," said Hazel; "but I cannot help thinking there is something wrong."

"That's right; go it. Nice opinion you've got of your brother. Something wrong, indeed! Why, what do you suppose is wrong?"

"For shame, Hazel! How dare you!" cried Mrs Thorne. "It is cruel to him, and an insult to me. Why do you think such things of your poor orphaned brother? If your father had been alive, you would never have dared to speak so harshly. Oh, Hazel, Hazel, you make my life a burden to me, indeed, indeed."

"My dear mother, those words are uncalled for. I only asked Percy for some explanation of his conduct. We have had no warning of this; not one of his letters has hinted at the possibility of his leaving his situation; but we do know that he has been extravagant."

"Go it," cried Percy sulkily; and he began to rummage in his pockets.

"Really, Hazel, I think he has managed on very little," said Mrs Thorne indignantly.

"I differ from you, mother; for I had hoped that my brother would have striven to help us, and not found himself compelled to drain our resources more and more."

"Look here," cried Percy, "I sha'n't stand this. There's plenty more posts to be obtained, I dare say, and then I shall be a burden to no one."

"Don't talk like that, my dear," cried Mrs Thorne. "Hazel is only a little tired and cross, and she'll be as different as can be, when she has had her meal. There, I won't be angry with you, my dear; sit down and have some tea. Poor Percy was nearly starved, and I got some ready for him myself. I was afraid you would not like to be called out of the school."

Hazel glanced at the little table where the remains of the tea were standing, with empty egg-shells, a fragment of bacon, the dirty cups, and a large array of crumbs.

"I made him a good cup, poor fellow! he was so worn out; so if you fill up the pot, my dear, I dare say you'll find it all right."

This was the first time that Mrs Thorne had attempted to prepare the tea, and when she had performed her task it was in an untidy way. Now that the meal was over, everything looked

wretchedly untempting to a weary person seeking to be refreshed.

Hazel looked at Percy, but he avoided her eye, and sitting down with his back to her, he began to fill a little cutty pipe from an indiarubber pouch.

“My dear Percy, what are you about?” cried Mrs Thorne.

“Only going to have a pipe,” he said, striking a vesuvian and holding it to the bowl; “a fellow can’t get on without his weed.”

Hazel’s eyes flashed as she saw the thick puffs of smoke emitted from her brother’s lips, but she did not speak; she waited for her mother, whose forehead looked troubled, but who made no remark.

“If I speak now,” thought Hazel, “it will only make more unpleasantness.” So she filled up the teapot which was half full of leaves, and then sat down to her comfortless meal.

Finding that she was silent, Percy took it that she had repented, so he assumed the offensive as he sat and smoked, showing himself an adept at the practice, and soon half-filling the little room with the pungent vapour.

“Precious mean little place this for you to have to live in, mamma,” he said contemptuously.

“Yes, it is, my boy, and I feel it very deeply,” said Mrs Thorne in a lachrymose tone.

“Ah, just you wait a bit,” he said. “I’ve left that old office, but don’t you be afraid. A fellow I know has put me up to a few things, and perhaps I shall astonish you one of these days.”

“You mean you will get on well, my dear?”

“That’s it. Only you wait. There’s plenty of money to be picked up by any one with *nous*. Ten times as much as any one can get by keeping his nose to a desk and trying to please a set of cads.”

“Yes, dear, I suppose so.”

“Some people have no more spirit than a fly,” continued Percy. “Fancy a girl like our Hazel settling down in a bit of a hut like this, when she might have been the making of us all.”

“Ah, yes, my dear,” sighed Mrs Thorne, “that is what I often tell your sister, who might, if she had liked, have married—”

“My dear mother, will you kindly discuss that with Percy when I am not here!”

“Oh, of course, if you wish it, Hazel,” cried Mrs Thorne. “I am not mistress here, Percy. This is Hazel’s home, where I and your poor little sisters are allowed to live on sufferance and —”

Sob—sob—sob.

“Oh, I say, Hazy, it’s too bad,” cried Percy. “You know how weak and ill poor mamma has been, and yet you treat her like this.”

“Yes, my boy; I’m a mere nonentity now, and the sooner I am dead and put beneath the sod the better. I’m only a useless burden to my children now.”

“Don’t talk like that, ma dear,” cried the lad. “You only wait a bit, and as soon as I’ve got my plans in order I’ll make you a regular jolly home.”

“That you will, I know, my dear boy,” cried Mrs Thorne; “and I hope you will try hard to do something to redeem our lost position.”

“What are your plans, Percy?” said Hazel suddenly.

“Oh, nothing that you could understand,” he said haughtily. “I don’t wonder at poor ma being miserable, if you treat her as you are treating me!”

“Percy,” said Hazel gently, “only a few months ago you had no secrets from me, and we planned together how we would work and make mamma a happy home.”

“And nicely you’ve done it,” cried the lad ungraciously.

“You declared, upon your honour as a gentleman, that you would never turn from me, but that you would strive to take poor papa’s place, and be a help and protector to your mother and sisters. I ask you, how are you keeping your word?”

Percy fidgeted about in his chair, glanced at his mother, and then began playing with his pipe.

“If you have made some grievous mistake, dear, tell us at once, so that we may join with you in trying to repair it; but do not weakly take umbrage at my asking you rather searchingly what you have been doing.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said the boy sulkily.

“Tell me exactly how you came to leave your office?”

“I did tell you. A set of cads!”

“Then I shall write to Mr Geringer, and ask him to send me the full particulars. Perhaps we can make peace for you so that you can go back.”

“Go back, Hazy?”

“Yes: go back. I do not wish to seem unkind, Percy, but you will not be able to stop here.”

“And why not, pray?” cried the lad defiantly.

“There is one reason why not,” said Hazel, pointing to the pipe. “You ought not to have lit that here, Percy. This is not my house, but the cottage attached to the school, in which, while I teach the children, I am allowed to live.”

“Now you’re beginning about my bit of tobacco,” cried the lad. “You’re as bad as old Geringer!”

“Really, Hazel, you are in a very, very cruel frame of mind to-night,” said Mrs Thorne, whimpering; “but never mind, my boy, you shall share my home as long as your poor mamma has one. Perhaps Hazel will give us a refuge here to-night—to-morrow we will seek one elsewhere.”

“You will do no such foolish thing, mamma,” said Hazel with spirit; “and as for you, Percy, I insist upon knowing the whole truth.”

The boy flushed and threw up his head defiantly; but Hazel rose from her place, crossed to him, and laid her hands upon his shoulders. Then, bending down, she kissed him, and stood by him with her arm round his neck.

“Tell me everything, dear,” she said; “it is your sister who asks.”

For answer Percy dashed his pipe beneath the grate, laid his arms upon the table, his head went down, and he began to cry like a great girl.

“Oh, Hazel, Hazel, what have you done?” cried Mrs Thorne. “Percy, Percy, my boy, come here.”

“Hush, mother!” said Hazel sternly; and, kneeling down, she drew the boy’s unresisting head upon her shoulder, and held it there, smoothing his hair the while.

“Oh, Hazy, Hazy,” he sobbed at last. “I’m a beast—a brute—a wretch; and I wish I was dead.”

“There—there! Hazel, see what you have done!” cried Mrs Thorne angrily. “Oh, my boy, my boy! Come here to me, Percy; I will stand by you whatever comes.”

But Percy seemed to be quite satisfied to stay where he was, for he made no movement beyond that of yielding himself more and more to his sister’s embrace.

“Hush, dear!” she said tenderly. “If you have done wrong, be frank and outspoken. Let us hear the truth.”

For answer, the lad, approaching manhood in stature, but with his child-nature still greatly in the ascendant, wept more bitterly; but at last, perfectly heedless of his mother’s complaints and appeals, he raised his head, wiped his eyes, and, flinging his arms round his sister, kissed her

passionately again and again.

“There; now you will tell us all, Percy,” said Hazel, responding to his caresses.

“You’ll turn your back on me if I do,” he groaned.

“Is it likely that I should, Percy! There, speak out frankly—is it something about money!”

“Yes,” said the lad, hanging his head.

“You have been getting in debt!”

“Well, not much. Hazy—not more than I could soon pay off,” said the boy, looking timidly in her face, and then shrinking from her searching eyes.

“There is something more?”

“Ye-es,” he faltered; and then, desperately, after a few moments’ hesitation, “It was all Tom Short’s fault.”

“Who is Tom Short?” asked Hazel.

“A fellow in our office. He won seventy pounds by putting money on horses, and it seemed so easy; and I thought it would be so nice to get some money together so as to be able to help poor mamma.”

“There, Hazel, you hear!” cried Mrs Thorne triumphantly.

“And so you began betting on horse-races, Percy—a habit poor papa used to say was one of the greatest follies under the sun.”

“Well, no, dear, it wasn’t exactly betting, but going to a bookmaker and putting money on any horse you chose. He did the betting. You only give him your money and wait.”

“Till you know it is lost, Percy!”

“Well, yes; it was so with me, because I was so terribly unlucky. Some fellows win no end that way.”

“And you have always lost, Percy?”

“Yes, Hazy; and it does lead you on so,” he cried earnestly, “you lose, and then you think your luck must turn, and you try again, because one winning means making up for no end of losses.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Hazel sadly.

“And so I kept on and kept on, trying so hard; but the luck hasn’t turned yet. I’m sure it

would, though, if I had been able to keep on.”

“That is what all gamblers think, Percy.”

“Don’t call me a gambler, Hazel, because I’m not that.”

“And that is where the money went that poor mamma borrowed for you, Percy?”

“Yes,” he said despondently; “but I mean to get it all back again some day, and to pay it, and interest too.”

“That is quite right, Percy; but not by betting.”

“I don’t see why not,” he said. “Other fellows do.”

“Let them,” replied Hazel; “but it is not a course to be followed by my brother. Tell me, did your employers find out that you were engaged in betting?”

“Ye-es,” faltered Percy; “and it was all through that sneak, Tom Short.”

“And they dismissed you?”

“Well, I think I dismissed myself; I resigned, you know.”

“Call things by their right names, Percy. Well, I am glad you have told us. We will say no more now. But to-morrow we must begin to take steps to get you another engagement.”

“But look here, Hazel,” cried the lad, “if you and mamma could knock together twenty pounds for me to start with, I feel as sure as sure that I could make no end by putting it on horses at some of the big races. You’ve no idea what a pot of money some fellows handle that way. Ah, you may smile, but you are only a girl, and very ignorant of such things. You wouldn’t laugh if I was to turn twenty pounds into a thousand.”

“No, Percy, I should not laugh if you turned twenty pounds into a thousand,” said Hazel. “But there, we will say no more now; only promise me this,—that you will not smoke again in this cottage, nor yet make any more bets.”

“Yes, I’ll promise,” said the boy sulkily. “I suppose I must.”

“I’m sure no one could have behaved better than Percy has, my dear,” said Mrs Thorne. “He has been perfectly open and frank. All that you can find against him is that he has been unlucky. Poor boy! If your father had been alive!”

Here Mrs Thorne entered into the performance of a prose dirge upon her sufferings, and the cruelty of fate—of what would have happened if Mr Thorne had lived, and finished up during a *résumé* of her prospects when she was Hazel’s age by finding that Percy had gone fast asleep, Hazel being upstairs, making arrangements for the accommodation of this addition to their family, a task of no small difficulty to people with their limited means.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Facts.

Several things interfered with Hazel's obtaining a good night's rest. She had given up her bedroom to Percy, and the little sofa was cramped and hard. But had she been in the most luxurious of beds, Hazel Thorne would not have slept well, for she was haunted by the angry, vindictive look of Mr Samuel Chute, and troubled by his threats. Next there was the shame and mortification of knowing that her mother's weak words had gone home, and were being used against her. Then the quiet deference of the vicar and his peculiar way made her uneasy as she went over and over her interview with him, and recalled the smallest matters of his reference to Mr Chute.

Lastly there was Percy's sudden arrival, and the battle she found herself having with the idea that, in spite of his apparent frankness, the boy had not told her all.

At last, towards morning, she dropped into an uneasy sleep, in which she dreamed that Mr William Forth Burge had told her he loved her, and that he would provide for Percy and make her mother a comfortable home, if she would be his wife.

In her trouble she awoke suddenly, to find that it was morning; and, unwilling to tempt sleep again, she rose, dressed, and prepared the kitchen and sitting-room for the breakfast before going upstairs and softly awakening the two little girls, who, under her tuition, had become adepts at dressing each other in turns.

Whispering to them to be silent and not awaken their mother, Hazel stole down again, and went to the door to glance up the street, for it was nearly half-past seven, and she had a strange fancy that a letter would arrive that morning.

Sure enough, before another ten minutes had passed away she saw the postman coming down the last row of houses towards the schools, and she was about to hurry out and meet him, when, through the wire window-blind, she caught sight of Mr Chute, who stepped out and received a letter from the postman, with whom he at once entered into conversation.

Hazel, from where she stood, could see everything that passed, and that Chute stretched out his hand to take a large blue envelope from the postman's hand; but this the rustic official refused to allow. He, however, permitted the schoolmaster to peruse the address, and that of another letter, before going on with his delivery.

Hazel felt that he was coming there, and she opened the door in time to stop his heavy thump.

"Two letters, miss—big 'un and little 'un," he said, thrusting the missives into her hand. The next moment Hazel was reading the directions, both of which were to her mother.

One was from Mr Geringer—she knew his hand well. The other, the large blue envelope, was probably from Percy's employer. She had expected that letter; and, yes, there were the names on the back, stamped in blue letters in an oval, "Suthers, Rubley, and Spark."

Hazel stood hesitating as to what course she should pursue. She held in her hands, she knew, the explanation of Percy's return home. If the letters contained painful revelations her mother would suffer terribly. Ought she to let her see the news without reading it first?

Of late all the correspondence had fallen to her share, and Mrs Thorne, when a letter had arrived, had been in the habit of saying, "Open that, Hazel, and see what it is."

She hesitated a few minutes, and then opened the blue envelope.

The letter was short and stern in its diction, saying that knowing Mrs Thorne to be a lady of good family, and one who had suffered much trouble, the firm had felt it to be their duty to write to her before taking further proceedings with respect to her son, who had, they regretted to say, abused the confidence placed in him, and been guilty of embezzlement, to what amount they were not prepared to state.

Hazel stood with her brow wrinkled, gazing straight before her for some minutes before, with a weary sigh, she opened the second letter—Mr Geringer's—which endorsed the information contained in the first, and finished as follows:—

"It is very terrible, my dear Mrs Thorne; and, for my poor friend's sake, I deeply regret that his son should so soon have shown a disposition to go wrong. It comes the harder on me because I was the cause of his going to these people, who took him entirely upon my recommendation. I regret your position, of course, and beg to assure you of my deep sympathy. Had we been related by marriage, I should have felt it my duty to see the lad through his difficulty, the result, I find, of folly, he having entered upon a course of betting upon horses. As it is, you must excuse me for saying that my credit will not allow of my having my name mixed up with the transaction."

He remained, as a matter of course, Mrs Thorne's very sincere and attached friend; but, all the same, he had given Hazel a severe stab in the course of the letter, which again placed her conduct in an unsatisfactory light. Was she always to be accused of standing in the way of her mother's and brother's prospects? And as she asked herself that question, quietly folding the letters the while, she could not help seeing Mr Geringer's selfishness showing through all.

But what was to be done? The people evidently meant to prosecute Percy, and at any moment he might be taken into custody. She knew enough of the law to see that he was in a very perilous position, and if her mother knew, she trembled for the consequences.

"I am glad I opened the letters," she thought; "but now I know, what shall I do?"

A host of ideas passed through her brain, for the most part wild, impossible notions, that could not be carried out.

Percy must escape—go away somewhere; but how, and to what place?

This was unanswerable; and besides, she knew that sooner or later, the police, if in search, would be sure to find him.

No; he must stop and face it out—it would be the most honourable proceeding. But she wanted help—she wanted some one to cling to in this hour of difficulty; and to all intents and purposes she was alone, for it was impossible to ask her mother's aid and guidance at a time like this.

What should she do?

Mr Geringer?

No; his letter showed how her refusal rankled in his breast, and if she appealed to him he might wish to make some bargain with her to act as a payment.

Mr Lambent?

No; she could not ask him. He was most kind, but she shrank from appealing to him. She dared hardly think of him, and dismissed him at once; for, set aside the exposure and the lowering of her position in his eyes, he frightened her. And then there were his sisters, who would be sure to know.

Archibald Grave's father?

No; she dared not appeal to him. And when she began to run over the list of her relatives, there did not seem one likely to take a step to help her in this terrible strait—help her, for everything seemed to fall upon her shoulders.

"What shall I do? Whom shall I ask?" she said half aloud; and, as half prayerfully she asked the question, there rose up before her the round, simple, honest face of Mr William Forth Burge, smiling at her as was his wont and seeming to invite her to ask his help.

"Oh no; it is impossible," she said half aloud, as Mr Chute's words of the previous evening came back to her mind. "I could not ask him. What would he say?"

But all the same, she could not help thinking of his amiability, the interest he had taken in her and hers, and that even if she dared not herself ask him, there was a mediator in the person of Miss Burge, who, gentle, amiable little body that she was, would readily espouse her cause.

"But what are they to me? It would not be right to ask them. I dare not—I cannot do it."

Just then the two children came dancing down to leap up at her and kiss her, making her sorry for their sakes that her face wore so dismal a look. But it did not trouble them. It was, "How long will breakfast be, sis?" and then they were off out to look at their little gardens, to

see how much the plants and seeds had progressed during the night.

Hazel went through another phase of troublous thought while the children were in the garden, and the kettle was singing its homely song; and as she thought she stood waiting to make the tea so as to carry up Mrs Thorne's cup, which was always partaken of before that lady attempted to rise in the morning.

Just as the tea was made there was a step on the stairs and, looking very sleepy and red-eyed, Percy came into the kitchen.

"Morning, Hazel," he said rather sheepishly, as he looked at her in a half-penitent curious way; but he made no offer to kiss her, nor she him. "I say, what time does the post come in here?"

"The post Percy?" said Hazel quietly, as she went on preparing Mrs Thorne's tea. "Do you expect a letter?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll go out and meet the postman, and see what the place is like. Letters'll be here soon, I suppose?"

"Not till to-morrow morning," said Hazel, watching his changing countenance.

"Not till to-morrow morning!" he cried wonderingly.

"No; there is only one delivery here a day. The postman has been."

Percy was taken aback, and he stood staring, unable to find words and to meet his sister's stern, angry look.

"Percy," she said at last, "are you trying to be a man?"

"Of course I am," he said quickly. "Every fellow at my time of life tries to be one."

"Would it not have been more manly, then, when I invited your confidence last night, if you had told me frankly the whole truth?"

Percy's jaw dropped and he stood gazing at her with a vacant, pitiful expression.

"Then a letter has come this morning," he said.

"Two letters have come this morning," she replied, "and I know everything. Stop! What are you going to do?"

"Cut," he said sulkily. "It is of no use to stay here."

"Do you think the police would not find you if you went away?"

"Police!" he cried, turning pale.

“Yes. Your employers warned us in the letter that they had not settled yet what they should do since—since—oh, heavens! is it true?—they found out that my brother was a thief.”

“No, no—not a thief, Hazy! ’Pon my soul, I only borrowed the money. I meant to pay back every shilling. I made sure that I should win, and I never meant to steal.”

“You committed theft of the worst kind, Percy. A common thief breaks in and steals; he has not been trusted with that which he takes. You had been; and you not only broke your trust but stooped to the basest ingratitude as well.”

“Yes, I know, Hazy,” he cried hoarsely, and with his lips white; “but tell me, does my mother know? Oh, for pity’s sake, don’t tell poor ma!”

“Do you think it will pain her more than this discovery has pained me?”

“Is that why she isn’t down? Has it made her ill? I meant to have been first and got the letters; but I was so dog-tired last night I overslept myself. I say, Hazel, does she know?”

“She does not know yet; but she must know.”

“No, no! pray don’t tell her! You mustn’t—you shan’t tell her!” he cried. “It would only be making bad worse.”

“And how am I to account for your absence when you are fetched away?”

“I say, Hazel, is it so bad as that?” he cried piteously.

“Yes; I am afraid so. There is no knowing what steps your late employers may take.”

“Set of beastly cads!” muttered Percy.

“For objecting to their clerk’s dishonesty! Shame on you, if you have any shame left.”

“And now you turn against me, Hazy!” cried the lad. “I did think last night that you were sorry for me and meant to help me.”

“I am sorry for you,—sorry that you could have disgraced yourself and us to this terrible extent I feel it bitterly that you should have kept back what you did last night; but that cannot be changed now, and—”

“Isn’t breakfast ready?” cried Cissy, coming to the door. “We are so hungry.”

“Yes, dears, come in,” cried Hazel cheerfully. And the little party, after Mrs Thorne had been diligently attended to, sat down to the homely breakfast, Percy making a pretence of being too much troubled to taste anything, but ending by eating with all the heartiness of a growing lad; while it was Hazel who just managed one scrap of bread and a cup of tea, as she sat thinking of what proceedings she had better take.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Ann Straggalls Turns Messenger.

It was soon school-time, and leaving her brother, who needed no instructions to send for her should any one call, Hazel Thorne hurried to her duties, read prayers with wandering mind, and then, fully resolved upon what course to pursue, she started the children at their various lessons, and at last, in the midst of the noisy buzz, went to her desk and, quite in a fit of desperation, wrote to Mr William Forth Burge, simply saying that she was in great trouble, and would he as a friend come and give her his help and counsel?

As soon as she had finished and folded the letter she began to hesitate, asking herself whether she ought not first to have written to Miss Burge; but she came to the conclusion that she had done right and picking out the most trustworthy girl she could think of at the time, she bade her take the letter up to Mr Burge's house.

Hazel Thorne was excited enough during all these proceedings but her excitement would have increased had she been aware of the fact that one of the partition shutters was slightly lowered, and from this point of vantage Mr Samuel Chute was from time to time inspecting her every act.

For Mr Chute was a good deal exercised in his spirit.

"If it isn't to be friends it shall be enemies," he said; and he not only set himself to watch, but told his mother—to use his own words—to have an eye on the next-door people, a commission which Mrs Chute seized upon with avidity, it being one greatly to her taste.

Samuel Chute, then, knew of Percy Thorne's coming before Hazel, and also who the tall, overgrown lad was. He knew of the arrival of the business letters that morning, and after due debate in his own mind, he came to the conclusion that there was something wrong.

"They won't get over me in a hurry," he muttered; and taking it that there was a conspiracy of some kind afloat, he went quite early into the school and lowered the shutter, ready to keep a watch upon Hazel's movements, and to be ready—he only knew why—with movements of his own.

So it was there that he saw Hazel looked agitated and ill at ease, and also saw her write a letter and call up one of the girls, fat Ann Straggalls—the slow, innocent and sure—being selected for the task.

Mr Chute thrust his hands through his hair and made it stick up fiercely as he left his desk, frowned all round the room, said "Sh! sh!" in several classes, and then walked quickly to the door, turned and gave a glance round to find every eye in the school directed at him, and then stepped out into the front just in time to find Ann Straggalls engaged in a struggle with Hazel's missive, which refused to be tucked down into the bosom of the stout young maiden's dress, consequent upon the tightness of certain strings.

“Here! Hi! Straggalls!” cried Chute, and the girl crawled shrinkingly to him in the same way as the boys would have turned, a sharp, quick call from Mr Chute always suggesting impending punishment to the youthful mind.

“How is it you are not in school, Ann Straggalls?” said the schoolmaster importantly.

“Plee, sir, teacher, sir, sent me with this letter, sir. I’ve got to take it, sir.”

“What letter, Straggalls?”

“This letter, sir,” said the girl, holding out the crumpled missive.

“Letter? Ah, a letter for you to take, eh?” he said, after a glance at the direction; and his teeth gritted together as he thought that Hazel had never written to him.

He would have detained the missive, but he dared not, and half turning upon his heel, he saw that the vicar’s sisters were coming down the street, an observation which impelled him to make a quick retreat.

“There, go on,” he said; “and mind and make haste back.”

“Yes, sir, plee, sir, that’s what teacher told me to do.”

“Writing to Burge, eh?” said Mr Chute as he re-entered his school. “That’s to tell him that I spoke out to her yesterday. Ah! just let him take her part and I’ll soon give him a bit of my mind. She’s carrying on with him, is she? I know it as well as if I’d been told; but perhaps I shall be one too many with all of them yet.”

The next minute he was bitterly regretting that he had not detained and read the letter, though he knew all the time that he dared not, and he finished up for the present by having another peep at Hazel through the slit above the shutter, expecting, as his brain suggested, that she would be writing another letter, but only finding her busy with one of the classes.

Meanwhile, with her cheeks flushed and eyes brightened at the escape she had just had, Ann Straggalls stumped eagerly along to perform her commission, but only to encounter the Lambent sisters, before whom she stopped short compelling them also to stop or else turn off to right or left, unless they were willing to fall over her. For, according to traditional instruction at Plumton Schools, it was the proper thing for every schoolgirl who met the vicar’s sisters to make a bob to each, and these two bobs Ann Straggalls diligently performed.

“Not in school, Straggalls?” said Rebecca, in a stern, inquisitorial tone of voice.

“No, ’m, please, ’m. Teacher’s sent me with a letter, ’m.”

“Indeed!” cried Beatrice, thrown by excitement off her guard. “To Mr Cannings?”

“No, ’m, please ’m; to Mr William Forth Burge, ’m.”

"To Mr William Forth Burge!" cried Rebecca, excited in her turn. "What is Miss Thorne writing to him for?"

"Please 'm, I don't know, 'm. Teacher said I was to take this letter, 'm, and I don't know any more."

"It is very strange, Beatrice," said Rebecca querulously.

"Strange indeed," replied her sister, who felt better on finding that her suspicions were incorrect, and worse at having betrayed the bent of her own thoughts, and not troubling herself about her sister's feelings in the least.

"Ought we to do anything, Beatrice?" said Rebecca, whose fingers itched to get hold of the letter.

"Do anything?" said Beatrice.

"Yes," said Rebecca in a low tone, unheard by Ann Straggalls, whose large moist lips were some distance apart to match her eyelids, as she stared at the vicar's sisters; "ought we to let that note go?"

"Oh, I could not think of interfering," said Beatrice, shaking her head. "Besides, it would be impossible. Henry gives the new mistress great latitude, and possibly he might approve of her corresponding with Mr Burge."

"I—I don't like letting her go," said Rebecca, hesitating, a fact of which her sister was well aware. "I don't think it is proper, and it seems to me to be our duty to take some steps in such matters as these."

"I shall not interfere with Miss Thorne in any way," replied Beatrice. "Henry is, I dare say, quite correct in his views respecting the mistress's behaviour, and I certainly shall not expose myself to the risk of being taken to task again by my brother for interfering, as he called it at the schools. You had better make haste, Straggalls, and deliver your message."

"Please, 'm, it's a letter, 'm," said Ann Straggalls in open eyed delight at catching the speaker tripping.

"Make haste on and deliver your letter, child," said the lady with dignity; and the girl made two more bobs and hurried away.

"It was quite impossible, Rebecca," said Beatrice reprovingly. "The letter is no business of ours."

"Are we going down to the school to-day?" asked Rebecca.

"Not now," replied her sister; "but we might call upon Mrs Thorne. I wonder what Mr Chute has had to do with that letter to Mr Burge."

“Yes, I was wondering too. He was certainly talking to the girl Straggalls as we came into sight.”

And then, itching with curiosity, the sisters walked on.

Ann Straggalls held her head a little higher as she went on up the street through the market-place. She felt that she was an ambadress of no little importance, as she had been stopped twice on her way.

As luck had it, she came upon the Reverend Henry Lambent as he was leaving the Vicarage gates, looking very quiet and thoughtful, and he would have passed Straggalls unnoticed, had not that young lady been ready to recognise him, which, nerved as she was by her pleasant feeling of self-satisfied importance, she did by first nearly causing him to tumble over her, as she made the customary bob by way of incense, and then saying aloud—

“Plee, sir, I’ve got a letter.”

“A letter, child! Let me see—oh, it is Straggalls.”

“Yes, sir—Annie Straggalls, sir, plee, sir.”

“Then why don’t you give me the letter, child? Who is it from?”

“Teacher, plee, sir.”

A flush came into the vicar’s pale cheeks, and he raised his drooping lids as he impatiently held out his hand and waited while Ann Straggalls struggled to produce the letter. She had had some difficulty in placing it in what she considered to be a safe receptacle, forcing it down below the string that ran round the top of her frock. That struggle, however, was nothing to the one which now took place to release the missive, for the note had crept down to somewhere about Ann Straggalls’ waist where it was lying so comfortable and warm that it refused to be dislodged, in spite of the pushing of one hand, and the thrustings down of the other. The young lady posed herself in a variety of attitudes, reaching up, bending down, leaning first on one side, then upon the other, but all in vain. She grew red in the face, her hands were hot, and the vicar became more and more impatient; but the letter was not forthcoming, and at last she exclaimed, with a doleful expression of countenance—

“Plee, sir, I can’t get it out.”

“You’ve lost it,” cried the vicar angrily.

“No, sir, I ain’t, plee, sir. I can feel it quite plain, but it’s slithered down to my waist.”

“You tiresome girl!” cried the vicar impatiently, for it was an awkward dilemma, and he was beginning to think of the penknife in his vest pocket, and the possibility of cutting the note free without injury to the young lady’s skin, when she solved the difficulty herself by running off to where she saw a little girl standing, and the result of the companion’s efforts was so successful

that Ann Straggalls came running back beaming with pleasure, the letter in her hand.

“Good girl!” exclaimed the vicar, thrusting a sixpence into her palm, as he eagerly snatched the letter, devoured the address with his eyes, and the flush died out of his cheeks.

“Why, the letter is for Mr Burge,” he said excitedly.

“Yes, sir; for Mr William Forth Burge, plee, sir.”

“Take it,” exclaimed the vicar huskily, and thrusting the note hastily into the girl’s hands, he turned sharply round and walked back into the house, thoroughly unnerved by the incident, trifling as it may seem.

“He’s give me sixpence!” said Ann Straggalls wonderingly; and then—“Didn’t he seem cross!”

At last, after these interruptions, which duly published the fact that Hazel Thorne openly wrote to Mr William Forth Burge, the note came to that gentleman’s hand, for Ann Straggalls reached the gate, pushed it wide open, and knowing from experience what a splendid gate it was, she passed through, and stopped to watch it as it swung back past the post, with the latch giving a loud click, and away ever so far in the other direction; then back again with another click; away again with another, and then to and fro, quicker and quicker, click—click—click—click—clack, when the latch caught in its proper notch, and Ann Straggalls smiled with satisfaction, and wished that she had such a gate for her own.

The clicking of the gate took the attention of Mr William Forth Burge, who was busy amongst his standard rose-trees, with a quill-pen and a saucer, using the former to brush off the abundant aphides from the buds into the latter. He smiled with satisfaction as he released from its insect burden some favourite rose, whose name was hanging from it upon a label like that used for the old-fashioned medicine bottles—“one tablespoonful every four hours”—but, all the same, it was undoubtedly unpleasant for the aphides that were being slaughtered by the thousand.

Miss Burge had her work and a garden-seat, and she was looking up from time to time, and smiling her satisfaction at seeing her brother so happy, for of late he had been dull and overclouded, and did not take to his dinners and his cigars so heartily as of old.

She too looked up as the gate clicked, and together the brother and sister watched the coming girl, who had not seen them yet, but was staring, open-mouthed, at the various flowers. First she made a pause before one, and her fingers twitched with the intense desire she felt to pick it; then before another which she bent down to smell, and so on and on slowly, fighting hard and successfully against temptation, till she came to a rose in full bloom, before which she came to a complete standstill.

“Oh, you beauty!” she cried aloud as she bent down and began sniffing with all her might. “Oh, don’t I wish Feelier Potts was here!”

But Feelier Potts was not there, fortunately for Mr William Forth Burge's *Gloire de Bordeaux*, for that young lady would have felt no more scruple in ravaging the bush than in picking the buttercups and daisies of the fields; so at last Ann Straggalls turned with a sigh of regret, to find herself face to face, with the owner of the garden, who was smiling at her blandly.

"Plee, sir, I've brought a letter, sir, from teacher, sir."

Little Miss Burge felt startled as she saw the change that came over her brother's face, for, in place of its customary ruddiness, it grew mottled, and he stood gazing at the girl as if her words could not be true.

"A letter? For me?"

"Yes, sir, plee, sir; teacher sent it."

"Take her in, Betsey; give her some cake or biscuits," he said hastily, as he almost snatched the missive.

Little Miss Burge sighed as she took the girl by the hand and led her away, Mr William Forth Burge following directly after with the letter, which he took into his study, for it was too sacred to be read out in the open air.

It only took a minute to seat Ann Straggalls in the hall with a big lump of cake in her hand, portions of which she transferred to her mouth and worked at with machine-like regularity, and then Miss Burge hurried to the study, to find her brother walking up and down in a great state of excitement.

"Betsey," he cried hoarsely, "she's written to me—she's sent for me!"

"Oh, Bill, has she?" cried the little woman sadly.

"Yes; she's written to me—she's sent for me."

"Bill dear, I don't like that."

"What?"

"It don't—please don't be angry with me—but it don't seem nice."

"Not nice—not nice!" he cried almost fiercely. "Why, read here. Poor gal! she's in trouble. There's something wrong. Here, where's my best coat. I'll go down."

"Oh! that's different," cried little Miss Burge, who seemed greatly relieved. "Poor girl! Why, whatever can be the matter?"

"I don't know. You mustn't stop me, Betsey," he cried. "I must go directly—I must."

“Oh, Bill! Bill! Bill!” sobbed the little lady, throwing her arms round his neck and bursting into tears.

“I can’t help it, Betsey,” he cried; “I can’t help it. I never had it before, but I’ve got it badly now, dear; and I ain’t a bit ashamed to own it to you.”

“Oh, Bill!”

“Don’t try to stop me, Betsey.”

“But you won’t do anything foolish, dear?”

“It wouldn’t be foolish if it was her,” he said excitedly.

“No, Bill, I suppose not; but I don’t like her sending for you to come.”

“There, there,” he cried, “I won’t hear another word.” And he proved it by hurriedly taking his hat and going down straight to the school, leaving his sister in tears, and Ann Straggalls deep in cake.

Mr Chute was on the look-out, and saw him pass, and directly after the schoolmaster took up a slate and a pencil, and placing the slate against the partition, began to write thereon, with his back to the boys, but with his eager eyes gazing through the slit at where Hazel was busy with her pupils.

A minute later he saw Mr William Forth Burge enter the schoolroom and shake hands. Hazel spoke to him, but the words did not reach Chute’s ears; and soon after, as the hands pointed to twelve, the children were dismissed, and Hazel and Mr William Forth Burge were alone, but, to Chute’s great disgust they went out and into the cottage.

“Well, of all the shabby—Oh, I can’t stand this!” cried the schoolmaster, stamping his feet. “It’s too bad.”

But, bad or good, he had to submit to it for his chance of overhearing the conversation was gone.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

“I’m Very Glad You’re in Trouble.”

“I’m very glad you’re in trouble, Miss Thorne,” said Mr William Forth Burge, as he took the chair in the little parlour which Hazel placed for him, Mrs Thorne, not being dressed to her own satisfaction, having escaped into the kitchen, where her son was seated, sulky, and with his countenance full of gloom.

“Are you?” said Hazel, smiling sadly.

“No; not glad you’re in trouble, but that you’ve felt that I could help you,” said the visitor, suddenly recollecting that Hazel was standing, and rising to put a chair for her in turn.

“I am so lonely here—so helpless,” said Hazel after a pause, for she hesitated to begin and lay bare the trouble that was at her breast.

“Well, don’t say lonely, Miss Thorne,” said the great man. “I’m sure my sister and me has always felt a sort of longing to be neighbours, and to be friendly. For don’t you think because I’m a rich man that it’s made a bit of difference in me.”

“I felt your kindness so much, Mr Burge,” she replied earnestly, “that I ventured to ask for your advice and help in this very great trouble.”

“That’s right,” he exclaimed, his admiration and respect for the speaker shining out of his honest eyes. “I’m a very plain, common sort of man, my dear, but I’ve had lots of business experience, and p’r’aps I can help you better than some people would think.”

There was a pause here, for Hazel’s tongue seemed to refuse its office. Her visitor’s manner was so tender and kind, as well as respectful, that it touched her to the heart, and she looked at him piteously, as if imploring him to give her time.

“It’s a good big bit of trouble, I can see, my dear,” he said quietly. “Give yourself time and speak out; and if William Forth Burge can help you through with it, you may feel that it’s as good as done. Suppose I try a bit of a guess—just to help you like. Now, is it money? Don’t be offended at my saying so, but is it money, now?”

“It is about money,” faltered Hazel, making an effort.

“I thought so,” he said, brightening up and rubbing his hands softly. “Then don’t you worry a bit more, my dear; for my sister Betsey’s got lots of money saved up, and there’s nothing wouldn’t please her better than putting your bit of trouble all right for you.”

“I must explain to you, Mr Burge,” said Hazel.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said gently. “It might hurt you, perhaps; and, dear heart alive! why should you make yourself miserable about such a thing as money! Now, just you look here, my dear Miss Thorne. I’m going straight home, and I’ll send down my sister Betsey, and you just say offhand to her what will put it straight—fifty, or a hundred, or two hundred, or whatever it is—and she’ll have it in her ridicule, and the job’s done. There, I shall make you cry if I stay, and I don’t want to do that, you know. Good-bye. God bless you!”

He had started up, and was standing, hat in hand, holding out his hand to her, which she took and held while she tried to speak.

“No, no, Mr Burge,” she said at last. “Let me tell you all.”

“To be sure you shall,” he said soothingly. “There, there! don’t be afraid to speak to me,

my dear.—Just you say to yourself, ‘William Forth Burge is an old friend of mine, and I’d trust him with anything, and he’s just the man to go to when I’m in trouble.’”

“You are very kind,” faltered Hazel, fighting hard to be brave. And at last she told him the story of her brother’s lapse.

“The young dog!” he cried angrily; and his voice was raised. “How dare he do such a thing, and disgrace you and his mamma? I—I could thrash him well.”

“It is so terrible—so shocking a thing. I don’t know what to do, Mr Burge. I feel so helpless: for the people, his employers—seemed to hint at prosecution.”

“Is—is he in there?” whispered Mr William Forth Burge, winking one eye and pointing with his thumb at the door.

“Yes; he is in the next room,” replied Hazel.

“I shouldn’t wonder a bit,” said the visitor very loudly. “I should say they are sure to prosecute and put him in prison.”

The moment after he nodded and frowned and winked at Hazel.

“Let’s frighten him a bit,” he whispered. “Let him think he is going to be in great trouble, and it will make him remember. But you give me the people’s names, my dear, and I’ll set my lawyer on to ’em; and don’t you worry yourself any more. I’ll square it all for you, and make it right.”

“But the shame—the disgrace!” cried Hazel.

“It’s no shame or disgrace of yours, my dear,” he said. “You couldn’t help it. I had three boys in my place at different times as was bitten that way. Lots of ’em are. A silly young dog! He deserves to be well flogged. But just you leave the thing to me, and I’ll put it right. But what are you going to do with him afterwards? You can’t keep him here!”

It was a question Hazel could not answer, for like a blow the idea came to her that by his act of dishonest folly her brother had lost his character, and that the chances were greatly against his obtaining further employment.

“Ah! You don’t know,” said Mr William Forth Burge cheerfully. “You can’t think. It is a job, isn’t it? Sometimes, my dear, I have thought that boys are a regular mistake. They’re a terrible lot of trouble, unless they make up their minds to be very careful and particular, and that they don’t often do. But never you mind. We’ll see if we can’t set it all right by-and-by. We’ll get him out of the scrape first, and then see what’s to be done with him afterwards. Now, suppose I put down who the people are; and you may as well give me the letters you talked about.—That’s right. Now wait a bit.”

Mr William Forth Burge’s coat was buttoned very tightly across his chest, and he had some

difficulty in getting at the breast-pocket; but he extricated therefrom a large metallic paper pocket-book, such as would be used by a commercial traveller about to receive an order, opened the clasp, found a suitable place, and fixed it by placing the elastic band of the pocket-book round the leaves, after which he moistened the tip of the pencil between his lips from habit, and proceeded to enter the day and date of the month.

“Nothing like doing these things in a business-like way, my dear,” he said, as he wrote on, asking questions and making his notes, ending by saying:

“Now, suppose we have in the young fellow.”

“Have him in?” faltered Hazel.

“Yes; let’s have him in and give him a bit of a talking to. Don’t you think it will be best?”

Hazel thought for a few moments, and in that brief space she seemed to realise exactly what Percy would say, and how he would resent being taken to task by their visitor.

Mr William Forth Burge guessed her thoughts, and nodded and smiled.

“You’re afraid I shall be too hard upon him. That’s just the way with worn—I mean ladies. You’re too gentle and kind—just like your nature. Why, my sister, Betsey, she’d come here in a case like this, and she’d tell that brother of yours that he was a very naughty boy, and mustn’t do so any more, and there would be an end of it; only it wouldn’t do any good. For, bless you, my dear, if you talk like that to a boy who has been a bit out in the world, he’ll pretend to be very sorry and that he’s going to be quite square, and as soon as you’re out of sight he’ll grin at you and think how soft you are. Now, suppose you fetch him in.”

For answer Hazel rose and went to the kitchen, where she found that Percy had tried to secure himself by taking his two young sisters one upon each knee, and holding them there as a sort of armour of innocence against attack.

“Percy, there is a gentleman in the next room wishes to see you.”

“Oh, I can’t go—I daren’t go!” the boy said excitedly. “What does he want?”

“Surely, Hazel, my dear, you are not going to expose poor Percy to insult,” cried Mrs Thorne.

“Mamma,” said Hazel firmly, “I have asked Mr Burge to come down here and help me in an endeavour to settle Percy’s affairs.”

“Settle his affairs! Oh! surely, Percy, you have not been such a bad boy as to go and get into debt?”

“Yes, mother,” said Hazel quickly, as she responded to the boy’s imploring look, “Percy has behaved badly, and entangled himself with a very serious debt and Mr Burge is going to see

what can be done.”

“Then you’ve been a bad, wicked, thoughtless boy, Percy!” exclaimed Mrs Thorne in a whining voice; “and I don’t know what you don’t deserve—going spending your money in such a reckless way, and then taking trust for things you ought not to have had.”

“Don’t you turn against me, ma,” whimpered the lad.

“But I must turn against you, Percy. It is my duty as your mamma to teach and lead you, and when you are going wrong to scold you for being naughty. Now, put those children down directly, and go upstairs and brush your hair, and then go and see Mr William Forth Burge, who will, I dare say, being a very respectable sort of man, talk to you for your benefit. Hazel, my dear, make my compliments to Mr William Forth Burge, and tell him I am much gratified by his calling, but that I never receive till after three o’clock. Tuesdays and Fridays used to be my days, but of course one cannot be so particular now.”

“Yes, mother,” said Hazel quietly. “Come, Percy,” she continued, and she took his hand.

“I say, Hazy, must I go?” said the lad, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

“Yes: come along and be brave and respectful. Let Mr Burge see that you are truly sorry, and I think he will try and see your employers, and make some arrangement.”

“What—so that there shall be no police bother?” he asked eagerly.

“Yes, I hope so.”

“I couldn’t stand that, Hazy; I couldn’t indeed. I should go and enlist or jump off a bridge, or something of the kind.”

“Don’t be foolish, Percy, but try and meet the difficulty like a man.”

“Yes,” he said, “I will. But stop a moment. I say, is my collar all right? Those children have been tumbling me.”

“Yes, it looks quite right.”

“And—must I go upstairs and brush my hair?”

“No, no; it looks quite smooth. Now, come—be brave and face it as you should.”

“Oh yes, it’s all very well for you, who haven’t got it to do,” he replied. “You can’t think what it is.”

“Yes, Percy, I can; and it makes me say to you: Why expose yourself to such bitter humiliation? Would it not have been better to be able to hold up your head before all the world and to say: I am poor, and occupy a very menial position, but I am a gentleman?”

“Yes, Hazel is quite right my dear,” said Mrs Thorne. “It is what I always say to her: Never forget that you are a lady; and I am glad to find that she does not forget my teachings.”

“I’ll come now,” said Percy. “I—I think I’m ready;” and, clinging to his sister’s hand, he went with her into the room where Mr William Forth Burge was seated behind his book, with his pencil across his mouth, as if it had been a bit to bridle his tongue from uttering that which he had wished to say. He was trying to look very stern, but an admiring glance shot from his eyes as Hazel closed the door after her and then said simply:

“This is my brother, Mr Burge.”

There was a few moments’ pause, during which Percy, after a quick look at the great man of Plumton, stood there humbled and abashed, for the knowledge of his position completely took away his natural effrontery, and seemed to have made him ten years younger than he was. A flash of resentment came for a moment, and made his eyes brighten and his cheek colour on hearing their visitor’s salutation, but they both died out directly, for all Percy Thorne’s spirit seemed to have evaporated now.

“Well, sir,” cried Mr William Forth Burge fiercely, for here was an opportunity for crowing over a lad who was a very different sort of boy to what he had been. He had never meddled with moneys entrusted to him, and had been content to plod and plod slowly and surely till he had made himself what he was. This boy—Percy Thorne—had tried to make himself rich by one or two bold strokes—by gambling, in fact, and this was a chance; so “Well, sir,” he cried, “and what have you got to say for yourself?”

Percy looked up and looked down, for it was evident he had nothing to say for himself, and he ended by gazing appealingly at his sister, his lips moving as if saying: “Speak a word for me! Please do.”

Mr William Forth Burge could be sharp enough as a business-man, simple as he was in some other matters, and he noted Percy’s glance, and softly rubbed his hands beneath the table as he rejoiced in the fact that he had been called in to help Hazel in this family matter. Then, seizing upon the opportunity of showing where he could be shrewd and strong, he said quietly:

“I think, Miss Thorne, you had better leave us together for a few minutes, and well see what can be done.”

Hazel hesitated for a moment, and then, in spite of an appeal from her brother, walked to the door, turning then to direct a glance at her visitor which completely finished the work that her eyes had unconsciously already done, and for a few moments after she had gone the ex-tradesman sat with his gaze fixed upon the table, completely unnerved and unable to trust himself to speak.

He soon recovered, though, and turned sharply to where the tall, thin boy stood, miserable and humiliated, resting first on one foot and then on the other, and after staring him completely

out of countenance for a few moments, he showed himself in quite a new character, and gave some inkling of how it was that he had been so successful in his trade.

“Now, young fellow,” he said sharply, “I know all about it, and what a scamp you have been.”

Percy blushed again, and raised his head to make an angry retort.

“Well, scoundrel, then, or blackguard, if that other name isn’t strong enough for you.”

“How dare”—began Percy, scarlet.

“Eh? What? How dare I? Well, I’ll tell you, boy. It’s because I’m an honest man, and you ain’t. There: you can’t get over that.”

Percy could not get over that. The shot completely dismantled at one blow the whole of his fortifications, and left him at his enemy’s mercy. Giving up on the instant he whimpered pitifully —

“Please don’t be hard on me, sir; I have been a scoundrel, but if you—you—could give me another chance—”

Boy prevailed, and all Percy Thorne’s manliness went to the winds. He was very young yet in spite of his size, and, try how he would to keep them back, the weak tears came, and he could not say another word.

“Give you another chance, eh?” said the visitor sharply. “That’s all very well, but we’ve got to get you out of this scrape first. Your people, Suthers, Rubley, and Spark, write as if they meant to prosecute you for robbing them.”

“But I meant to pay it again, sir—I did indeed!” cried Percy.

“Yes: of course. That’s what all fellows who go in for a bit of a spree with other people’s coin say to themselves, so as to give them Dutch courage. But it won’t do!”

“But indeed I should have paid it sir.”

“If you had won, which wasn’t likely, boy. Only one in a thousand wins, my lad, and it’s always somebody else—not you. Now then, suppose I set to work and get these people, Suthers, Rubley, and Spark”—he repeated the names with great gusto—“to quash the prosecution on account of your youth and the respectability of your relations, what would you do?”

“Oh, I’d be so grateful, sir! I’d never, never bet again, or put money on horses, or—”

“Make a fool of yourself, eh?”

“No, sir; indeed, indeed I would not.”

“Well, what sort of people are these Suthers, Rubley, and Spark?”

“Oh! dreadful cads, sir.”

“If you say that again,” cried the ex-butcher sharply, “I won’t make a stroke to get you out of your trouble.”

Percy stared at him with astonishment.

“It’s all very fine!” cried Mr William Forth Burge. “Every one who don’t do just as you like is a cad, I suppose. People have often called me a cad because I’ve not had so good an education and can’t talk and speak like they do; and sometimes the cads are on the other side.”

“I’m very sorry, sir,” faltered Percy.

“Then don’t you call people cads, young fellow. Now then, you mean to give up all your stupid tricks, and to grow into a respectable man, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir; I’ll try,” said Percy humbly.

“Then just you go to your bedroom, brush that streaky hair off your forehead, take out that pin, and put on a different tie; and next time you get some clothes made, don’t have them cut like a stable-boy’s. It don’t fit with your position, my lad. Now, look sharp and get ready, for you’re going along with me.”

“Going with you, sir?”

“Yes, along with me, my lad; and I’m going to keep you till you are out of your scrape. Then we’ll see about what’s to be done next.”

Percy left the room, and his sister came back, to find Mr William Forth Burge looking very serious; but his eyes brightened as he took Hazel’s hand.

“I am going to take your brother away with me, and I sha’n’t let a moment go by without trying to put things square. I think the best thing will be for me to take him right up to London, and go straight to his employers; but I haven’t told him so. If I did, he’d shy and kick; but it will be the best way. And I dare say a bit of a talk with the people will help to put matters right.”

“But will they prosecute, Mr Burge? It would be so dreadful!”

“So it would, my dear; but they won’t. They’ll talk big about wanting to make an example, and that sort of thing, and then they’ll come round, and I shall square it up. Oh, here he comes. There, say good-bye to your sister, young man, for we’ve no time to spare. Now, go in first. Good-bye, Miss Thorne.”

“Mr Burge, I cannot find words to tell you how grateful I am,” cried Hazel in tears.

“I don’t want you to,” he replied bluntly, as he shook hands impressively, but with the greatest deference. “I couldn’t find words to tell you, my dear, how grateful I am to think that you are ready to trust me when you want a friend.”

Here Mr William Forth Burge stuck his hat on very fiercely, and went home without a word, Percy Thorne walking humbly by his side, and checking his desire to say to himself that after all, Mr William. Forth Burge did seem to be a regular cad.

Chapter Thirty.

Mr Burge is Business-Like.

"I am the last person in the world, Rebecca, to interfere," said Beatrice, as she busied herself making a series of holes with some thick white cotton, which she wriggled till something like a pattern was contrived; "but I cannot sit still and see that young person misbehaving as she does."

"I quite agree with you, dear, and it shocks me to see into what a state of moral blindness poor Henry has plunged."

"Ah!" sighed her sister, "it is very sad;" and she sighed again and thought of a certain scarlet woman. "What would he say if he knew that Miss Thorne openly sent letters to Mr William Forth Burge?"

"But they might be business letters," said Rebecca.

"Miss Thorne has no right to send business letters to Mr William Forth Burge," said Beatrice angrily. "If there are any business matters in connection with the school, the letter, if letter there be—for it would be much more in accordance with Miss Thorne's duty if she came in all due humility—"

"Suitably dressed," said Rebecca.

"Exactly," assented her sister. "—to the Vicarage and stated what was required. Or if she wrote, it should be to the vicar, when the letter would be in due course referred to us, and we should see what ought to be done."

"Exactly so," assented Rebecca.

"Mr William Forth Burge has been a great benefactor to the schools; but they are the Church schools, and, for my part, I do not approve of everything being referred to him."

"I—I think you are right, Beatrice," assented Rebecca; "but Mr William Forth Burge has, as you say, been a great benefactor to the schools."

"Exactly; a very great benefactor, Rebecca; but that is no reason why Miss Thorne should write to him."

"I quite agree with you there, Beatrice; and now I have something more to tell you, which I have just heard as I came up the town."

"About the schools?"

"Well, not exactly about the schools, but about the school-cottage. I heard, on very good

authority, that the Thornes have a young man staying in the house.”

“A young man!”

“Yes; he arrived there yesterday afternoon, and Mr Chute, who was my informant, looked quite scandalised.”

“We must tell Henry at once,” cried Beatrice.

“Of what use would it be?” said Rebecca viciously. “He would only be angry, and tell us it was Miss Thorne’s brother, or something of that sort.”

“It is very, very terrible,” sighed Beatrice, “Of what could Henry be thinking to admit such a girl to our quiet country district?”

Just at the same time their brother also was much exercised in his own mind on account of the letter that he had seen in Hazel’s handwriting directed to Mr Burge, and he was troubled the more on finding that she should appeal to Mr Burge instead of to him—the head of the parish, and one who had shown so great a disposition to be her friend—for even then he could not own that he desired a closer intimacy.

The Reverend Henry Lambent knit his brows and asked himself again whether this was not some temptation that had come upon him, similar to those which had attacked the holy men of old; and as he sat and thought it seemed to him that it could not be, for Hazel Thorne grew to him fairer and more attractive day by day, and, fight hard as he would against those thoughts, they grew stronger and more masterful, while he became less able to cope with them.

And all this time Mr William Forth Burge, the stout and plain and ordinary, was working away on Hazel’s behalf. He was showing the business side of his nature, and any one who had studied him now would easily have understood why it was that he had become so wealthy. For there was a straightforward promptness in all he did that impressed Percy a good deal; and when, after keeping him for some hours at his villa, wondering what was to happen next—hours that were employed in copying letters for his new friend—the said new friend announced that they were going up to London, Percy, with all the disposition to resist obeyed without a word, and followed to the station.

“Don’t seem very well off,” thought Percy, as Mr William Forth Burge took a couple of third-class tickets for London.

He read the boy’s thoughts, for he said sharply—

“Six shillings third class; eighteen shillings first class. Going this way saves one pound four.”

Percy said, “Yes, sir,” and subsided moodily into the corner of the carriage opposite to his companion, and but little was said on the journey up. Mr William Forth Burge took the boy to a quiet hotel, and wrote a letter or two, as it was too late to do any business that night. The next

morning Percy was left in the coffee-room to look furtively over the sporting news in the *Standard* while his new friend went off to see Mr Geringer, who, on hearing his business, seemed greatly displeased at any one else meddling with the Thornes' affairs; and though he did not refuse to go with his visitor to intercede for Percy, he put him off till the next afternoon, and Percy's champion left his office chuckling to himself.

"Asks me to wait till next day," he said, "so that he may go and see the state of the market for himself. Won't do, Mr Geringer, sir. That's not William Forth Burge's way of doing business." And he went straight to the firm, gave his card, and was shown in to Mr Spark, a dull, heavy man, remarkable in the business for his inertia.

Yes, of course they should prosecute Percy Thorne, if that was what the visitor wanted to know; and if the said visitor wanted to know anything else, would he be kind enough to be quick, for Mr Spark's time was very valuable?

"Quick as you like, sir," said Mr William Forth Burge, who showed the new side of his character. "I've been in trade, and I know what's what. Now, sir, I'm the friend of the boy's sister; father dead—mother a baby. Business is business. Prosecute the boy, and you put him in prison, and spend more money; you get none back. Forgive him, and take him on again, and, if it's fifty pounds, I'll pay what's lost."

Then followed a long argument, out of which Mr William Forth Burge came away a hundred pounds poorer, and with Percy Thorne free to begin the world again, but handicapped with a blurred character.

That evening they were back at Plumton.

"But there's going to be no prosecution, or anything of that sort, Miss Thorne; and, till we hear of something to suit him, he shall stop at my house and do clerk's work in my office."

"But I feel sure you have been paying away money to extricate him from this terrible difficulty, Mr Burge," cried Hazel.

"Well, and suppose I have," he said, smiling; "I've a right to do what I like with my own money, and it's all spent for the benefit of our schools."

"But, Mr Burge," cried Hazel eagerly, and speaking with the tears running down her cheeks, "how can I ever repay you?"

"Oh, I'll send in my bill some day," he said hastily. "But as I was going to say, Master Percy shall stay at my place for the present. I could easily place him at a butcher's or a meat salesman's, but that ain't genteel enough for a boy like him. So just you wait a bit and—"

"See," he would have said, but all this time he had been backing towards the door to avoid Hazel's thanks, and he escaped before his final word was spoken.

"There's something about that man I don't quite like," said Mrs Thorne as soon as their

visitor had gone.

“Not like him, dear?” cried Hazel wonderingly.

“No, my dear; there’s a sort of underhandedness about him that isn’t nice.”

“But, my dear mother, he has been up to town on purpose to extricate Percy from a great difficulty, and, I feel sure,” said Hazel warmly, “at a great expense to himself.”

“Yes, that’s it!” exclaimed Mrs Thorne triumphantly. “And you mark my words, Hazel, if he don’t try to make us pay for it most heavily some day.”

“Oh, really, mother dear!”

“Now, don’t contradict, Hazel, because you really cannot know so well as I do about these things. Has he not taken Percy to his house?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Then you will see if he doesn’t make that boy a perfect slave and drudge, and work him till—Well, there now, how lucky! What can have brought Edward Geringer down now?”

Hazel turned pale, for at her mother’s exclamation she had turned sharply, just in time to see Mr Geringer’s back as he passed the window, and the next moment his knock was heard at the door.

“Well, my dear,” exclaimed Mrs Thorne, as Hazel stood looking greatly disturbed, “why don’t you go and let Mr Geringer in? And, for goodness sake, Hazel, do be a little more sensible this time. Edward Geringer has come down, of course, on purpose to see you, and you know why.”

Further speech was cut short by the children relieving their sister of the unpleasant duty of admitting the visitor, who came in directly after, smiling and looking bland, with one of the little girls on each side.

“Ah, Hazel!” he exclaimed, loosing his hold of the children.

Hazel tried to master the shrinking sensation that troubled her, and shook hands. Her manner was so cold that Geringer could not but observe it; still, he hid his mortification with a smile, and turned to Mrs Thorne.

“And how are you, my dear madam?” he exclaimed effusively as he took both the widow’s hands, to stand holding them with a look that was a mingling of respect and tenderness, the result being that the widow began to sob, and it was some little time before she could be restored to composure.

“I had a visit,” he said at last, “from a gentleman who resides in this place, and upon

thinking over your trouble I have engaged to go with him to-morrow afternoon to see poor Percy's employers; but I felt bound to run down here first and have a little consultation with you both before taking any steps."

He glanced at Hazel, and their eyes met; and Hazel read plainly that she was the price of his interference to save Percy, and as she mentally repeated his letter, she met his eye bravely, while her heart throbbed with joy as she felt ready to give him a triumphant look of defiance. He started, in spite of himself, as Mrs Thorne exclaimed—

"It is just like you, Mr Geringer—so kind and thoughtful! But Mr William Forth Burge has settled the matter with those dreadful people. They kept a great deal of it from me, but I know all, now it is well over; and it is very kind of you, all the same."

"I try to be kind," he said bitterly, "but my kindness seems to be generally thrown away. Miss Thorne, I am going to the hotel to stay to-night. A note will bring me back directly. Mrs Thorne, you must excuse me now."

He spoke in a quiet very subdued voice, and left the house, lest they should see the mortification he felt and he should burst out into a fit of passionate reproach, so thoroughly had he hoped that, by coming down, he might work Percy's trouble to his own advantage, and gain so great a hold upon Hazel's gratitude that he might still win the life-game he had been playing so long. But this was check and impending mate, and had he not hurried away he felt that he would have lost more ground still.

He walked up to the hotel in a frame of mind of no very enviable character, fully intending to stay for a few days; but on reaching the place he found that it was possible to catch the night-train back to town.

"Better let her think I am offended now," he muttered. "It is the best move I can make;" and he went straight back to the station, so for the present Hazel saw him no more, and to her great relief.

Percy only came to the cottage once a week, saying that Mr William Forth Burge kept him hard at work writing, and he should be very glad to get a post somewhere in town, for he was sick of Plumton, it was so horribly slow, and Mr William Forth Burge was such a dreadful cad.

Percy's stay proved to be shorter than he expected, for at the end of a month he was one morning marched up to Ardley, and brought face to face with George Canninge, who was quiet and firm with him, asking him a few sharp questions, and ending by giving him a couple of five-pound notes and a letter to a shipping firm in London, the head of which firm told him to come into the office the very next day, and was very short, but informed him that his salary as clerk would begin at once at sixty pounds a year, and that if he did his duty he should rise.

Chapter Thirty One.

Another Trouble.

It was, some will say, a childish, old-fashioned way of keeping cash, but all the same it was the plan adopted by Hazel, who every week dropped the amounts she had received from the school pence, after changing the coppers into silver, through the large slit of an old money-box that had been given her when a child. It was a plain, oak-wood box, with ordinary lock and key, and the slit at the top was large enough to admit of each week's shillings and sixpences being tied up in note-paper, in the ladylike way adopted by the fair sex—that is to say, a neat packet is made and tied up with cotton. After the tying up Hazel used to put the amount it contained upon the packet, enter the said amount in a memorandum-book, drop the packet through the slit, and lock up the drawer in which the box reposed.

During the early portion of her stay at Plumton, as previously shown, Mr Chute went on changing the pence for her from copper to silver, but after a time Hazel felt a certain amount of diffidence in charging the schoolmaster with the task, and made an arrangement with the grocer and draper of the place, who readily made the exchange.

Then there was the monthly payment to the blanket fund, which was also placed in the same receptacle, after being duly noted; and there were times when Hazel thought that it would be a good thing when she could get rid of an amount that was rather a burden to her, and she even went so far as to think that she would ask Mr William Forth Burge to take charge of the amount, but for certain reasons she declined.

It was no uncommon thing for Hazel to run very short of money for housekeeping purposes, and several times over it would have been a great convenience to have made use of a portion of the school pence and replaced it from her salary; but she forbore, preferring that the sums she held in charge should remain untouched as they had come into her hands.

After expecting for what seemed a very great length of time, she at last received a beautifully written but ill-spelt letter from one of the churchwardens, requesting her to send him in a statement of the amounts received for the children's pence, and to be prepared to hand over the money at a certain appointed time.

The letter came like a relief to her as she sat at dinner; and upon Mrs Thorne asking, in a somewhat ill-used tone, who had been writing that she was not to know of, her daughter smilingly handed her the letter.

"It was such a thorough business letter, dear, that I thought you would not care to read it."

But Mrs Thorne took it, read it through, and passed it back without a word.

"I think you seem a good deal better, dear," said Hazel, smiling.

"Indeed, I am not, child," replied Mrs Thorne sharply. "I never felt worse. My health is terrible: Plumton does not agree with me, and I must have a change."

“A change, dear?” said Hazel, sighing.

“Yes. It is dreadful this constant confinement in a little poking place. I feel sometimes as if I should be stifled. Good gracious, Hazel! what could you be thinking about to come and live in a town like this? Let’s go, my dear, and find some occupation more congenial to your spirit. I cannot bear to go on seeing how you are wasted here.”

“My dear mother!” exclaimed Hazel wonderingly.

“I repeat it, Hazel—I repeat it, my dear!” exclaimed Mrs Thorne excitedly. “You are not fit for this place, and the wretched people down here do not appreciate you. Let us go away at once.”

“But, my dear mother, it is impossible. I should, even if I thought it best, be obliged to give some months’ notice; and besides, it would be ungrateful to Mr and Miss Burge, and to the vicar, who is most kind and considerate.”

“Oh yes; I know all that,” whimpered Mrs Thorne. “But all the same, we must go.”

“Must go, mother dear?”

“Yes, child—must go. It is a cruelty to you to keep you here.”

“But I have been so well, mother; and I seem to be winning the confidence of the people, and the children begin to like me.”

“Oh yes—yes—yes; of course they are bound to like you, Hazel, seeing what a slave you make yourself to them. But all the same, my dear, I protest against your stopping here any longer.”

“My dear mother,” said Hazel, rising and going to her side to bend down and kiss her, “pray—pray don’t be so unreasonable.”

“Unreasonable?—unreasonable? Am I to be called unreasonable for advising you for your benefit? For shame, Hazel—for shame!”

“But my dear mother, suppose I accede to your wishes and decide to leave: where are we to go? I should have to seek for another engagement.”

“And you would get it, Hazel. Thousands of school managers would be only too glad to obtain your services.”

Hazel shook her head and smiled.

“No, mother dear; you are too partial. Engagements are not so plentiful as that. Think it over, and you will look at the matter differently. We have not the means at our command to think of moving now.”

“But we must leave, Hazel, and at once,” cried Mrs Thorne excitedly. “I cannot and I will not stay here.”

“But it would be unreasonable and foolish, dear, to think of doing so under our present circumstances. For the children’s sake—for Percy’s sake, pray be more considerate. We must not think of it at present. After a time, perhaps, I may have the offer of a better post and the change may be such a one as you will like. Come, dear, try and be content a little longer, and all will be right in the end.”

“Hazel,” cried Mrs Thorne angrily, “I insist upon your giving up this school at once!”

“My dear mother!”

“Now, no excuses, Hazel I say I insist upon your giving up this school at once, and I will be obeyed. Do you forget that I am your mother? Is my own child to rise up in rebellion against me? How dare you? How dare you, I say?”

“But my dear mother, if we decide to leave, where are we to go? Where is the money to pay for our removal? You know as well as I do that, in spite of my care, we are some pounds in the tradespeople’s debt.”

“Now she throws that in my face, when I have worked so hard to make both ends meet, and cut and contrived over the housekeeping, thinking and striving and straining, and now this is my reward!”

“I do not blame you, dear,” said Hazel sadly; “I only think it was a pity that you should have ordered goods for which we had not the money to pay.”

“And was I—a lady—to go on living in the mean, sordid, penurious way you proposed, Hazel? Shame upon you! Where is your respect for your wretched, unhappy parent?”

It was in Hazel’s heart to say, half angrily, “Oh, mother, dear mother, pray do not go on so!” but she simply replied, “I know, dear, that it is very hard upon you, but we are obliged to live within our means.”

“Yes: thanks to you, Hazel,” retorted her mother. “I might be living at ease, as a lady should, if my child were considerate, and had not given her heart to selfishness and a downright direct love of opposition to her parent’s wishes.”

“Dear mother,” cried Hazel piteously, “indeed I do try hard to study you in everything.”

“It ought to want no trying, Hazel. It ought to be the natural outcome of your heart if you were a good and affectionate child. Study me, indeed! See what you have brought me to! Did I ever expect to go about in these wretched, shabby, black things, do you suppose—I—I, who had as many as two dozen dresses upon the hooks in my wardrobe at one time? Oh, Hazel, if you would conquer the stubbornness of that heart!”

“My dear mother, I must go and put away the dinner-things; but I do not like to leave you like this.”

“Oh, pray go, madam; and follow your own fancies to the top of your bent. I am only your poor, weak mother, and what I say or do matters very little. Never mind me, I shall soon be dead and cold in my grave.”

“Oh, my dear mother, pray, pray do not talk like this!”

“And all I ask is, that there may be a simple headstone placed there, with my name and age; and, if it could possibly be managed, and not too great an expense and waste of money for so unimportant a person, I should like the words to be cut deeply in the marble,—or, no, I suppose it would be only stone, common stone—just these simple words: ‘She never forgot that she was a lady.’”

Here Mrs Thorne sighed deeply, and began to strive to extricate herself from her child’s enlacing arms.

“No, no, no, Hazel; don’t hold me—it is of no use. I can tell, even by the way you touch me, that you have no affection left for your poor suffering mother.”

“How can you say that dear?” said Hazel firmly.

“Nor yet in your words, even. Oh, Hazel, I never thought I should live to be spoken to like this by my own child!”

“My dear mother, I am ready to make any sacrifice for your sake.”

“Then marry Mr Geringer,” said the lady quickly.

“It is impossible.”

“Move from here at once. Take me away to some other place. Let me be where I can meet with some decent neighbours, and not be Chuted to death as I am here.”

Mrs Thorne was so well satisfied with the sound of the new word which she had coined that she repeated it twice with different emphases.

“My dear mother, we have no money; we are in debt and it might be months before I could obtain a fresh engagement. Mother, that too, is impossible.”

“There—there—there!” cried Mrs Thorne, with aggravating iteration. “What did I say? Everything I propose is impossible, and yet in the same breath the child of my bosom tells me that she is ready to do anything to make me happy, and to show how dutiful she is.”

“Mother,” said Hazel gravely, “how can you be so cruel? Your words cut me to the heart.”

“I am glad of it, Hazel—I am very glad of it; for it was time that your hard, cruel heart

should be touched, and that you should know something of the sufferings borne by your poor, bereaved mother. A little real sorrow, my child, would make you very, very different, and teach you, and change you. Ah, there is nothing like sorrow for chastening a hard and thoughtless heart!"

"Mother dear," said Hazel, trying to kiss her. "I must go into the school."

"No, no! don't kiss me, Hazel," said the poor, weak woman with a great show of dignity; "I could not bear it now. When you can come to me in all proper humility, as you will to-night, and say, 'Mamma, we will leave here to-morrow,' I shall be ready to receive you into my embrace once more."

"My dear mother, you drive me to speak firmly," said Hazel quietly. "I shall not be able to come to you to-night and to say that we will leave here. It is impossible."

"Then you must have formed some attachment that you are keeping from me. Hazel, if you degrade yourself by marrying that Chute I will never speak to you again."

"Hush, mother! the children will hear."

"Let them hear my protests," cried Mrs Thorne excitedly. "I will proclaim it on the housetops, as Mr Lambent very properly observed last Sunday in his sermon. I will let every one know that you intend to degrade yourself by that objectionable alliance, and against it I now enter my most formal protest."

Mrs Thorne's voice was growing loud, and she was shedding tears. Her countenance was flushed, and she looked altogether unlovely as well as weak.

Hazel hesitated for a moment, her face working, and the desire to weep bitterly uppermost, but she mastered it, and laying her hand upon her mother's shoulder, bent forward once again to kiss her.

It was only to be repulsed; and as, with a weary sigh, she turned to the door, Mrs Thorne said to her angrily—

"It is time I resumed my position, Hazel—the position I gave up to you when forced by weakness and my many ills. Now I shall take to it once again, and I tell you that I will be obeyed. We shall leave this place to-morrow morning, and I am going to begin to pack up at once."

Chapter Thirty Two.

A Question of Cash.

"Heaven give me strength to be patient and forbearing!" said Hazel softly, as she left the

cottage and went into the school, for it was just upon two o'clock. "What am I to do? Will she have forgotten this by night?"

Far from it, for as soon as Hazel returned Mrs Thorne began again with fresh importunity, and in so strange a manner that her daughter grew frightened, and hesitated as to whether she should send for medical advice; but after a while the poor woman grew more calm, took out her work and began knitting some unnecessary ornament with costly wool; ending, to Hazel's great relief, by going off fast asleep.

She signed to the children to be quiet, and led them softly to bed without waking the sleeper; after which, at liberty for the first time that day, she sat down in her own room to think, previous to drawing up a statement of the school pence ready for giving to the churchwarden upon the following day.

Hazel's thoughts wandered far—to Archibald Graves, to Mr Geringer, and then to the vicar, his sisters, and good-hearted, kindly Mr Burge, to whom she felt that she could never be sufficiently grateful. Lastly, she went over her mother's strange fit that day. Mrs Thorne had never seemed settled at Plumton, and had always been full of repining, but had never been so excited and importunate before.

"She will be better to-morrow," thought Hazel, "and perhaps revert to it no more. I told her aright—it is impossible for us to go away from here; and now—"

She had been speaking half aloud during the last few minutes; but she said no more, only sat thinking deeply of the troubles she had had to encounter since she had been at Plumton, and a pleasant smile came upon her lip as she thought that the troubles had been more than balanced by the kindness and friendly ways of many there. Even the parents of the children had a pleasant smile and a cheery word for her whenever she went to inquire after some sick absentee.

"No," she thought to herself. "I should not like to leave my children now." And she smiled as she recalled scenes with Ann Straggalls and Feelier Potts. Then over the sunshine of her memories came clouds once more, as the stiff, chilling presence of the Lambent sisters intruded itself and changed the aspect of her workaday life. Then, as she sat and thought there came back the scene of the school feast the enjoyment of the children, and then—

A vivid blush came into Hazel Thorne's face, and she rose from her seat angry with herself and ready to cry shame for the direction her thoughts had taken, and that was towards George Canninge and the attentions he had paid her.

She tried to drive these thoughts away, but they returned pertinaciously, and, try how she would, she kept picturing his face, his words, the quiet gentlemanly courtesy with which he had always treated her.

"Oh, it is monstrous!" she cried aloud at last and taking her paper, pen, and ink, she prepared to make out the statement ready to deliver next day; but though she tried to keep her

thoughts to the work, she found it impossible, and at last the tears gathered in her eyes, and, weary and low-spirited, she found herself thinking bitterly of her position in life, and her want of strength of mind for allowing such thoughts as these to intrude.

At last she began to master herself, and taking up her pen, she opened her memorandum-book, copied out the various amounts received week by week ever since her coming, cast them up, and found that she had a total of twenty-three pounds seven shillings and fourpence, including nearly six pounds that had been paid in for club money.

This done, she went down on tiptoe to see if Mrs Thorne had awakened; but she was sleeping soundly, and after glancing at the children Hazel returned to her task, though not to recommence, for once more the thoughts of George Canninge, and his conduct towards her, came back, till, blushing vividly for her folly, she made a stern effort and resumed her work.

She had pretty well ended, but there was this to be done: she felt that she ought to unfasten the little packets of money and count them over and check them, ending by placing the whole of the silver in a stout canvas-bag which she had provided for the purpose. Leaving her seat, then, she opened the drawer and took out the heavy oaken box, placed it upon the table, and unlocked it slowly, her thoughts wandering to George Canninge all the time, but only to be rudely brought back by the box before her.

She had not opened it before during many months, but in imagination she had pictured its contents—a number of little white packets tied up with cotton lying one upon the other in a sort of neat chaos. Instead of this there were the pieces of paper certainly, but they had been opened, and the scraps of cotton were lying about with the crumpled paper and a number of pence.

It struck her as strange, that was all. She did not for the moment remember placing pence in the box, but she must have done so once, probably when she could not get them changed for silver. It was hard to recall what she had done in the course of so many weeks, and after trying for a few moments, she let the effort go, and picked up two or three of the pieces of paper to read her memorandums on the outer side. This one was six shillings and fivepence, that five and elevenpence, then a heavier one that had held ten shillings and sixpence; and again another, evidently when some arrears had been paid up, for it had contained eleven shillings and ninepence.

Then the paper dropped from Hazel's hand, and, with lips parted and a look of astonishment in her eyes, she hurriedly took out the heap of pieces of paper, to find that, one and all, they had been emptied, and that at the bottom of the box lay about five shillings' worth of coppers, not a single silver coin remaining behind.

"Ah!" ejaculated Hazel, and a chill of horror ran through her, followed by a peculiar sinking sensation of dread. Where was the money left in her charge—where were the contents of those little packets which she had so carefully tied up and entered? Not one remained untouched, for the box had been opened, and she had been robbed!

No: it was impossible. Who could know of the existence of that money? Strangers might know that she received the money weekly, but no one would be aware of the fact that she placed it in that box, locked it, and then locked the box in her drawer.

She must have made some mistake. It was impossible that she could have been robbed. It was a mistake certainly, and she hurriedly turned out the contents of the box upon the bed, and counted up the pence first—four shillings and ninepence. Then there were the empty papers.

Hazel put her hand to her head, feeling bewildered, and wondering whether she had not made some strange mistake. Did she know what she was doing, or was her memory failing from over-study?

Making a determined effort to be cool, she took the papers, arranged them by their dates, and checked them off by the statement which she had drawn up, to find that they tallied exactly; but when she had done that she was no further than before, and at last she stood there in a state of helpless despair, face to face with the fact that she had at last been called upon to give an account of her stewardship and the moneys that should have been ready for handing over to the churchwarden were gone.

Hazel sank down upon the floor with her hands clenched and her brain dizzy, to try and think out the meaning of this strange problem.

She recalled that she had had other difficult questions to solve before now—puzzles that had seemed perfectly insurmountable, but that they had grown less formidable by degrees, and the difficulties had been surmounted. Perhaps, then, this would prove less black after a time, and she would make out how it was.

Had she paid anybody? taken any of the money? given change?

No; she could recollect nothing, and in place of growing clearer, the problem grew momentarily more and more confused.

Her brow became full of wrinkles, her head more giddy, and as she crouched upon the floor with the empty money-box upon the bed, and the candle that stood upon the table surrounded by the empty wrappers, long of snuff and mushroom topped, she began more and more to realise the fact that at last she was face to face with a difficulty far greater than any that she had yet been called upon to deal with since she had been at Plumton.

It was horrible. She had to give up a heavy amount on the next day—a sum that she held in trust—and it was missing.

What should she do? What could she do?

She could have sobbed in the agony of her heart; but she forced herself to think—to try and make out where the money had gone.

The children would not have taken it; they did not know of its existence. Then who could?

Percy?

Oh no, it was impossible. He had—

Oh no; she would not harbour the thought. He had been weak and foolish, but she felt that she should scorn herself if she harboured such a thought as that her brother would have taken the money that she had in charge. It was too dreadful, and she would not believe it.

Then who could it be?

As she asked herself this again and again she suddenly heard a sound below as of a chair being thrust back. Then some one rose, and there came the opening of a door, and steps upon the stairs.

Hazel rose softly, and stood behind the dim unsnuffed candle as the steps came higher. The door was thrust open, and the breath that Hazel had been holding back till she felt that she must suffocate escaped with a loud sigh, and mother and daughter stood gazing across the table at each other.

The thought was horrible, almost maddening—but there was Mrs Thorne with her cap half off, and her hair slightly disarranged by her sleeping, staring in a shrinking, half-angry way before her daughter's searching gaze.

For Hazel had no such thought before. Now it came with almost stunning violence, and she saw in it the explanation of her mother's strange manner that day—her sudden desire to leave Plumton at any cost, as soon as she had read the letter containing the request for the school funds to be given up.

Words rose to Hazel Thorne's lips, and then sank back; they rose again, and she still remained silent. It was in her mind to ask her mother in accusing tones what she knew of the absent money, for she, and she alone, knew where it was kept and could have had access to the keys.

But no; those words were not uttered. She could not speak them. It was too horrible! But Hazel's eyes accused the poor, weak woman, who waited for nothing more, and exclaimed:—

“There, there, Hazel! don't glower at me like that child! It's all your fault; leaving me so short as you did for days and weeks together. Not a shilling to call my own, and poor Percy always writing to me for new clothes and pocket-money; and then things wanted to make the house tidy. I was obliged to use the money; I don't know what I should have done without it. You must pay it back out of your next quarter's salary; and there: pray don't look at me like that. It's very dreadful to be reduced to taking every penny from your own daughter, and—”

“Oh, mother, mother!” wailed Hazel; “say no more. What have you—have you done?”

“What have I done? What was I to do? How can you be so foolish, Hazel? Do you suppose I can keep up even so small an establishment as this upon the wretched pittance you give me

for housekeeping?”

Hazel gazed at her mother wonderingly, for the poor woman took hardly any interest in the household management which fell almost entirely upon her child, who found no little difficulty in keeping matters straight. And now Mrs Thorne was seizing upon this as a reason for her abstraction of the money; for she made no denial whatever, but, driven to bay, haughtily acknowledged the fact.

“Then you really did take this money, mother?”

“Of course I did, Hazel. Why should I leave it when it was lying idly there? It was absurd.”

“But, my dear mother, the money was not mine.”

“What nonsense, Hazel! What does it matter whether it was yours or not? Money’s money. The school people don’t want you to give them the very pennies that the children brought.”

“No, mother; but they want the amount.”

“Then give it to them, Hazel. My dear child, what a ridiculous fuss you do make?”

“But, mother, do you not understand—do you not see that I have no money, and no means of making it up?”

“Really, Hazel, you are too absurd,” said Mrs Thorne with forced levity. “What is the ridiculous amount?”

“Between twenty and thirty pounds.”

“Absurd! Why, I have often given as much, or more, for a new dress. There, get the money from the school people—Mr Lambent, Mr Burge, or somebody—and pray do not bother me about it any more.”

“Mother, dear mother,” cried Hazel, “have you no thought? Tell me, have you any of this money left?”

“Of course not, and I must beg of you not to address me in so disrespectful a manner. It is a very good thing that your little sisters are not awake. I would not have them hear you speak to me like this on any consideration.”

“How ever could you think of taking the money?”

“Now, this is too absurd; Hazel, when you leave me for days together without a penny. Why, I have even been obliged to go to Mrs Chute to borrow a shilling before now.”

“You have borrowed shillings of Mrs Chute, mother?”

“To be sure I have, my dear; and of course I had to pay them back. She said it was absurd

not to use the school pence.”

“She told you that?” cried Hazel quickly.

“Yes, my dear; and she said that both she and Mr Chute often used the pence, and made the sum up again when he took his salary. There, I am sleepy. For goodness’ sake, put away that box and get to bed, and don’t be so ridiculous.”

Hazel looked piteously at her mother, and stood hesitating for a few minutes, asking herself what she was to do in such a strait, for it seemed as if Mrs Thorne had quite lost all sense of right and wrong.

Was this really, then, the reason why her mother had expressed such a keen desire to get. It seemed like it, and this explained a great deal; for as Hazel studied her appearance more, it became evident to her that the poor woman was in a state of intense nervous trepidation, and that she hardly dare meet her daughter’s eye.

“Mother,” said Hazel at length, “the churchwarden will be here to-morrow, asking me for this money. What am I to say?”

“Say nothing, you foolish child! Pay him out of some other money.”

“You know, mother, that I have no other money whatever.”

“Then tell him to wait, like any other trades-person. He is only a common man. Such people as these must take their money when they can get it.”

“Are you wilfully blinding yourself to the fact, mother, that we have committed a theft in using this money?”

“My dear, absurd child—”

“That it is as great a trouble as that from the consequences of which poor, foolish Percy has just been rescued by Mr Burge?”

“Then go to Mr Burge, Hazel, and tell him that you were obliged to use the money because the salary is so small. He will give you the amount directly, my dear;” and she nodded and smiled as she eagerly reiterated her advice.

“Mother, mother, what are you thinking of?”

“I’m thinking of what is for the best, Hazel, under the circumstances,” said Mrs Thorne pompously.

“Mother,” cried Hazel excitedly, for she was now regularly unstrung, “I could not degrade myself by going and asking Mr Burge for that money, and I dare not face the churchwarden to-morrow when he comes. You took the money—cruelly took the money that was not mine—and

I must send him to you.”

“No—no; no, no, my dear Hazel, I could not, I will not see him! It is impossible. I dare not face him, Hazel. No, no! Let us go away; there is plenty of time. Let us go and settle down somewhere else, and let them forget all about it. They soon will.”

“Mother, are you bereft of your senses?” said Hazel. “Oh, for shame, for shame! How could we go away and leave such a name behind us? How could I ever hold up my head again? Oh, how could you? How could you?”

“I’m sure, my dear, I never thought it would cause all this trouble, or I wouldn’t have taken the paltry, rubbishy money. But Hazel, Hazel,” she cried, glancing round in an excited manner, “you—you don’t think—you don’t think—they’d take me up for it? Hazel, it would kill me; I’m sure it would. I’ve been frightened, my dear, ever since I took the first packet; but taking one seemed to make me take another.”

“Mother,” said Hazel, as a thought flashed across her mind, “does Mrs Chute know that you took this money?”

“Yes, my dear; I told her every time, and she said it was quite right and the best thing I could do. Oh, my dear child, pray, pray do something! Let’s—let’s run away, Hazel; and take all we can carry, and leave the rest.”

“Be silent mother. Sit down, and let me think,” said Hazel in a cold, hard voice.

“Oh, don’t speak to me like that Hazel!” cried Mrs Thorne reproachfully. “What have I done to deserve it?”

Hazel glanced at her wonderingly, for the poor woman’s words were absurd; but she had evidently spoken in all sincerity, and there was a mute agony of mind and appeal in her countenance, which made her child feel that it would be folly to look upon her any more as one who was thoroughly answerable for her actions.

“Hadn’t we better go, Hazel?” she said again. “This is a miserable place, and we should be better away. The people are not nice. We could get a long way off by morning, and then we shouldn’t be worried any more about this wretched school money.”

“Pray, pray be quiet, mother!” said Hazel wearily; “you distract me!”

“Ah! you are beginning to feel what trouble is now. I’ve—had my share, Hazel.”

“Mother, will you be silent, and let me try to think of some way out of this difficulty?”

“Of course I will, my dear; though I don’t see why you should speak so pertly to me, and show such want of respect for your poor, bereaved mother. For my part, I don’t think you need trouble your head about it. The churchwarden will know that you are a lady, and if, as a lady, you give him your word that you will send the money to him—say to-morrow or next day, or

next week—I'm sure it cannot be particular to a few days."

Hazel covered her face with her hands, resting her elbows upon her knees, while Mrs Thorne went maundering on; and as the poor girl sat there, mingled with her thoughts came her mother's garrulity. Now it was strong advice to go at once to Mr Burge, who, in spite of his vulgarity, was very rich and well-disposed. Mrs Thorne said that she would not for a moment mind asking him herself, and that would settle the matter at once.

Then she thought that Mr Lambent, who, in spite of his stiffness, was a thorough gentleman, had displayed a good deal of interest in Hazel. He would lend her the money in a moment if he had it; but then Mrs Thorne was not sure that he had got it, and he might not be able to get it in time; for, as Hazel would know when she grew older, clergymen were very often short of money, especially curates; and if she, Mrs Thorne, had her time to come over again, she should never listen to the attentions of a curate. Yes: Mr Lambent would, of course, lend the money if he had it, for he was a perfect gentleman, and could not, of course, refuse a lady; but then he might not have it and if this were the case, all he could do would be to speak to the churchwarden and tell him to wait.

Then there was Mr Canninge, a very gentlemanly man, who might be quite ready to advance the amount as a sort of donation to the school, especially as Hazel was so genteel, and ladylike. She felt that she rather liked Mr Canninge, and if she were Hazel she should be very particular how she behaved to Mr Canninge—for there was no knowing. Some gentlemen had common-sense enough not to look for money, and she had her suspicions on the day of the school feast.

"Yes," rattled Mrs Thorne, "he was very attentive that day. I remarked it several times. I have a very observant eye, Hazel, for that sort of thing, and depend upon it my dear, if you play your cards properly, there are far more unlikely things than your becoming mistress of Ardley Hall. Yes; I should say that you might very well send Mr Canninge a nicely-worded note, written on thoroughly good paper—in fact, I'd get some for the purpose—and take pains with your writing, so as to let him see that you are a lady. I should tell him that a sudden demand has been made upon you for fifty pounds—yes, I'd make it fifty pounds, anything under looks so paltry, and as if you were a common begging-letter writer. I don't know but what I'd make it a hundred while I was about it. The extra money would be so useful, my dear; you could buy yourself a few dresses with it and make yourself more attractive. You would be sure to win Mr Canninge, I feel certain. The very fact of your showing him that you look upon him almost as a friend would be sufficient to make, as it were, a link between you. Ah! my dear, if young people would only think a little more of their advantages they would be far more successful in life."

Here Mrs Thorne yawned very audibly, and looked at Hazel, who was still bending down, hearing everything, and struggling at the same time to see her way out of the difficulty before them, and to keep back the feelings of misery and degradation aroused by her mother's words.

"She has actually gone to sleep!" said Mrs Thorne, who seemed quite to have forgotten the terrors of the past few hours. "Ah, these young people—these young people! Heigh-ho!—has—have—Dear me, how sleepy I am! I think I'll go to bed."

She glanced at Hazel, and hesitated for a moment, as if about to touch her, but directly after she left the room, saying—

“I won’t wake her. Poor girl! she works very hard, and must be terribly tired.”

As Mrs Thorne closed the door and went into the adjoining room, Hazel rose from her crouching attitude, her faced lined with care-marks, and a hopeless aspect of misery in her heavy eyes.

Hazel stood gazing at the door, listening to every sound from the little adjoining room, till she heard her mother sigh and throw herself upon the bed, when she said in a low voice, “God help me!” and knelt down to pray.

Chapter Thirty Three.

Paying the Piper.

"You must ask Mr Cannings, Hazel, or else Mr Burge or Mr Lambent," said Mrs Thorne dictatorially. "Either you must ask one of those gentlemen, or I shall certainly feel that it is my duty to leave Plumton and seek a refuge at the home of one of my relatives."

"Mother," said Hazel decidedly, "I cannot ask one of those gentlemen. Can you not see that it would be a degradation that I could not bear?"

"If you would think less of your own degradation, Hazel, and more of mine," said Mrs Thorne, "I think it would be far more becoming on your part."

It was breakfast-time, and, hot-eyed, feverish, and weary, Hazel was trying to force down a few morsels of dry bread as she sipped her weak tea.

She made no reply, but was working hard to find some solution of the difficulty in which she found herself, but could see none.

One thing was evident to her, and that was the fact that she must take the full blame of the pence being missing, and undertake to pay it out of her next half-year's salary. It was impossible for her to accuse her mother, and she could think of no relatives who would advance the money. Her head ached violently, and she was suffering from a severe attack of lassitude that deadened her brain-power making her ready to go back to her bed and try to forget everything in sleep.

But there was the day's work to meet and at last, in a dreary, hopeless spirit, she went to the school, seeing Mr Chute on his way to the duties of the day, and meeting his eye, which was full of an ugly, malicious expression, that made her shrink and feel that she had indeed made this man her enemy.

The children were more tiresome than usual, or seemed to be, and it was only by a great effort that she was able to keep her attention to the work in hand.

At another time she would not have noticed it, but now every tap at the schoolhouse door made her start violently, and think that it was the churchwarden, Mr Piper, come for the school pence.

"A guilty conscience needs no accuser," she thought to herself, as she set to once more trying to see her way to some solution of her difficulty, but always in vain; and at last she found herself letting the trouble drift till it should find bottom in some shallow shoal or against the shore, for nothing she could do would help her on.

The only thing she could hit upon was to say to the churchwarden that she would bring him

up the money shortly, and in the meantime she might find out some means of raising it wishing the while that the jewellery of which she once had a plentiful supply was still her own.

She could think of no other plan, and was drearily going on with her work, when there came a loud tap from one of the lower classes, presided over at that time by Feelier Potts, and followed by a howl.

“What is that?”

“Please, teacher, Feely Potts hit me over the head with a book.”

“Please, teacher, I kep’ on telling her you’d got a bad headache, teacher, and told her to be quiet, and she would keep on making a noise, and—and—and I think I did box her with the Testament, teacher.”

“But you know, Ophelia how strictly I have forbidden any monitor to touch one of her class.”

“Yes, please, teacher; and I wouldn’t have touched her now, only I knew you’d got such a bad headache, and she would be so tiresome I felt as if I could knock her head right off.”

“Ophelia!” exclaimed Hazel, as she felt ready to smile at what was evidently a maternal expression.

“Please, teacher, I won’t do so no more.”

“Then go to your class. I shall trust you, mind. You have given me your word.”

“Yes, teacher,” cried the girl eagerly; “and is your head better, please, teacher!”

“No, Ophelia; it is very bad,” said Hazel wearily.

“Then, please, teacher, let me run home and get mother’s smelling-salts. She’s got a new twopenny bottle. Such strong ’uns. Do, please, let me go and fetch ’em, teacher.”

“Thank you; no, Ophelia,” said Hazel, smiling at the girl, whose eyes were sparkling with eagerness. “I have a bottle here. Now, go back to your class, and remember that you will help me most by being attentive and keeping the girls quiet, but not with blows. I do not keep you quiet and attentive, Ophelia, by striking you.”

“No, please, teacher; but mother does.”

“I prefer gentle means, my child. I want to rule you, if I can, by love.”

Feelier looked sharply round to see if she was observed, and then bobbed down quickly, and before Hazel knew what the girl intended to do, she had kissed her hand and was gone.

It was a trifling incident, but in Hazel’s depressed condition it brought the tears into her

eyes, and made her think for the first time of how hard it would be to leave her girls if fate said that through this terrible defalcation she must give up the school. The toil had been hard, the work tiresome, but all the same there had been a something that had seemed to link her to the children, and she began to find out now how thoroughly her heart had been in her daily task.

There were endless little troubles to encounter; even now there was a heap of confiscations taken from the children, petted objects that they carried in imitation of their brothers—sticky pieces of well-chewed indiarubber, marbles, buttons; one girl had a top which she persisted in bringing to school, though she could never get it to spin, and had twice been in difficulties for breaking windows with it—at times when its peg stuck to the end of the string. There were several papers of sweets, and an assortment of sweets without papers, and in that semi-glutinous state that comes over the best-made preparations of sugar after being submitted to a process of biscuiting in a warm pocket. Half-gnawed pieces of cake were there too, and fancy scraps of a something that would have puzzled the keenest observer, who could only have come to the conclusion that it was comestible, for it displayed teeth-marks. Without analysis it would not have been safe to venture upon a more decisive opinion.

It had been imperceptible, this affection for her school, coming on by slow degrees; and as in the middle of her morning's work Hazel suddenly found herself face to face with the possibility of having to resign, she felt startled, and began to realise that in spite of the many troubles and difficulties with which she had had to contend, Plumton had really been a haven of rest and the thought of going completely unnerved her.

She started violently several times over as tap after tap came to the door; but the visitors were always in connection with the children. "Please, may Ann Straggalls come home? Her mother wants her."

"Please I've brought Sarah Jane Filler's school money." Then there were calls from a couple of itinerant vendors of wonderfully-got-up illustrated works, published in shilling and half-crown parts, to be continued to infinity, if the purchaser did not grow weary and give them up.

At last there came a more decided knock than any of the others, and Hazel's heart seemed to stand still. She knew, without telling, that it was the churchwarden, and she was in no wise surprised at seeing him walk in with his hat on, without waiting to have the door opened, but displaying a certain amount of proprietorship only to be expected from an official of the church.

Mr Piper was the principal grocer of Plumton, and in addition to the sale of what he called "grosheries," he dealt largely in cake—not the cake made with caraways or currants, but linseed oil-cake, bought by the farmers for fattening cattle and giving a help to the sheep. Mr Piper "did a little," too, in corn, buying a lot now and then when it was cheap, and keeping it till it was dear. There were many other things in which Mr Piper "did a little," but they were always bits of trading that meant making money; so that take him altogether, he was what people call "a warm man," one who buttoned up his breeches-pockets tightly, and slapped them, as much as to say, "I don't care a pin for a soul—I'm too independent for that."

This was the gentleman who, tightly buttoned up in his best coat, and looking, all the same, as if he still had his shop-apron tied, walked importantly into the school with his hat on, and nodded shortly as the girls began to rise and make bobs, the curtseys being addressed to the broadcloth coat more than to Mr Piper himself, a gentleman of whom all the elder girls had bought sweets, and who was associated in their minds with the rattling and clinking of copper scales with their weights. For a goodly sum per annum was expended by the Plumton school children in delicacies, a fact due to the kindness of Mr William Forth Burge, who always went down the town with half-a-crown's worth of the cleanest halfpennies he could get, a large supply of which was always kept for him by Mr Piper's young man, who even went so far as to give them a-shake-up in a large worsted stocking with some sand and a sprinkling of vitriol, knowing full well that these halfpence were pretty sure to come to him again in the course of trade.

It was, then, to Mr Piper's best coat that the girls made their bobs, that gentleman being held in small respect. In fact as soon as he entered Feelier Potts went round her class, insisting upon every girl accurately toeing the line; and then, whispering "Don't laugh," she began to repeat the words of the national poet who wrote those touching, interrogative lines beginning, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers," and finishing off with, "Please, Mr Piper, I want a pen'orth of pickled peppers."

"Morning, Miss Thorne," said Mr Piper importantly, and speaking in his best-coat voice, which was loud and brassy, and very different to his mild, insinuating, "what's-the-next-article, ma'am, yes-it-is-a-fine-morning" voice, which was used behind the counter, and went with a smile.

"She ain't ready with that money, I'll lay a crown," said Mr Piper to himself. Then aloud—"I have been getting Mr Chute's school pence, Miss Thorne, to put in my accounts. I always collect the school money once a year."

Just then the school-door opened quietly, unheard by Hazel and the churchwarden, and also unnoticed by Miss Feelier Potts, who, forgetting all promises of amendment, was delighting her class by asking Mr Piper in a low voice for half-ounces and pen'orths of all sorts of impossible articles suggested by her active young brain, beginning with sugared soap, and on through boiled blacklead to peppermint mopsticks.

The terrible moment had come, and Hazel said, as firmly as she could—

"I am not ready with the accounts, Mr Piper; but I will see to them at once, and—"

"Oh, all right: I'm in no hurry," he replied; and Hazel's heart gave a leap of relief, but only to sink down heavily the next moment, as he continued—"I always give one morning a year to this job, so get the money and a pen and ink, and I'll soon run through it with you."

"You misunderstood me, Mr Piper," faltered Hazel, whose cheeks began to burn before turning pale with shame. "I have made up the account but I have not the money ready."

“Couldn’t have made out the account properly without the money counted out ready,” he said triumphantly.

“I checked it by the sums I had put down each week, Mr Piper,” said Hazel.

“To be sure. Well, it won’t take us long to count the money out.”

“But I have not the money by me,” said Hazel desperately, for she could make no excuse at the moment.

“Oh!” said Mr Piper slowly, as he made a curious rasping noise by rubbing a rough finger upon his closely-shaven cheek: “have not got the money by you.”

“No; not at present,” faltered Hazel; and once more the tell-tale blush came flushing to her cheeks.

“Oh!” said Mr Piper again; and his interjection was as long as a ten-syllable word.

“I will send or bring it up to you in a few days.”

“Oh!” said Mr Piper once more, and he took out his pocket-book at the same time, but made no attempt to go. He slowly took a pencil from a sheath at the side, and examined its point before thrusting it in again, as if trying very hard to make sure that it was a fit.

Hazel was in agony, and would have given anything to be alone, but Mr Piper went on testing the depth of his pencil-sheath in the leather pocket-book, and drawing the pencil out again.

“You see, it always has been paid upon the morning I said I’d call. I’ve got Mr Chute’s money in here.”

He slapped his breeches-pocket twice in a very emphatic manner, and looked at Hazel the while, as if asking her to deny it if she dared.

“I—I was taken rather by surprise,” faltered Hazel.

“Nay, nay,” said the churchwarden; “I gave you a day’s notice.”

“Yes,” said Hazel, “but I was not ready. I will send or bring the amount in a few days, Mr Piper.”

“I wanted to have made up my accounts,” he said, gazing still at his pencil and pocket-book in a meditative way. “You see, it puts me out, being a business-man. I have all this churchwarden work to do, and don’t get nothing by it, and it puts me wrong when things go contrary like, and I can’t get in the accounts. Now, your pence, for instance—I ought to have had them a month ago.”

“I am very sorry, sir, but I was not aware when they ought to be paid in.”

"You see, I make up all these parish things regular like, and if I can't get the money in it throws me all out."

"I am very sorry, Mr Piper."

"Yes," he said, turning his pencil upside down, and trying whether it would go in the reverse way; "but, you see, that don't help a busy man. I give up one morning like this every year to the school accounts, and dress myself"—he glanced at the sleeve of his black coat—"and come down, and if the money isn't ready, you see, it throws me out."

"Yes, I understand, Mr Piper," faltered Hazel; "and I am very sorry."

"Yes," he continued, trying to coax the pencil down by giving it a revolving movement, which succeeded better, though not well, for the leather of the pencil-sheath was getting worn with use, and it went into so many folds that Mr Piper had to withdraw the pencil and try it in the proper way—"Yes, it is a nuisance to a busy man," he continued. "I don't know why I go on doing this parish work, for it never pleases nobody, and takes up a deal of a man's time. I wouldn't do it, only Mr Lambent as good as begs of me not to give it up. P'r'aps you'll give me what you have in hand, miss."

"Give you what I have in hand?" said Hazel.

"Yes! Part on account you know, and send me the rest."

"I cannot, Mr Piper. I am not prepared," said Hazel, who felt ready to sink with shame, and the degradation of being importuned at such a time.

"Can't you give me any of it on account—some of your own money, you know, miss!"

"I really cannot sir; but I will endeavour to pay it over as soon as possible."

"Within a week?"

"I—I think so," faltered Hazel.

Rap went the book open, and Mr Piper's pencil was going as if it was taking down an order for "grosheries," making a note to the effect that Miss Thorne could not pay the school pence upon the proper day, but would pay it within a week.

Hazel stood and shivered, for it was horrible to see how business-like Mr Piper could be; and though she could not see the words he wrote, she mentally read them, and wondered how it would be possible to meet the engagement. Still, it was a respite, disgraceful as it seemed, and she felt her spirits rise as the churchwarden wrote away as busily as a commercial traveller who has just solicited what he calls a "line."

All this time the school-door was standing partly open, as if some one was waiting to come

in, but Hazel was too intent to see.

“That’ll do, then, for that,” said the churchwarden, shutting his book on the pencil and then peering sidewise like a magpie into one of the pockets, from which he extracted a carefully folded piece of blue paper, at the top of which was written very neatly, “Miss Thorne.”

“As I was coming down, miss, I thought it would be a good chance for speaking to you about your account, miss, which keeps on getting too much behindhand; so p’r’aps you’ll give me something on account of that and pay the rest off as quick as you can.”

“Your account, Mr Piper?” said Hazel, taking the paper.

“Yes, miss. Small profits and quick returns is my motter. I don’t believe in giving credit—’tain’t my way. I should never get on if I did.”

“But you mistake, Mr Piper; everything we have had of you has been paid for at the time, or at the end of the week.”

“Don’t look like it, miss. When people won’t have nothing but my finest Hyson and Shoesong, and a bottle of the best port every week, bottles regularly returned, of course a bill soon runs up.”

“But surely—” cried Hazel.

“Oh, you’ll find it all right there, miss; every figure’s my own putting down. I always keep my own books myself, so it’s all right.”

“Have you nearly done, Mr Piper?” said Miss Lambent, speaking sweetly, as she stood with Beatrice at the door. “Pray don’t hurry: we can wait. Our time’s not so valuable as yours.”

“Just done, miss—just done, miss. You’ll find that quite right, Miss Thorne—eleven pun fifteen nine and a half. S’pose you give me six this morning and let the other stand for a week or two?”

“Mr Piper, I must examine the bill,” said Hazel hoarsely. “I did not know that I was indebted to you more than half-a-sovereign.”

“Oh, you’ll find that all right miss, all right. Can you let me have a little on account?”

“I cannot this morning!” cried Hazel desperately.

“May we come in now?” said Rebecca Lambent.

“Yes, miss, come in,” said the churchwarden, closing his pocket-book as Hazel crushed this last horror in her hand in a weak dread lest it should be seen.

“So you’ve been collecting the school accounts as usual, Mr Piper,” said Beatrice, smiling. “How much do they amount to this time? My brother will be so anxious to know.”

Out came Mr Piper's pocket-book again, the pencil was drawn from its sheath, and the page found.

"Boys' pence for the year ending the blank day of blank eighteen blank," read Mr Piper, "thirty-two pound seven shillings and eightpence-ha'penny: though I can't quite make out that ha'penny."

"And the girls', Mr Piper—how much is that?"

"Well, you see, Miss Thorne ain't ready 'm yet so I can't tell. It's no use for me to put down the sum till I get the money. Good morning, miss. Good morning, miss. It's a busy time with me, so I must go."

The churchwarden left the schoolroom, his hat still upon his head, and Hazel was left face to face with her friends from the Vicarage.

"Had you not better call Mr Piper back, Miss Thorne," said Rebecca.

"Shall I call him, Miss Thorne?" said Beatrice eagerly.

"No, ma'am, I thank you," replied Hazel. "I explained to Mr Piper that I was not ready for him this morning."

"But did he not send word that he was coming?" said Rebecca suavely. "I know he always used to send down the day before."

"Yes, Miss Lambent; Mr Piper did send down, but I have not the money by me," said Hazel desperately. "My—I mean we—had a pressing necessity for some money, and it has been used. I will pay Mr Piper, in the course of a few days."

Rebecca Lambent appeared to freeze as she glanced at her sister, who also became icy.

"It is very strange," said the former.

"Quite contrary to our rules, I think, sister," replied Beatrice, "Are you ready?"

"Yes, dear. Good morning, Miss Thorne."

"Yes; good morning, Miss Thorne," said Beatrice; and they swept out of the school together, remaining silent for the first hundred yards or so as they went homeward. "This is very extraordinary, Rebecca," cried Beatrice at last, speaking with an assumption of horror and astonishment, but with joy in her heart.

"Not at all extraordinary," said Rebecca. "I am not in the least surprised. Unable to pay over the school pence and deeply in debt to the grocer! I wonder what she owes to the butcher and baker?"

“And the draper!” said Beatrice malignantly. “A schoolmistress flaunting about with a silk parasol! What does a schoolmistress want with a parasol?”

“She is not wax,” said Rebecca. “I rarely use one. And now look here, Beattie; it is all true, then, about that boy.”

“What! Miss Thorne’s brother?”

“Yes; Hazel Thorne’s brother. He was in trouble, then, in London, and fled here, and it seems as if the vice is in the family. Why, it is sheer embezzlement to keep back and spend the school pence. I wonder what Henry will say to his favourite now?”

Meanwhile Hazel, whose head throbbed so heavily that she could hardly bear the pain, had dismissed the girls, for it was noon, and then hurried back to the cottage to seek her room, very rudely and sulkily, Mrs Thorne said, for she had spoken to her child as she passed through, but Hazel did not seem to hear.

“I sincerely hope, my dears, that when you grow up,” said Mrs Thorne didactically, “you will never behave so rudely to your poor mamma as Hazel does.”

“Hazel don’t mean to be rude, ma,” said Cissy in an old-fashioned way. “She has got a bad headache, that’s all. I’m going up to talk to her.”

“No, Cissy; you will stay with me,” said Mrs Thorne authoritatively.

“I may go, mayn’t I, ma? I want to talk to Hazel,” said Mab.

“You will stay where you are, my dears; and I sincerely hope to be able to teach you both how to comport yourself towards your mamma. Hazel, I am sorry to say, has a good deal changed.”

A good deal, truly; for she looked ghastly now, as she knelt by the bed, holding her aching head, and praying for help and strength of mind to get through her present difficulties and those which were to come.

Chapter Thirty Four.

Mother and Son.

“I thought you would have come in, George,” said Mrs Cannings, entering her son’s library, where he was seated, looking very moody and thoughtful.

“Come in? Come in where?”

“To the drawing-room, dear. Beatrice Lambent called. I thought you would have known.”

"I saw some one come by," he said quietly. "I did not know it was she."

"She is in great trouble, poor girl!" continued Mrs Cannings; "or, I should say, they are all in great trouble at the Vicarage."

"Indeed! I'm very sorry. What is wrong!"

"Nothing serious, my dear; only you know what good people they are, and when they make a *protégée* of anybody, and that body doesn't turn out well, of course they feel it deeply."

"Of course," said George Cannings absently; and his mother bit her lip, for she had not excited his curiosity in the least and she had wanted him to ask questions.

"It seems very sad, poor girl!" she said after a pause.

"My dear mother," said the young squire rather impatiently, "Is it not rather foolish of you to speak of Beatrice Lambent as 'poor girl'? She must be past thirty."

"I was not speaking of Beatrice Lambent, my dear," said Mrs Cannings; "though, really, George, I do not think you ought to jump at conclusions like that about dear Beatrice's age, which is, as she informed me herself, twenty-five. I was speaking of their *protégée* at the Vicarage."

"I beg your pardon," said George Cannings. "I did not know, though, that they had a *protégée*."

"Well, perhaps I am not quite correct, my dear boy, in calling her their *protégée*; but they certainly have taken great interest in her, and it seems very sad for her to have turned out so badly. They took such pains about getting the right sort of person, too."

"Whom do you mean?" said the young man carelessly; "their new cook? Why, the parson was bragging about her tremendously the other day when he dined here—a woman who could make soup fit for a prince out of next to nothing."

"My dear boy, how you do run away, and how cynically and bitterly you speak!" exclaimed Mrs Cannings, laying her hands upon her son's shoulders. "I was not speaking of Mr Lambent's cook; I meant the new schoolmistress."

There was a pause.

"I felt his heart give a great throb," said Mrs Cannings to herself. "Calm as he is striving to be, I can understand him, and read him as easily as can be."

"Indeed!" said George Cannings at last, as soon as he could master his emotion. "I was not aware the Vicarage people thought so much of Miss—of the new schoolmistress."

"Well, you see, dear, she is only a schoolmistress, but they have been very kind and

considerate to her. They found her to be a young person of prepossessing manners, and, like all country people, they took it for granted that she would be worthy of trust; and, therefore this discovery must have been a great shock to them."

It needed all George Canninge's self-command to keep him calmly seated there while his mother, from what she considered to be a sense of duty, went on poisoning his wound. But he mastered himself, and bore it all like a stoic, denying himself the luxury of asking questions, though the suspense was maddening, and he burned to hear what his mother had to say.

"I declare, George," she said at last; "it is quite disheartening. You seem to have given up taking an interest in anything. I thought you would have liked to hear the Vicarage troubles."

"My dear mother, why should I worry myself about the 'Vicarage troubles'?" said the young squire calmly. "I have enough of my own."

"But you are the principal landholder here, my dear, and you must learn to take an interest in parish matters for many reasons. Now, this Miss Thorne has been trusted to a great extent by Mr Lambent and it seems shocking to find one so young behaving in an unprincipled manner."

George Canninge rose.

There is an end to most things; certainly there is to the forbearance of a man, and Mrs Canninge's son could bear no more.

"Unprincipled is a very hard term to apply to a young lady, mother," he said, with the blood flushing into his cheeks.

"It is, my dear boy, I grant it; and very sad it is to find one who seemed to be well educated and to possess so much superficial refinement, ready to yield to temptation."

The ruddy tint faded out of George Canninge's cheeks, leaving him very pale; but he remained perfectly silent, while his mother went on—

"It is the old story, I suppose: that terrible love of finery that we find in most young girls. I must say I have noticed myself that Miss Thorne dressed decidedly above her station."

George Canninge did not speak. His eyelids drooped over his eyes, and he stood listening, with every nerve upon the stretch; and very slowly and deliberately Mrs Canninge went on—

"I am sure I am very sorry, my dear, for it seems so sad; though, really, I do not see that I need trouble myself about it. The foolish girl, I suppose, wanted money for dress, and having these school funds in her hand—children's pence and some club money—she made use of them. So foolish, too, my dear, because she must have known that sooner or later, she would be found out."

"Who has told you this, mother!" said George Canninge sternly.

"I heard it from Beatrice Lambent, my dear, just now. She is in terrible trouble about it."

"Miss Lambent has been misinformed," said George Canninge calmly; but it cost him a tremendous effort to speak as he did.

"Oh, dear me, no, my dear George!" exclaimed Mrs Canninge eagerly. "She was present when Mr Piper went to the school to receive the money, and she confessed to having spent it; and it seems that these people are terribly in debt as well."

"There is some mistake, mother," said George Canninge again, in the same calm, judicial voice; "it cannot be true."

"But it is true, my dear boy," persisted Mrs Canninge, who, woman of the world as she was, had not the prudence upon this occasion to leave her words to rankle in her son's breast, but tried to drive them home with others in her eagerness to excite disgust with an object upon which George Canninge seemed to have set his mind.

"I say, mother, that it cannot be true," he said, speaking very sternly now; and he crossed the room.

"You are not going out dear?" said Mrs Canninge. "I want to talk to you a little more."

"You have talked to me enough for one day, mother," said the young man firmly; "and I must go."

"But where, dear? You are not going to the Vicarage to ask if what I have told you is true? I had it from dear Beatrice's own lips, and she is terribly cut up about it."

"I am not going to the Vicarage, mother," said the young man firmly. "I am going down to the school to ask Miss Thorne."

"George, my dear son!"

Her answer was the loudly closing door, and directly after she heard steps upon the gravel-drive.

She ran to the window, and could see that her son was walking rapidly across the park; for George Canninge was so deeply considering the words he had heard that he would not wait for his horse.

"It is monstrous!" cried Mrs Canninge, stamping angrily. "It shall never be! It would be a disgrace!"

The next minute she had thrown herself angrily into her son's chair, and sat there with clenched hands and lowering brow. A minute later, and she was acting as most women do when they cannot make matters go as they wish. Mrs Canninge took out her pocket-handkerchief, and shed some bitter, mortified tears.

Chapter Thirty Five.

Sister and Brother—Vulgar.

“Oh, Bill!”

Then an interval of panting and wiping her perspiring face and then again—

“Oh, Bill!”

Then a burst of piteous sobbing, for poor little Miss Burge was crying as if her heart would break.

“Let it go, Betsey. Don’t try to stop it, dear. Let it go,” said Mr William Forth Burge in the most sympathising of tones; and his sister did let it go, crying vehemently for a time, while he waited patiently to know what was the matter.

“That’s better, my dear,” he said, kissing her. “Now then, tell us what’s the matter.”

“Oh, Bill! I’ve been down the town, and I almost ran back to tell you the news.”

“And you haven’t told it to me yet,” he said, smiling affectionately at the troubled little woman, under the impression that he was doing the right thing to comfort her.

“Don’t laugh, Bill dear; for you’ll be so upset when you know.”

“Shall I, Betsey?” he said seriously. “Then I won’t laugh.”

“You see, I went down to Piper’s to order some fresh things for the storeroom, as I’d been through this morning, when Mr Piper himself came to wait upon me, and he told me he’d been down to the schools for the children’s pence for the year, and that Mr Chute had paid, and that Miss Thorne didn’t, but owned that she had spent all the money.”

“What! the school pence?”

“Yes, dear; and after a time he said that the Thornes were a good deal in debt with him besides.”

“More shame for him. I never went shouting it out to other folks if any one was in my debt. But, Betsey, did he say Miss Thorne had—had spent the money!”

“Yes, dear; and it was so shocking.”

Mr William Forth Burge stood rubbing and smoothing his fat round face over with his hand for a few moments, his sister watching him eagerly the while, like one who looks for help from the superior wisdom of another.

"I don't believe it," said the great man at last.

"You don't believe it, Bill?"

"Not a bit of it."

"Oh, I am glad!" cried Miss Burge, clapping her hands. "It would have been shocking if it had been true."

"Did you go down and see Miss Thorne?"

"No, dear; I came to tell you directly."

"You ought to have gone down and asked her about it, Betsey," said her brother stiffly.

"Ought I, Bill dear? Oh, I am so sorry! I'll go down at once."

"No, you won't: I'll go myself. Perhaps, poor girl! she has spent the money because it was wanted about her brother, and she's been afraid to speak about it, when of course, if she'd just said a word to you, Betsey, you'd have let her have fifty or a hundred pound in a minute."

"No, indeed, Bill dear, for I haven't got it," said Miss Burge innocently.

"Yes, you have, dear," he said, screwing up his face, and opening and shutting one eye a great deal. "Of course she wouldn't take it from me, but she would from you, you know. Don't you see?"

"Oh, Bill dear, what a one you are!" cried little Miss Burge. "I'll go down to her at once."

"No," he said; "I must go. It's too late now; but another time you just mind, for you've got plenty of money for that I say, Betsey: I've got it, my dear—it's her mother!"

"What's her mother, Bill dear?"

"Spent the money, and she's took the blame," he cried triumphantly.

"Oh! I am glad, Bill. But oh, how clever you are, dear! How did you find it out?"

"It's just knowing a thing or two; that's all, Betsey. I've had jobs like this in connection with business before now. But I must be off."

"But won't you take me with you, Bill?"

He hesitated for a moment or two, and then said—

"Well, you may as well come, Betsey; but mind what you're about, and don't get making an offer, for fear of giving offence."

“Would it give offence, Bill?”

“Yes, if you didn’t mind your p’s and q’s. You hold your tongue, and leave everything to me; but if I give you a hint, you’re to take Miss Thorne aside and make her an offer.”

“It’s my belief that Bill will be making her an offer one of these days,” thought little Miss Burge; “but she don’t seem to be quite the sort of wife for him, if he is going to bring one home.”

Mr William Forth Burge was not long in changing his coat and he met his sister in the hall, twirling his orange silk handkerchief round and round his already too glossy hat; after which they walked down arm-in-arm to the school, to find the head pupil-teacher in charge, and the girls unusually quiet, a fact due to the vicar being in the class-room, in company with George Canninge, both having arrived together, and then shaken hands warmly, and entered to have a look round the school.

Mr William Forth Burge and his sister both shook hands with the other visitors, and were then informed that Miss Thorne was suffering from a terribly bad headache. She had been very unwell, the pupil-teacher said, all the morning, and had been obliged to go and lie down.

Hereupon the visitors all began to fence, the object of their call being scrupulously kept in the background, and they one and all took a great deal of interest in the girls, and ended by going away all together, expressing their sorrow that poor Miss Thorne was so unwell.

The vicar and George Canninge walked up the town street together, after shaking hands with Mr and Miss Burge, and discussed politics till they parted; while Mr William Forth Burge, slowly followed with his sister, also talking politics but of a smaller kind, for they were the politics of the Plumton people, and the great man began to lay down the law according to his own ideas.

“They were both down there about that school money, Betsey, as sure as a gun. But just you look here: people think I’m soft because I come out with my money for charities and that sort of thing; but they never made a bigger mistake in their lives, if they think they can do just what they like with me; so there now.”

“That they never did, Bill,” assented his sister.

“I look upon them schools as good as mine, and if there’s to be a row about this money, I mean to have a word in it, for I’m not a-going to have that poor young lady sat upon by no one. I’ve hit the nail on the head as sure as a gun, and if it isn’t the old lady that’s got her into a scrape, you may call me a fool.”

“Which I never would, Bill,” said little Miss Burge emphatically; and together they toddled back home.

Something by Post.

It was a most extraordinary thing, but, probably from uneasiness, Mrs Thorne was the first down next morning. Hazel had had a sleepless night, and it was not till six o'clock that she dropped off to sleep heavily, and did not awaken till past eight, when, hot, feverish, and with her head thick and throbbing, she hurriedly dressed herself and went down.

Fate plays some strange tricks with us at times; and on this, the first morning for months that Hazel had not received the letters herself, Mrs Thorne was there to take them.

"Three letters for Hazel," she said to herself. "Dear me, how strange! Three letters, and all bearing the Plumton postmark!"

She changed the envelopes from hand to hand, and shuffled them in a fidgety way, as if they were cards.

"I feel very much displeased, for Hazel has no right to be receiving letters from gentlemen; and I am sure if Edward Geringer were here he would thoroughly approve of the course I take. She shall not have these letters at all. It is my duty as Hazel's mamma to suppress such correspondence. Often and often have I said to her, 'Hazel, my child, under any circumstances never forget that you are a lady.'"

There was another close examination of the letters, and then Mrs Thorne went on—

"No young lady in my time would have ventured upon a clandestine correspondence with a gentleman; and now, to my horror as a mamma, I wake to the fact that my daughter is corresponding with three gentlemen at once. Oh, Hazel, Hazel, Hazel! it is a bitter discovery for me to make that a child of mine has been deceiving me. I wonder who they can be from."

Mrs Thorne laid the envelopes before her with the addresses uppermost.

"'Miss Thorne, The Schools, Plumton All Saints,' all addressed the same. This, then, is the reason why poor Edward Geringer has been refused."

Here there was another examination of the postmarks.

"Three gentlemen, and all living at Plumton. Now, really, Hazel, it is not proper. It is not ladylike. One gentleman would have been bad enough, in clandestine correspondence; though, perhaps, if there had been two it would be because she had not quite made up her mind. But three gentlemen! It is positively disgraceful, and I shall stop it at once!"

This time, in changing the position of the letters, Mrs Thorne turned them upside down.

"I remember at the time poor Thorne was paying me attentions how Mr Deputy Cheaply and Mr Meriton, of the Common Council, both wished to pay me attentions as well; but, no: I said it would not be correct. And I little thought, after all my efforts, that a child of mine would be so utterly forgetful of her self-respect as to behave like this. Ah, Hazel! Hazel! It is no

wonder that the silver threads begin to appear fast in my poor hair.”

Mrs Thorne placed the envelopes beneath her apron as the two children came bustling in, one with the cloth, and the other with the bread-trencher, to prepare the breakfast.

“Hazel’s fast asleep, ma, and we’re going to get breakfast ready ourselves.”

“I’m sure I don’t know why your sister can’t come down, my dears,” said Mrs Thorne pettishly. “It is very thoughtless of her, knowing, as she does, how poorly I am.”

“Sis Hazy has got a very bad headache, mamma; and we dressed quietly and came down and lit the fire quite early.”

“Oh, it was you lit the fire, was it!” said Mrs Thorne. “I thought it was one of the schoolgirls.”

“No; it was us, ma dear; and when we’ve made the tea we’re going to take poor Hazy a cup in bed.”

“Whoever can these letters be from?” said Mrs Thorne to herself, as she turned them over and over in her hands, growing quite flushed and excited the while. “I declare I don’t know when I have felt so hurt and troubled;” and going into the little parlour, leaving the children busy over the preparations, she once more examined them carefully, and ended by taking out her scissors.

“I don’t care!” she exclaimed; “it is my duty as Hazel’s mamma to watch over her, and I should not be doing that duty if I did not see who are the gentlemen who correspond with her.”

Mrs Thorne hesitated a few minutes longer, and then the itching sensation of curiosity proved to be too much for the poor woman, and taking the pair of finely-pointed scissors, she slit open the three envelopes, and then started guiltily, thrust them into her pocket, and went into the kitchen.

“Did I hear Hazel coming down?” she said sharply.

“No, ma. Mab just went up and found her fast asleep.”

Mrs Thorne went back into the parlour, hesitated a few moments longer, and then opened the first letter, to find that it contained five ten-pound notes, all new and crisp, and with them a sheet of note-paper bearing the words:—

“Will Miss Thorne accept the help of a very sincere friend?”

That was all.

“Well, I am sure!” exclaimed Mrs Thorne, staring at the crisp notes, re-reading the words upon the note-paper, and then hurriedly replacing notes and paper in the envelope. “Now, who

can that be from?"

The second envelope was then opened, and, to Mrs Thorne's intense astonishment, it contained ten five-pound notes, also crisp and new, and with them the simple words:—

"With the hope that they may be useful. From a friend."

"I never did in all my life!" exclaimed Mrs Thorne, now beginning to perspire profusely, as she hurriedly replaced the second batch of notes, and then with trembling fingers opened the last envelope, which contained six five-pound notes, carefully enclosed in a second envelope, but without a word.

"Only thirty pounds," said Mrs Thorne, "only thirty, and without a word. Well, all I can say is, that whoever sent it is rather mean. Now, who can have sent these banknotes? Well, of course, it is on account of that paltry sum in school pence being required, and it is very kind, but I don't think I ought to allow Hazel to receive money like this. Really, it is a very puzzling thing, and I wish Edward Geringer was here."

The notes were returned to the third envelope, and Mrs Thorne sat there very thoughtful, and looking extremely perplexed.

"No; I certainly shall not let Hazel have this money. A girl at her time of life might be tempted into a great many follies of dress if she had it and I shall certainly keep it from her."

With a quiet self-satisfied smile, she placed the notes in her pocket and was in the act of rising, when she turned and saw Cissy at the door.

"Well, what is it?" said Mrs Thorne sharply.

"Breakfast's ready, ma dear; and I can hear Hazy dressing in such a hurry. Come and sit down, and let's all be waiting for her. It will be such fun. She will be so surprised when she comes down."

Mrs Thorne felt relieved, for she was afraid that the child had seen her with the notes, and that might have interfered with her plans.

"I'm sure it is quite time your sister was down, my dear," said the lady indignantly. "I don't know how she expects the wretched children she teaches to be punctual, if she is so late herself." And assuming an aspect of dignified, injured state, she seated herself at the table, the children smothering their mirth as they also sat down, one on either side, and watched the door.

Hazel hurried down directly after, to come hastily into the little kitchen, where, reading the children's faces, she felt the tears rush into her eyes with the emotion caused by the pleasant innocent surprise, and went and kissed them both before saluting her mother, who kept up her childish, injured air.

"Really, Hazel, my dear, I think when I do come down that you might study me a little, and

not leave everything to these poor children. It comes very hard upon me, to see them driven to such menial duties, when their sister might place us all in a state of opulence. It seems very hard—very hard indeed.”

Hazel glanced at her, but did not speak. There was that, however, in her eyes which told of mingled reproach and pity, emotions that the weak woman could not read, as she took the tea handed to her, sipping it slowly with an injured sigh.

“Were there any letters, mother!” said Hazel, when breakfast was half over and she had glanced at the clock, for Feelier Potts had been for the schoolroom key, and already there were distant echoing sounds of voices and footsteps in the great room, which told of the arrival of the scholars.

Mrs Thorne did not reply.

“Were there any letters, mother dear?” said Hazel again.

“Pass me the bread and butter, Mab, my child,” said Mrs Thorne, colouring slightly, while Hazel looked at her with wonder.

“There were three letters for you, Hazy,” cried Cissy sharply.

“Cissy! How dare you say such a thing?” cried Mrs Thorne.

“Please, ma, I met the postman when I went for the milk, and the postman told me so, and I saw him afterwards showing them to Mr Chute.”

“You wicked—Oh, of course, yes. I forgot,” said Mrs Thorne hastily, as she encountered her daughter’s eye fixed upon her with such a look of reproach that she shivered, and in her abject weakness coloured like a detected schoolgirl.

“Will you give me the letters, mamma?” said Hazel, holding out her hand.

“Don’t call me mamma like that, Hazel,” said Mrs Thorne, with a weak attempt at holding her position; but her daughter’s outstretched hand was sufficient to make her tremblingly take the letters from her pocket and pass them across the table.

“You have opened them, mamma!” said Hazel.

“Once more, Hazel, I must beg of you not to call me *mamma* like that!” exclaimed Mrs Thorne. “I have always noticed that it is done when you are angry.”

“I said you have opened them, mamma!”

“Of course I have, my dear. I should not be doing my duty as your mother if I did not see for myself who are the class of people with whom you hold clandestine correspondence.”

“You know, mother,” said Hazel firmly, “that I should never think of corresponding with any

one without your approval.”

“Then, pray, what do those letters mean?”

“I do not know,” said Hazel quietly; and she opened them one by one, saw their contents, read the notes that accompanied two, and then, letting her face go down upon her hands she uttered a loud sob.

“Now, that is being foolish, Hazel,” cried her mother. “Children, leave the table! Or, no, it will be better that your sister and I should retire. No; take your breakfasts into the other room, children, and I will talk to your sister here.”

“Don’t cry, Hazy,” whispered Cissy, clinging to her sister affectionately.

“Don’t speak cross to Hazel, please ma,” whispered Mab.

“Silence, disobedient children!” cried the poor woman in tragic tones. “Leave the room, I desire.”

Hazel felt cut to the heart with sorrow, misery, and despair. The increasing mental weakness of her mother, and her growing lack of moral appreciation of right and wrong, were agonising to her; and at that moment she felt as if this new trouble about the letters was a judgment upon her for opening those addressed to her mother, though it was done to save her from pain. To some people the airs and assumptions of Mrs Thorne would have been food for mirth; but to Hazel the mental pain was intense. Knowing what the poor woman had been previous to her troubles, this childishness was another pang; and often and often, when ready to utter words of reproach, she changed them to those of tenderness and consideration.

“Now, Hazel,” said Mrs Thorne with dignity, “I am waiting for an explanation.”

“An explanation, dear?” said Hazel, leaving her seat to place her arm affectionately round her mother’s neck.

“Not yet, Hazel,” said the poor woman, shrinking away. “I cannot accept your caresses till I have had a proper explanation about those letters.”

“My dear mother, I can give you no explanation.”

“What! do you deny that you are corresponding with three different gentlemen at once?”

“Yes, mother dear. Is it likely?” said Hazel, smiling.

“Don’t treat the matter with levity, Hazel. I cannot bear it! Who are those letters from?”

“I do not know, dear; though I think I could guess.”

“Then I insist upon knowing.”

“My dear mother, I can only think they are from people who know of my trouble about the school.”

“You did not write and ask for help, Hazel?”

“No, mother. No; I should not have done such a thing.”

“Then tell me at once who would send to you like that.”

“Mother dear, can you not spare me this?”

“I never did see such a strange girl in my life as you are, Hazel. Well, never mind; I dare say I can bear another slight or two if you will not tell me. There, I suppose you must pay that wretched school money out of those notes.”

“Out of these, mother?”

“Of course, child. Why, what are you thinking now?”

“Mother dear, it is impossible.”

“Impossible, child! Why, what romantic notion have you taken into your head now?”

“It is no romance, mother; it is reality,” sighed Hazel.

“Then what are you going to do?”

“Return the money to the givers as soon as I can be certain where to send.”

“Return it? What! that money, when you know how urgently it is needed at home?”

“Yes, dear.”

“And how is that school money to be paid?”

Hazel was silent.

“I declare, Hazel,” cried Mrs Thorne, “your behaviour is quite preposterous, and the absurdity of your ideas beyond belief. Do, pray, leave off these foolish ways and try to behave like a sensible—There now, I declare her conduct is quite shocking: running off like that without saying ‘Good morning,’ or ‘May I leave the room, mamma?’ Dear, dear me, I have come down in the world indeed.”

For Hazel had suddenly left the room—nine o’clock striking—and the idea strongly impressing itself upon her mind that so sure as she happened to be late some one or another would kindly inform Miss Lambent if she did not realise it for herself.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

Hazel Thorne Seeks Help.

As soon as Hazel Thorne had fairly started the school that morning, she took out the envelopes and studied each handwriting fairly to see if she could make out who were the senders of the letters.

That she found she could not do, but in her own mind she set down the writers aright, and a bitter feeling of shame and humiliation came upon her as she felt that those who sent would never have dreamed of making such a present to any one they respected. It looked to her like charity, and her face burned as she indignantly longed to return the envelopes and notes to their senders.

She knew that there had been the three gentlemen visitors to the school while she was absent upon the previous afternoon, and though it was possible that they might have been down to speak to her respecting her failure of trust, her heart told her that it was not; and now her mother's strong desire to leave the place seemed to have come upon her in turn, and she felt that she would give anything to be a hundred miles away from Plumton and at peace.

She tried to win forgetfulness by devoting herself to the various classes, but in vain; every step she heard seemed to be a visitor coming to ask her about the money not paid, and every subject she took up suggested the notes now lying in her pocket.

Twice over she went to her desk and there wrote a brief letter of thanks to Mr William Forth Burge, but she tore it up directly; and she dared not write one to George Canninge, nor yet to the vicar, from whom she was sure the other amounts had come.

Just in the middle of one of her greatest fits of depression there was a knock at the door, and she dreaded that it might be the vicar, while if it had been George Canninge she felt that she dared not have faced him.

Her heart gave a throb of relief as she heard the familiar tones of Mr William Forth Burge, and the next throb was one of gratitude as she knew that he had had the delicacy to bring his sister with him. Then there was a depressing feeling as she felt that they would show by their manner how displeased and disappointed they were at her breach of trust.

Here she was wrong again, for her visitors' greeting was warm in the extreme, and with the reaction a sensation of oppression robbed her of the power of speech; while had she not tried hard she would have burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"We were so sorry to hear of your bad headache, my dear," said little Miss Burge affectionately, "and really I don't think you ought to be here now. Your poor eyes look as red as red, and you are quite pale and feverish."

“So she is,” said Mr William Forth Burge. “Why, Betsey, there ought to be a holiday, so that Miss Thorne could take a day or two’s rest.”

“No, no, Mr Burge; I am better,” said Hazel, speaking excitedly; for the kindly consideration of these people had taken away all resentment, all pride, and she felt that she was with friends. “Mr William Forth Burge—”

“No, no; plain Mr Burge or William Burge to me, Miss Thorne. I don’t want a long name from you.”

“Mr Burge—Miss Burge, yesterday I could not have spoken to you upon this subject, but your kindness—”

“There, there, there; don’t say a word about it,” he replied quickly. “I know all, and it was an accident.”

“An accident?”

“Yes, my dear,” broke in little Miss Burge. “Bill talked it over to me last night, and—Now, you won’t be offended, my dear?”

“Nothing you could say would offend me,” cried Hazel eagerly.

“No, of course not, my dear. Well, my brother said to me, ‘depend upon it, Betsey, her poor ma wanted the money for housekeeping or something, and just used it. That’s all.’”

“And he has humiliated me by this letter that I received by post.”

“Don’t call it humiliation, my dear,” cried Miss Burge; “it was only sent out of civility to you as one of our neighbours whom we like, and that’s what it means.”

Hazel hesitated for a few moments, and then, in her loneliness and isolation, she clung to the hands outstretched to help her.

“Mr Burge—Miss Burge, I am so lonely and helpless here. You have heard about the school pence, but I cannot tell you why the amount was wanting. Give me your help and counsel.”

“Then will you let me help you?”

“I shall be most grateful if you will,” cried Hazel.

“Hullo!” shouted Burge, staring up at the partition. “What are you a-doing there?”

“The shutter slipped down a little, sir,” said Mr Chute loudly. “Trying to close it, sir. That’s it!” and the shutter closed with a snap.

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” said Mr William Forth Burge angrily. “I don’t know as that is it, Mr

Chute.” But Mr Chute had by this time fastened the shutter, and had descended from his coign of vantage, looking very red and feeling terribly mortified at having been detected. “He was listening; that’s about what he was doing.”

There was a buzz of excitement amongst the children, but it subsided directly, and Hazel placed at a venture the envelope which she believed to have come from her visitor in his hands.

“You sent that to me, Mr Burge,” said Hazel firmly.

“Well, it was me, as you know, Miss Thorne; and you won’t hurt our feelings by refusing it, will you?”

“I could not take it, sir; but I do appreciate your goodness all the same. Now help me to decide who sent me these letters.”

Hazel’s visitors looked at each other, then at the envelopes, and then back at Hazel.

“Do you want me to say who sent those two letters?” said Mr William Forth Burge gloomily.

“I should be very grateful if you could, sir.”

“This one’s from Mr Cannings, at Ardley, I should say; and the other’s the parson’s writing, I feel sure. If they’ve sent you money, Miss Thorne, of course you won’t want mine—ours.”

It was an endorsement of her own opinion, and for the moment Hazel did not notice the dull, heavy look on her visitor’s face as she exclaimed—

“I have no doubt these gentlemen had kindly intentions, but I cannot take their help, and I want to see whether I might risk a mistake in returning the notes.”

“Oh, I think I’d return ’em,” said Mr William Forth Burge eagerly. “I’d risk its being a mistake. Even if it was, your conduct would be right.”

Hazel looked at him intently, and then bowed her head in acquiescence.

“Yes,” she said thoughtfully, “I will risk its being a mistake. Or no: Mr Burge, will you be my friend in my present helpless state? I ask you to return the notes on my behalf.”

“That’s just what I will do,” he cried excitedly, for it seemed to him that he had won the day.

Chapter Thirty Eight.

Mr William Forth Burge is Indignant.

You may make money, and you may turn philanthropist giving right and left, letting not

either hand know what the other doeth; but if you think you are going to make innumerable friends by so doing, you are mistaken, for you will most likely make enemies.

You will excite jealousy amongst your equals, because you have passed them in the race; your superiors, as they call themselves, will condemn you, and hold you in contempt for trying, as they say, to climb to their level; and even the recipients of your bounty will be offended.

Mrs Dilly will think that Miss Bolly's half-pound of tea was better than hers, and old Tom Dibley will be sure to consider the piece of beef his neighbour, Joe Stocks, received "a better cut" than his own.

It was so with Mr William Forth Burge, who gave a great deal of beef to the poor—it was in his way—and who was constantly giving offence by presenting one poor family with better "cuts" than others; and he knew it, too.

"I tell you what, Betsey," he said, rubbing his ear with vexation, one day, "it's my full belief that nature made a regular mistake in bullocks. There ought to be no legs and shins, or clods or stickings, my dear, but every beast ought to be all sirloin; though it's my belief, old girl, that if it was, and you let 'em have it full of gravy, and sprinkled with nice white scraped horse-radish on the top, they wouldn't be satisfied, but would say the quality was bad."

"There, never mind, Bill dear," said his comforter; "some people always would be ungrateful. Old Granny Jenkins is just as bad. She said yesterday that the nice, warm, soft, new flannel jacket I made for her myself was not half so nice and warm as one I gave to Nancy Dean."

"Yes, that's just the way," said Mr William Forth Burge. "The more you help people, the more they turns again' you. I often wish I'd never made a penny; for what's the good of it all but to help other people, and be grumbled at afterwards for not helping 'em more?"

"Oh, but all people ain't the same, dear."

"There ain't much difference, Betsey. Here's old Mrs Thorne quite hates me; that boy thinks I'm a reg'lar cad; and Miss Thorne's turning the same way."

"That I'm sure she's not!" cried little Miss Burge, starting up and speaking angrily, with her face flushed, "Miss Hazel Thorne's as good as gold, and she thinks you the best of men; and I declare, Bill, that you ought to be ashamed of yourself, and I don't know what you don't deserve. It's too bad. There!"

"Thanky, Betsey, my dear. That seems to do me good. I like to hear you speak out like that. But do you really think she likes me?"

"I'm sure she does, Bill, and there ain't no think in the matter; and there, for goodness' sake, don't you settle down into a grumbler, Bill, because you've got no cause to be, I'm sure."

"Well, I don't know, Betsey," he said, stirring his tea slowly. "Things don't seem to go right.

I thought, seeing what I'd done for the schools, I ought to have a pretty good voice in everything, but because I've spent hundreds and hundreds over 'em it seems just why I'm to be opposed. Here's Chute: I showed the committee that he was a miserable spy of a fellow, not content with watching Miss Thorne, but putting it about that she was carrying on with different people in the place and gentlemen from town, just out of spite like, as Lambent agrees with me, because the poor gal wouldn't notice him. Well, I want him dismissed or made to resign."

"Well, and isn't he to go?"

"Go! Lor' bless you! Why, the committee's up in arms to keep him; and just on account of that school-pence job, as the poor gal couldn't help at all, they'd have dismissed her if she hadn't said she'd resign."

"Oh, Bill, it's much too bad!"

"Bad ain't nothing to it, my dear. I've been fighting hard for her stopping, and sending her resignation back; but neither Lambent nor Squire George Canninge won't interfere, and I'm left to fight it all out, and they're beating me."

"And why didn't you tell me all this before, Bill?" said Miss Burge.

"Oh, I hadn't the heart to talk about it, my dear," replied her brother. "It's all worry and vexation, that it is, and I wish I'd never done nothing for the schools at all."

"Don't say that, Bill, when you've done so much good."

"But I do say it," he cried angrily. "Here is everybody setting themselves again' me, and it's all jealousy because I've got on. I never asked no favours of 'em before; it's all been give, give; and now they show what they're all made of. It's all horse-leeches' daughters with 'em, that's what it is, and I wish Plumton All Saints was burnt. All Saints indeed!" he cried indignantly; "it's all devils, and no saints in it at all."

"But can't Mr Lambent settle it?"

"No, he couldn't if he'd moved; and those two cats—there, I can't call 'em anything else—who are always going about preaching charity and love to the poor people, and giving 'em 'Dairyman's Daughters' instead of beef or tea, have been setting every one again' the poor gal, and they're at the bottom of it all I know. They hate her like poison."

"Well, I don't know about as bad as poison," said little Miss Burge thoughtfully; "but they don't like her, and I don't think that Mrs Canninge likes her either."

"No, I'm sure she don't; but I don't care," said Mr William Forth Burge furiously. "I'm not beaten, and if that poor girl will stand by us, I'll stand by her, to the last shilling I've got."

"That's right, Bill!" cried little Miss Burge enthusiastically, "for I do like her ever so; and the good, patient way in which she puts up with the fine airs and silly ways of her ma makes me

like her more and more. I haven't got a very bad temper, have I, Bill?"

"I think you've got a regular downright good 'un, Betsey," said her brother, looking at her admiringly.

"Well, Bill, do you know if I was to go there much, Mrs Thorne would make me a regular spitfire. She gives me the hot creeps with her condescending, high-and-mighty ways. She's come down in the world. Well, suppose she has. So's thousands more, but they don't—they don't—"

"Howl," said Mr William Forth Burge, "that's it; they don't howl. Lor a mussy me, what difference do it make? Do you know, Betsey, I believe I was just as happy when I first started business on my own account; and I'm sure I thought a deal more of my first new cart, with brass boxes and patent axles, painted chocklit—it was picked out with yallar—than I did of our new carriage, here, and pair. Ah! and my first mare, as I only give fifteen pun for, could get over the ground better than either of these for which I give two hundred because they was such a match."

"There, now, you're beginning to grumble again, Bill, and I won't have it. You've grown to be a rich man, all out of your own cleverness, and you ought to be very proud of of it; and if you're not, I am."

"But, you see, Betsey, I ain't so happy as I thought I should be."

"Then you ought to be, seeing how happy you can make other folks; and oh, Bill, by-the-way, them Potts's are in trouble."

"Well, that ain't nothing new. Potts always is in trouble. He ought to have been christened Beer Potts or Pewter Potts, though they don't know what a pewter pot is down in this part of the world."

"That's better, Bill; now you're beginning to joke," said little Miss Burge, smiling, "But you'll do something for the Potts's?"

"I'll never do nothing for anybody else again in the place," said Mr William Forth Burge; "a set of ungrateful beggars. What's the matter with Potts? Been tipsy again?"

"I'm afraid he has, Bill; but that isn't it. They've got the fever there; that big, saucy girl, Feelier, is down with it and the poor mother wants money badly."

"Why don't she work for it, then?"

"Oh, she do, Bill; she's the most hard-working woman in the place."

Mr William Forth Burge's hand went into his pocket, and he brought out five pounds, to place them in his sister's hand.

“I wouldn’t give it her all at once, dear,” he said; “but a pound at a time like. It makes it do more good.”

Little Miss Burge had the tears in her eyes as she gave her brother a sounding smack on either cheek.

“Now, don’t you pretend again, Bill, that you ain’t happy here,” she said, “for ain’t it nice to be able to do a bit of good like this now and then?”

“Of course it is,” he replied, “but they only jumps on you afterwards. Here we’re going to do this, and p’r’aps save that child’s life; and as soon as she gets well the first thing she’ll do will be to make faces at your back in the school, as I’ve seen her do on Sundays over and over again.”

“Oh, I don’t mind, Bill.”

“But you’re not going to the house where that gal’s ill?”

“Oh no, Bill dear; I won’t go down. Don’t you be afraid about that. And look here; you make a big fight of it, and beat ’em about Miss Thorne.”

“I’m going to,” he replied. “But I say, Betsey,” he continued, half turning away his face.

“Yes, Bill.”

“Should—should—”

Mr William Forth Burge’s collar seemed to be very tight, for he thrust, one finger between it and his neck, and gave it a tug before continuing hoarsely—

“I never keep anything from you, Betsey?”

“No, Bill, you don’t. You always was a good brother.”

“Should—should you mind it much, Betsey, if I was to—to—get married?”

Little Miss Burge stood gazing at him silently for some minutes, and then she said softly—

“No, Bill; I don’t think I should. Not if it was some one nice, who would make you very happy.”

“She is very nice, and she would make me very happy,” he said slowly. “But, Betsey—my—dear—do—you—think—she’d—have me?”

Mr William Forth Burge’s words came very slowly indeed at last, and he rested his arms upon his knees and sat in a bent position, looking down at the carpet as if waiting to hear what was a sentence of great moment to his life.

“Bill dear, I know who you mean, of course,” said the little woman at last, tearfully. “I don’t know. She likes you, for she told me she did; but I shouldn’t be your own true sister if I didn’t say that p’r’aps it’s only as a friend; and that ain’t love, you know, Bill, is it?”

“No,” he said softly; “no, Betsey; you’re quite right, dear. But I’m going to try, and—and I’m only a common sort of a chap, dear—if she says no, I’m going to try and bear it like a man.”

“That’s my own dear—dear—O Bill, look; if there she isn’t coming up to the house!”

And little Miss Burge ran off to hide her tears.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

William Forth Burge Makes Love.

Mr William Forth Burge’s heart gave a big throb, and his red face assumed a mottled aspect as he went out to the front to welcome Hazel Thorne, who shook hands warmly; and her pale face lit up with a pleasant smile as he drew her hand through his arm and led her into the handsome breakfast-room, his heart big with what he wished to say, while he asked himself how he was to say it, and shrank trembling from the task.

“Yes, my sister’s quite well,” he said, in answer to a question. “She’ll be here directly; and I hope the little girls are quite well. When may they come and spend the day?”

“It is very kind of you, Mr Burge,” said Hazel, giving him a grateful look; “but I think they had better not come.”

“Oh! I say, don’t talk like that,” he cried. “My dear Miss Thorne—”

He could get no farther. He had made up his mind to declare his love, but his heart failed as he mentally told himself it would be madness to ask such a thing of one so different to himself.

“She’ll go away again, and I shall have said nothing,” he thought. “It can’t never be, for she’s too young and nice for me.” And then, as is often the case, the opportunity came, and, to his own astonishment, William Forth Burge said, simply and honestly, all that was in his heart leaving him wondering, in spite of his pain, that he had spoken so truthfully and well.

“You have always been so kind, Mr Burge,” began Hazel, “that I shrink from letting you think I impose upon your good nature; but one of my girls is down with a very serious illness, and I have come to ask you to help her poor mother in her time of trial.”

“Help her? Why, of course,” he cried, leaving his chair and crossing to take Hazel’s hands. “Is there anything I wouldn’t do if you asked me, Miss Thorne? My dear, don’t think I’m purse-proud—because I tell you I’m a rich man; for I only say it so as you may know there’s plenty to

do good with; and if you'll come to me, my dear, and let it be yours or ours, or whatever you like to call it—there it is. You shall do as you like, and I'll try, and I know Betsey will, to make you as happy as we can.”

“Mr Burge!” cried Hazel piteously as she rose to her feet.

“Just a minute,” he pleaded. “It isn't nothing new. It's been growing ever since you come down here. Don't be offended with me. I know I'm twice as old as you, and more, and I'm very ordinary; but that don't keep me from loving you very, very dear.”

“Don't—pray don't say any more, Mr Burge,” cried Hazel appealingly. “I—I cannot bear it.”

“No, no; don't go yet, my dear,” he cried. “If you only knew what a job it has been to work myself up to say this, you wouldn't be so hard as to stop me.”

“Hard! Pray don't call it hard, Mr Burge. I grieve to stop you, for you have been so truly kind to me ever since I came.”

“Well, that isn't saying much; my dear. Betsey and me was kind—I say that ain't right, is it? I know now—Betsey and I was kind because we always liked you, and I thought it would be so nice if some day or other you could think me good enough to be your husband.”

“Dear Mr Burge, you cut me to the heart, for I seem as if I were so ungrateful to you after all that you have done.”

“Oh, no!” he said quickly; “you're not ungrateful. You're too pretty and good to do anything unkind.”

“Mr Burge!”

“You see, it is like this, my dear. I'm not much of a fellow; I never was.”

“You have been the truest and kindest of friends, Mr Burge; and I esteem you very much.”

“No! Do you, though?” he cried, brightening up and smiling. “Well, that does me good. I like to hear you say that, because I know you wouldn't say anything that was not true.”

“Indeed, I would not Mr Burge,” said Hazel, laying her hand upon his arm; and he took it quietly, and held it between both of his.

“All the same, though,” he went on dolefully, “I am not much of a fellow, though I've been a very lucky one. I never used to think anything about the gals—the ladies, and they never took no notice of me, and I went on making money quite fast. I used to think of how prime it would be to have a grand house and gardeners down here at Plumton, and how Betsey would enjoy it; and then what a happy time I should have; but somehow it hasn't turned out so well as I thought it would. You see, I've been a butcher—not a killing butcher, you know, but a selling butcher; and though the gentry's very kind and patronising, and make speeches and no end of

fuss about everything I do or say, I know all the time that they think I'm a tradesman, and always will be, no matter how rich I am."

"But I'm sure people esteem you very much, Mr Burge."

"No," he said, shaking his head sadly, "they don't. It's the money they think of. You esteem me, my dear, because you've just told me so, and nothing but the truth never came out of those pretty little lips. They don't think much of me. Why should they, seeing what a common-looking sort of fellow I am? No: don't shake your head, because you know it as well as I do. I ain't a gentleman, and if I'd twenty million times as much money it wouldn't make a gentleman of me."

"And I say you are a gentleman, Mr Burge—a true, honest, nature's gentleman, such as no birth, position, or appearance could make."

"No, no, no, my dear," he said sadly; "I'm only a common man, who has been lucky and grown rich—that's all."

"I say that you are a true gentleman, Mr Burge," she cried again, "and that you are showing it by your tender respect and consideration for a poor, helpless, friendless girl."

"No: that you ain't, my dear," he cried with spirit; "not friendless; for as long as God lets William Forth Burge breathe on this earth, with money or without money, you've got a friend as'll never forsake you, or say an unkind—lor', just as if one could say an unkind word to you; I couldn't even give you an unkind look. Why, I don't, even now, when what you've said has cut me to the heart."

"I couldn't—I couldn't help it, Mr Burge," she cried.

"I suppose you couldn't, my dear; but if you could have said yes to me, and been my little wife—it isn't money as I care to talk about to you—but the way in which I'd reglar downright worship you, and care for them as belongs to you, and the way in which you should do everything you liked, and have what you liked—There, I get lost with trying to think about it," he said dolefully, "and I go all awkward over my grammar, as you, being a schoolmistress, must see, and make myself worse and worse in your eyes, and ten times more common than ever."

"No, no, no!" she cried excitedly; "I never, never thought half so much of you before, Mr Burge, as I do now. I never realised how true a gentleman you were, and how painful it would be to say to you what I now say. I do appreciate it—I do know how kind and generous you are to wish to make me your wife—now, in this time of bitter disgrace."

"Tchah!" he cried contemptuously; "who cares for the disgrace? I'd just as soon believe that the sun and moon had run up again' one another in the night as that you had taken the beggarly school pence. Don't say another word about it, my dear: it makes me mad, as I told Miss Rebecca and Miss Beatrice yesterday. I said it was a pack of humbugging lies, and they ought to be ashamed of themselves for believing it. I know who had—"

"Hush! oh, pray hush!" cried Hazel piteously.

“All right, my dear, mum’s the word; but don’t you never say no word to me again about you having taken the money. It’s insulting William Forth Burge, that’s what it is.”

Hazel looked up sadly in his face, which was now scarlet with excitement.

“I thank you, Mr Burge,” she said simply; and then, smiling, “Am I not right in saying that you are a true gentleman?”

“No, no no, my dear; you are not right,” he replied sorrowfully.

“But I am!” she cried.

“No, my dear, no; but I know you think you are; and if—if you could go on thinking that I was just a little like a gentleman, you’d make me very happy indeed, for I do think a deal of you.”

“It is no thought—no fancy, Mr Burge; but the truth.”

“And if some day—say some day ever so far off—though it would be a pity to put it off long, for a fellow at my age don’t improve by keeping—I say if by-and-by—”

“Mr Burge—dear Mr Burge—”

“I say—say that again.”

“Mr Burge,” said Hazel, laying her hands in his; “you have told me you loved me, and asked me to be your wife.”

“Yes,” he said, kissing her hand reverently, “and it’s been like going out of my sphere.”

“It would be cruel of me not to speak plainly to you.”

“Yes,” he said dejectedly, “it would; though it’s very hard when a man’s been filling himself full of hope to find it all go—right off at once.”

“It is my fate to bring misery and trouble amongst people,” she sobbed, “and I would have given anything to have spared you this. I respect and esteem you, Mr Burge, more than I can find words to say; but I could never love you as your wife.”

He dropped the hand he held, and turned slowly away that she might not see the workings of his face; and then, laying his arms upon the mantelpiece, he let his head go down, and for the next few minutes he stood there, with his chest heaving, crying softly like a broken-hearted child.

“I cannot bear it,” muttered Hazel, as she wrung her hands and gazed wildly about the sumptuously furnished room, as if in search of help; for the troubles of the past had told upon her nerves. She felt hysterical, and could not keep back her own tears, which at last burst forth in a wild fit of passionate sobbing, as she sank into the nearest chair and covered her face with

her hands.

This roused her suitor, who took out his flaming orange handkerchief, and used it freely and simply, finishing off, after he had wiped his eyes, with a loud and sonorous blow of his nose.

“Tain’t being a man!” he said, in a low tone. “I’m ’bout ashamed of myself. It’s weak and stoopid, and what will she think?”

His face was very red now, but a bright, honest glow came into his eyes, and his next act showed how truly Hazel had judged his character and seen beneath the surface of the man. For, giving himself a sounding blow upon the chest, he pulled himself together, and the odd appearance, the vulgarity, all passed away as he crossed to where Hazel sat, weeping and sobbing bitterly.

“Don’t you cry, my dear,” he said softly, as he stretched out one heavy hand and touched her gently and reverently upon the arm. “I beg your pardon for what I’ve said, though I’m not sorry; for it’s made us understand one another, and wakened me up from a foolish dream.”

There was something in his voice that soothed Hazel, and the sobs grew less violent.

“It wasn’t natural or right, and I ought to have known better than to have expected it; but they say every man gets his foolish fit some time or other in his life, and though mine was a long time coming, it came very strong at last. It’s all quite over, my dear, and I know better now, and I’m going to ask you to say once more that common, vulgar sort of fellow as I am, you are going to look upon me as your friend.”

“Common!” cried Hazel hysterically, for the bonds that she had maintained for weeks had given way at last, and her woman’s weakness had resulted in tears and sobs. “Common!—vulgar! No, no!”

She caught his hands in hers and pressed them to her lips. Then she would have sunk upon her knees and asked his pardon for the pain she had unwittingly caused, but he caught her in his arms and held her helplessly sobbing to his breast.

They neither of them were aware that the drawing-room door was opened, and that Miss Burge and Rebecca Lambent had entered, the former to look tearfully on, the latter indignant as she muttered, “Shameless creature!” between her teeth.

“What! have you made matters up, then, Bill?” cried Miss Burge excitedly as she ran forward. “Oh, my dear, my dear!”

Her tears were flowing fast as she paused before them, trying to extricate her handkerchief from an awkward pocket and arrested by her brother’s words.

“Yes, Betsey, we’ve made it up all right,” he said.

"I—I didn't think it," sobbed Miss Burge.

"No," he said; "and it isn't as you think, for this is our very, very dear young friend, Betsey, and—and as I'm plenty old enough to be her father, Hazel Thorne's going to let me act by her like one, and stand by her through thick and thin, in spite of all that the world may say, including you, Miss Lambent." He spoke proudly, as he drew Hazel closer to his breast, and stood there softly stroking her hair, with so frank and honest a light shining out of his eyes that it brightened the whole man.

"Sir!" exclaimed Rebecca.

"Madam!" he cried, "I don't want to be rude; but, as your company can't be pleasant to Miss Hazel Thorne, I'd take it kindly if you'd go."

"And I was ready to forget my position and marry a man like this," muttered Rebecca as she walked down to the gate. "Oh, that creature! She came upon Plumton like a curse."

"Betsey, my dear," said Mr William Forth Burge, speaking to his sister, but speaking at Hazel, "you and me never had anything kept from one another, and please God we never will, so I'll tell you. I've been asking Miss Hazel Thorne here to be my wife."

"Yes, Bill dear, I know—I know," sobbed little Miss Burge.

"And while I've been asking her, it came over me like that I was wrong to ask her, and that it wouldn't be natural and right."

"Oh, Bill dear!"

"She's been so good and tender, and kind and sensible, that it's been like taking the scales from before my eyes, and been a sort of lesson to me; and somehow, my dear, I feel as if I was a different sort of man to what I was before. I'm not a speaker, and I can't express myself as I should like to; but what I want to say is, that I feel as if I was more of a man and a bit wiser than I was."

"Oh, Bill dear!"

"I'm getting on fast for fifty, Betsey dear, and Miss Thorne here—I should like to say Hazel Thorne here—is only two-and-twenty or thereabouts, and she's going to be like our own child from now, if she will, and we're going to try and keep away troubles for the future till she wants to go away. And now we won't say any more about it, but let things settle down. Stop a minute, though, Hazel Thorne, my dear; you've made me a gentleman, and we shall be friends."

For answer Hazel left Miss Burge, who had been sitting by her with her arm round her waist, and, placing her hand in his, she looked him full in the eyes, seeing no longer the homeliness of the man, hearing no more his illiterate speech, but gazing as it were straight into his simple honest kindly heart. She hesitated for a moment, and then, reaching up she kissed, him as a child would kiss one she loved.

Chapter Forty.

“I Want Teacher.”

One low, weary, incessant cry in the shabby, sloping-roofed, whitewashed room.

The place was scrupulously clean; there was not so much as a speck upon the windows; but the chamber was miserably bare. One well-worn, damaged rush-chair was beside the worm-eaten, stump bedstead, a box supported a chipped white jug and basin, and an old sack unsewn and opened out formed the carpet. The only other article of furniture was a thin, very old, white scrap of dimity curtain half drawn across the lead lattice-paned window upon a piece of tape.

And from the bed arose that one weary, constant cry from between the fevered, cracked lips, night and day—

“I want teacher to come!”

For there was no mischief dancing in her unnaturally bright eyes; the restless hands were not raised to play some trick; the face was not drawn up in some mocking grimace: all was pitiful, and pinched, and sad; for poor Feelier Potts lay sick unto death, and it seemed as if at any moment the dark shadow would float forth from the open window, bearing one more sleeping spirit away.

“I want teacher!—I want teacher!”—night and day that weary, weary burden, ever in the same unreasoning strain; and it was in vain that the poor rough mother, softened now in face of this terrible trouble, sought to give comfort.

“But she can’t come now, my bairn—she can’t come. Oh, do be quiet—do!”

“I want teacher—I want teacher to come.”

Unreasoning ever—for poor Feelier was almost beyond reasoning—there was one great want in her shadowed mind, and it found vent between her lips for the first days loudly, then painfully low, and at last in a hoarse murmur, but always the same—

“I want teacher to come.”

“I won’t come anigh you to speak, miss, for it wouldn’t be right,” sobbed poor, broken-down Mrs Potts, weak now and worn out, as she stood at the cottage gate, after making signs for Hazel to come to the door. For nights past she had been watching by her child’s couch, while her husband had kept watch at the public-house till it was shut, and then he had slept in a barn. For he had only one body, and he was terribly afraid lest it should be stricken by the sore disease.

"I am not afraid of the infection, Mrs Potts," said Hazel kindly. "You look worn out; let me give you a cup of tea."

"My dear Hazel," said Mrs Thorne from the kitchen, where she was seated at the evening meal, "what are you going to do?"

"Good, if I can, mother," said Hazel simply, and she filled a cup and took it out to the half-fainting woman, who looked her thanks, for she could not speak for some minutes.

"There, miss, and God bless you for it," she said, handing back the cup. "I felt I must come and tell you, miss, for—for it seems as if she couldn't die till you had been."

"Does she ask for me so?" said Hazel.

"She asks for nothing else, miss. It's always 'I want teacher,' and—and I thought miss—if you'd come to the house—if it was only to stand on the other side of the road—the window's open, miss, and she could hear you, and if you was just to say, 'I'm here, Feelier!' or, 'go to sleep, there's a good girl!' it would quiet her like, and then she'd be able to die."

"Oh, pray don't speak like that!" cried Hazel. "Let us hope that she will live."

"I don't know what for, miss," said the wretched woman despondently. "Only to live to have a master who'd beat and ill-use her, and make her slave to keep his bairns. I did think I'd like her to live, but the Lord knows best and He's going to take her away."

"I'll come on and see her," said Hazel quietly. "Poor child! I was in hopes that she was going to amend. Wait for me here till I get my hat, and I will come."

"What are you going to do, my dear?" exclaimed Mrs Thorne as Hazel passed through the room.

"I am going to see one of my children, mother," she replied quietly.

"Not that dreadful Feelier Potts, Hazel?"

"Hush, dear! The child is dangerously ill, and her mother can hear your words."

"But it would be madness to go. It is an infectious disease."

"I feel, dear, as if it is my duty to go," replied Hazel, with a curious, far-off look in her eyes; and without another word she followed to the little low cottage by the side of the road.

"There, miss, if you'd stand there I think you could hear her. You see the window's open. I'll go upstairs and stir her up like, and then you speak, and—"

"I want teacher! When will she come?"

The words came in a low, harsh tone plainly to Hazel's ears, and with a sigh she walked

straight up to the door. "But you hadn't better go anigh her. The doctor said—"

"It will not hurt me," said Hazel quietly.

"Well, miss, if you wouldn't mind, it would do her a power of good, I'm sure. This way, miss," and she led her visitor through the room where she had been washing, to the awkward, well-worn staircase, and up this to poor Feelier's blank-looking room.

"I want teacher!—I want teacher!" came the weary burden as Hazel walked up to the bedside, shocked at the way in which the poor girl had changed.

"I want teacher! When will she come?" came again from the cracked lips as Hazel sank upon her knees by the bedside.

"I am here, my child," she said softly, as the burning head was tossed wearily from side to side.

The effect was electrical. The thin arms that had been lying upon the coverlet were raised, and with one ejaculation they were flung round the visitor's neck, the poor child nestling to her with a cry of joy.

"My poor child!" cried Hazel tenderly. And the weary iteration was heard no more.

"She never made that ado over me," said the mother discontentedly; but no one seemed to heed her, and she stole downstairs to her work, but came up from time to time to find poor Feelier sleeping softly in Hazel's arms, her head upon her breast. And when Mrs Potts attempted to unloose the clinging hands that were about "teacher's neck," the girl uttered a passionate, impatient cry, and clung the tighter to one who seemed to have come to bring her hope of life.

"It was very imprudent of you to come, Miss Thorne," said the doctor. "I heard you were here from Mr William Forth Burge. He is waiting below. Suppose you try to lay her down; she seems to be asleep."

Asleep or awake, poor Feelier would not be separated from her friend, and the doctor unwillingly owned at last that it would be undoing a great deal of good to force her away.

"You have given her a calm sense of rest, for which in her delirium she has been so long striving. I must confess that you have done her more good than I."

"She will go to sleep soon, perhaps," said Hazel, "and then leave me of her own accord."

"And then?" said the doctor.

"I can return home, and come again when she asks for me."

"I'm afraid, Miss Thorne, that you have not thought of the probable consequences of returning home," said the doctor. "You have young sisters there, and your mother. My dear young lady, it would be exceedingly imprudent to go."

For the first time the consequences of her step occurred to Hazel, and she looked aghast at the speaker.

"Then there is the school, Miss Thorne. I think, as a medical man, it is my duty to forbid your going there again for some time to come. Yes, I see you look at me, but I am only a hardened medical man. I go everywhere, and somehow one escapes a great portion of the ills one goes to cure."

There was no help for it, and after coming as an act of kindness to see the poor girl who had cried for her so incessantly, Hazel found herself literally a prisoner, and duly installed in the bedroom as her sick scholar's nurse.

Chapter Forty One.

Brother and Sisters—Refined.

There was a good deal of conversation about it at the Vicarage, where it became known through a visit paid by Rebecca and Beatrice to the school, and their coming back scandalised at finding it in charge only of the pupil-teachers, who explained the reason of Hazel's absence, and that she had sent a message to Mr Chute, asking him if he would raise one of the shutters, and give an eye occasionally to the girls' school, which was, however, in so high a state of discipline now that the pupil-teachers were able to carry it on passably well.

"And of course Mr Chute has done so?" said Miss Lambent.

"No, please 'm; he said he had plenty to do with his own school," replied one pupil-teacher.

"And he wouldn't do anything of the sort," said the other.

"What a disgraceful state of affairs, Beatrice!" exclaimed Miss Lambent; and the sisters hurried away to acquaint their brother with the last piece of news.

"I suppose, with a person of her class, one can only expect the same conduct that one would receive from a servant," said Beatrice acidly.

"I do not understand you, Beatrice," said her brother.

"I mean, Henry, that now she has resigned or received her dismissal, we shall only get the same amount of inattention that one would from a discharged servant."

"For my part," said the vicar, "I think that Miss Thorne is being hardly dealt with."

“Absurd, Henry!” said Miss Lambent. “We cannot say a word to you but you take Miss Thorne’s part.”

“Why not, when I see her treated with injustice!”

“Injustice, Henry!” cried Beatrice. “Is it injustice to speak against a young person who behaves like an unjust steward?”

The vicar was silent.

“For my part,” said Rebecca, “I think she should have been dismissed at once; and she would have been, but for the opposition offered by you, Henry, and Mr Burge.”

“For my part,” continued the vicar, ignoring the past speeches, “I can see nothing more touching, more beautiful, and Christian-like than Miss Thorne’s behaviour to this child—one of the sick lambs of her fold.”

“We are sorry, of course, for Ophelia Potts,” said Rebecca; “but she is a dreadful child.”

“A fact, I grant,” said the vicar; “and one that makes Miss Thorne’s conduct shine out the more.”

“Henry!” exclaimed his sisters in a breath.

“We are not doing wrong in staying here, Rebecca,” said Beatrice haughtily. “I do not believe in witchcraft or such follies, but it is as though this woman had bewitched our brother, and as if he were shaping himself in accordance with her plans.”

“I do not understand you, Beatrice,” said the vicar sternly.

“I will be plainer, then, Henry. It seems to me that you are offering yourself a willing victim to the wiles of an artful woman; and the next thing will be, I suppose, that you intend bringing her here as mistress of the Vicarage.”

“I quite agree with Beatrice,” cried Rebecca. “It is time we left you, Henry, to the devices and desires of your own heart.”

The vicar was stern of aspect now, as he paced the library, and hot words of anger were upon his lips, but he stayed them there, and looked from face to face as if seeking sympathy where there was none.

He knew that his sisters were right, and that in following out the dictates of his own heart he would gladly ask Hazel Thorne to be his wife; but he was weak, and the more so that she had given him no hope. His was not the nature that would have made him a martyr to his faith; neither could he be one for his unrequited love. He loved Hazel Thorne; but she did not care for him—he could see it plainly enough; and even had she loved him in return, he was not one who could have braved public opinion for her sake. For the trouble connected with that money was

always in his mind. Then there was the society to which he belonged. What would they say if he, the Reverend Henry Lambent, Master of Arts, and on visiting terms with the highest county families, were to enter into a matrimonial alliance with the daughter of a bankrupt stockbroker—one who was only the new mistress!

Then there were his sisters. If he married Hazel, always supposing she would accept him, he should have to break with them; and this he was too weak to do. In imagination he had been the stern ruler of Plumton All Saints' Vicarage for many years, and head of the parish. But it was a mistake: the real captain had been Beatrice, his younger sister; and Rebecca, though the elder, had been first lieutenant. The vicar had only been a private in the ranks.

"Now we are upon this theme," Beatrice went on, "it would be better, Henry, that the unpleasant feeling that has existed should come to an end."

"Surely there has been no unpleasant feeling between us," said the vicar.

"I quite agree with Beatrice—unpleasant feeling," said Rebecca.

"We are sisters and brother," continued Beatrice, "and we must remain so."

"Most assuredly," said the vicar, smiling.

"I am speaking for Rebecca as well as for myself, then, Henry, when I tell you that we have concluded that the only way in which our old happy relations can be continued will be by separating."

"Parting?" said the vicar, in dismay.

"Yes, Henry; by parting. Rebecca and I have a sufficiency, by clubbing together our slender resources, to enable us to live a life of content. A life of usefulness, we fear, will no longer be within our reach, for we shall have to leave our poor behind. But that we must be resigned to lose, for it is time, Henry, that we left you free and were—"

"No longer a tax upon you and an obstacle in the path of your inclinations," said Rebecca.

"But surely—you do not mean—you would not leave the Vicarage?"

"We have carefully weighed the matter over, Henry," said Rebecca, "and I do not see how, under the circumstances, you could wish us to do otherwise."

"No, no, it is impossible!" cried the vicar, who seemed deeply moved. "Beatrice—Rebecca, of what are you thinking?"

"Of our duty and your happiness," said Beatrice firmly.

"At the expense of your own," exclaimed the vicar.

"We must do our duty," said Rebecca with a sigh, and the sisters rose and left the room,

like clever diplomatists, content with the impression they had made, and feeling that by a bold stroke they had completely riveted their old mastery.



Chapter Forty Two.

Bad News.

The news of Hazel Thorne's imprisonment, for it could be called little else, was not long in reaching Ardley, and Mrs Canninge watched her son's countenance to see what effect it had. There had been an increasing coolness between mother and son, and it seemed as if it were rapidly approaching estrangement. Their old affectionate intercourse had given place to a chilling politeness, and though, time after time, in the bitter annoyance she felt, Mrs Canninge had felt disposed to ask her son how soon it would be necessary for her to vacate her position of mistress of the old hall, she had never been guilty of the meanness, but waited her time.

"He shall never marry her," she said over and over again; and in spite of her better self, the news of the money trouble had been like balm to her wounded spirit. Now, then, the tidings of Hazel's visit to the sick child had come, and again, in spite of herself, she felt a sensation akin to satisfaction, for this seemed as if it might act as a safeguard to her son.

It was a flimsy one, she knew—a broken reed upon which to lean; but it was something, and every trifle that appeared likely to keep George Canninge and Hazel apart, if it were only for a few days longer, was like a reprieve, and might result in something better to her mind.

The matter was not discussed, but Mrs Canninge noted that her son rode over to the town every morning, and found afterwards that he called at the Burges' day after day, where he incidentally learned that Hazel was still nursing the fever-stricken child.

It was pleasant to him at this juncture to talk to little Miss Burge, and to listen to her simple prattle about Hazel, and what trouble she and her brother took in sending down everything that was necessary for the invalid and her nurse, so that Hazel might be comfortable.

"It is very kind of you and Mr Burge," said Canninge one day.

"Oh, I don't know, Mr Canninge," she replied; "we want to do all the good we can, and one can't help loving Miss Thorne."

"No," said George Canninge quietly; and as he rode home he repeated little Miss Burge's words to himself over and over again—"One can't help loving Miss Thorne."

But he made no further advances—he did not go to the schoolhouse to make inquiries, nor yet ask at the cottage where Hazel was a prisoner; he contented himself with visiting the Burges day by day, to start back almost in alarm one morning as he saw a look of trouble in little Miss Burge's face, and before he could ask what was wrong the little woman burst out with—

"Oh, Mr Canninge, that poor, dear girl!"

“What?” he said excitedly. “She has not—”

“Yes, sir, and badly. My brother has been down there this morning, and she is delirious. And oh, poor girl! poor girl! I cannot let her lie there alone. I’m dreadfully afraid of the fever, Mr Canninge; but I shall have to go.”

“You? What! to nurse her?” said George Canninge, with a face now ghastly.

“Yes, sir; I must go. My brother has been down every day, and I’ve never been once!” she cried, bursting into a fit of sobbing. “It’s dreadful cowardly, I know; but I could not help it then.”

“And she may die!” said George Canninge as he rode slowly home; “and I have never told her I loved her. Dare I go to see her now?”

He asked himself that question many times, and again many times on the succeeding days; but he did not go near the place where Hazel Thorne lay now, in the shabby room, upon the bed roughly made up for her by Mrs Potts; while Feelier, the very shadow of herself, lay watching “teacher,” and the tears stole down her wasted cheeks as she listened to Hazel Thorne’s excited talking, for the most part incoherent; but here and there a word came to Feelier’s ears, and she wept again, because she was too weak to get up and wait upon “teacher,” whose attack was rapidly assuming a serious form.

By special arrangement with the doctor, the news as to Hazel’s state was sent to the Burges’ after every visit. Not that this was held to suffice, for little Miss Burge was constantly calling at the doctor’s house, and asking for fresh information when there was none to give.

“I can’t bear this no longer, Bill dear,” said Miss Burge one morning. “There’s that poor girl lying there in that wretched place, and no one but strangers to tend her; and it seems as if all her friends had left her now she is in distress.”

“Not all,” said Burge, raising his drooping head. “I’m down there every day; only I can’t be admitted to her room, poor dear! I wish I might be.”

“And I’ve been holding back,” sobbed little Miss Burge, “because I felt afraid of catching the complaint, and the doctor said it would be madness for me to go; but I’m going down this morning, Bill dear, and if I die for it I won’t mind—at least not very much—for I’m sure I shouldn’t be any good to live if I couldn’t help at a time like this. Hasn’t her poor ma been to her yet?”

“No; she isn’t fit to go,” said Burge. “She is ill, and weak, and foolish, and the doctor told her that if she went she would only take the disease home to the little girls. She would only have worried her poor child and been in the way.”

“I’m glad I’ve never been a mother, Bill, to turn out no more use than that in trouble,” sobbed the little woman. “Now, do drink your tea, dear; it will do you good.”

“Nothing won’t do me no good, Betsey,” said the poor fellow dejectedly.

“But it looks so bad, dear, to see you like this. I declare you haven’t washed and shaved this mornings and your hair ain’t been brushed.”

“No,” he said drearily; “I forgot Betsey—I forgot.”

“Why, Bill!” she exclaimed, looking at him scrutinisingly.

“Yes, dear.”

“Why, you haven’t been to bed all night!”

“No, dear.”

“Why, if you haven’t been watching down there by that cottage!” she cried.

“Yes, dear,” he said quietly. “It seemed to do me good like.”

“Oh, Bill!”

“And then I went to the post-office, and I’ve telegraphed for Sir Henry Venner to come down by special train.”

“You have, Bill dear! Why, that’s the Queen’s doctor, ain’t it.”

“Yes, dear.”

“But won’t it cost a heap of money?”

“I’d give every penny I’ve got and sell myself too,” he said, with a ring of simple pathos in his voice, “if it would bring that poor darling back to herself.”

He laid his arms upon the table, and his forehead went down upon them, as he said softly, as if to himself—

“I don’t want any return—I’m not selfish—and I’d ask nothing back. I could go on loving her always, and be glad to see her happy, only please God to let her live—please God let her live!”

Little Miss Burge, with the tears streaming down her honest round face, rose from her seat at the breakfast-table, and went down upon her knees beside her brother, to lay her cheek against one of his hands.

“I’m going down to her now, Bill dear,” she said softly; “and I’ll watch by her night and day; for I think I love her, poor dear! as much as you.”

“God bless you, Betsey dear!” he said, drawing her to his breast, and speaking now with energy. “I couldn’t ask you to go, for it seemed like sending you where I daren’t go myself; but if you could go, dear, I should be a happier man!”

“And go I will, Bill; and I will do my best.”

“And look here, dear!” he cried, quite excitedly now, “you don’t know how you’re helping me, for now I can do what I want.”

“What’s that, dear?”

“Why, I thought, dear, if the big doctor would give leave, we might bring the poor girl on here; but I daren’t even think of it before, on account of you. You, see, dear, I could send away the servants, and get a nurse to come.”

“Oh yes; do, Bill dear!” cried the little body eagerly. “We’d put her in the west room, which would be so bright and cheerful, and—There, I’m standing talking when I ought to go.”

In fact, within five minutes little Miss Burge was ready, with her luggage on her arm; the said luggage consisting of a clean night-dress, “ditto” cap, a cake of soap, and a brush and comb; with which easily portable impedimenta she was soon after settled in Mrs Potts’s dreary low-roofed room.

“No, miss,” whispered the rough woman, “never slep’ a wink all night; but kep’ on talk, talk, talk, talking about her mother and father, and Squire Canninge, and the school pence, and that she was in disgrace.”

“And teacher kep’ saying Mr William Forth Burge was her dearest friend,” put in Feelier, in a shrill, weak voice.

“Hush!” whispered little Miss Burge, for their voices had disturbed Hazel, who, till then, had been lying in a kind of stupor.

She opened her eyes widely, and stared straight before her.

“Are you there, Mr Burge?—are you there?” she said in a quick, excited whisper.

“No, my dear; it’s me, Betsey Burge. I’ve come to stop with you.”

“I didn’t know how good and kind you were then—when I spoke as I did. I was very blind then—I was very blind then,” sighed Hazel wearily.

“And you’ll soon be better now,” said little Miss Burge in a soft, cheery way. “There—let me turn your pillow; it’s all so hot, and—Mrs Potts, send up for two pillows out of our best room directly.”

“Yes, mum; I’ll go myself;” and Mrs Potts hurried away.

“There, my dear, you’ll be nicer and cooler now, and—Oh, dear me, what a lot of things I do want! Mrs Potts, call at the druggist’s for some eau-de-cologne—a big bottle mind.”

“Yes, mum,” came from below.

“Her poor head’s like fire. There, dear—there, my poor dear, let me lay your hair away from you; it will cool your head.”

“Please, Miss Burge, don’t let them cut off all teacher’s hair,” whispered Feelier from the other bed.

“No, my dear; not if I can help it.”

“I want to tell you I was so ungrateful when you spoke to me as you did, Mr Burge,” said Hazel in her low excited whisper.

“No, no, my darling, not ungrateful,” said little Miss Burge, in the soothing voice any one would adopt to a child.—“Poor dear, she don’t know what she’s saying.”

“I have lain here and thought of what you have done,” continued Hazel, “and how self-denying you have always been to me; and I was ungrateful for it all. I know now I was ungrateful.”

“She is wandering, poor girl!” said little Miss Burge, with a sob, as she busied herself in making the room more comfortable, after she had smoothed Hazel’s pillow and opened the window wide to give her more air. After this she turned her attention to poor Feelier, rearranging her pillow, and ending by bathing her face and hands, the poor girl uttering a sigh of relief and pleasure, sinking back afterwards upon her cool pillow, too weak almost to raise her arm.

“There, now you feel more comfortable, don’t you, my dear?” whispered the busy little woman.

“Oh, yes, and—and—and—please—please I’ll never do so no more.”

Poor Feelier burst into a passionate fit of tearful remorse, sobbing wildly in spite of little Miss Burge’s efforts to calm her.

“Oh! hush, hush, my dear; pray be still.”

“I—I—I used to make faces at you in school,” sobbed Feelier.

“Yes, yes, yes; but hush my dear. You only did it in fun.”

“N-no, I didn’t,” sobbed Feelier; “I did it to make—make the other girls laugh.”

“But hush, pray hush, or you’ll hurt poor Miss Thorne.”

Feelier’s sobs ended in one large gulp, as if by magic, and she lay perfectly still, staring at the other bed.

“Please, Miss Burge,” she whispered, “will you bring some of your roses and put in water

by teacher's pillow?"

"Yes, my dear, that I will," said the little lady, patting Feelier's hand. "And now lie still, and don't talk; let's keep the room quiet, and try to make her better."

"Yes, Miss Burge; but please will teacher get well?"

"Why, surely, my dear; and very soon."

"Because mother said I was a little wretch and gave teacher the fever, and I wish I may die instead."

"But you shall both get well, my dear, very soon; and then you shall both go down to the sea, and you shall be Miss Thorne's little maid."

"Shall I?" cried the girl, with her eyes sparkling and a flush coming into her thin, sunken cheeks.

"Yes, that you shall, my dear; only lie very still, and don't talk."

"Please, Miss Burge," whispered Feelier, "let me tell you this."

"Well, only this one thing, and then you must be very quiet, my dear."

"Yes, I will," whispered Feelier, in a quiet, old-fashioned way; "but that's how teacher keeps on all night and all day; she keeps on wanting Mr William Forth Burge to come to her, and mother says I kep' on just the same, asking for teacher to come, and I was quiet when she did, and then"—sob—"she caught the fever too."

"Yes, yes, my dear; but you'll soon do better now."

"But you'd better let old Billy Burge—"

Feelier stopped short, conscious of the slip of her guilty tongue, and looked up at her gentle attendant as if she expected a blow.

"I won't call him that name agen," she said demurely, "but if he come he'd do teacher good; only if he did come, he'd ketch the fever too, and I don't know what's best, only we mustn't let teacher die."

"No, no, my dear; of course not," whispered little Miss Burge hastily.

"But if she did die I know what I should do," said Feelier dreamily, and with a drowsy look in her eyes, the effect of being washed and the cooler atmosphere of the room inducing sleep.

"What should you do, my dear?" said Miss Burge, pressing down the pillow to let the cool air blow upon her cheek.

"I should set violets and primroses all over her grave; and if any of the other girls was to pick any of 'em, oh, I would give 'em such a banging! And then—then—then—"

And then poor, weak Ophelia Potts sank into a profound sleep, and little Miss Burge wiped her eyes and sat and watched Hazel's weary, restless head; listening to her broken sentences and the incoherent mutterings, all of which were to the same tune—that she had been weak and cruel and ungrateful to one who had been all devotion to her, and that she would never rest till she had tried to make him some amends.

"Poor Bill, if he could only hear her now, how glad he'd be!" sighed the watcher; "but this will all pass away, and when she gets well she'll never know she said a word. Poor Bill; it won't never—it couldn't ever be!"

"I want Mr Burge," cried Hazel suddenly, and her voice sounded hard and strange. "Tell him to come to me—tell him to come."

"Yes, yes, yes, my darling; he shall come soon."

"He would catch the fever, do you say? No no; I could not give it to him; he is so kind and good. Tell Mr Geringer, mother, it is impossible; I could not be his wife."

"Oh, my poor dear!" whispered Miss Burge, bathing Hazel's burning forehead with the eau-de-cologne that Mrs Potts had now brought; "that poor, poor, burning, wandering brain. Why don't the doctor come?"

Chapter Forty Three.

The Queen's Physician.

It was many hours yet before the doctor came, for the life of one patient is no more to a medical man than that of another, and the great physician had several urgent cases to see before he could use the special train placed at his disposal by Hazel's elderly lover, who had never left the station all the morning, and had given instructions that the starting of the train should be telegraphed to him from the terminus in town.

In addition, he had a messenger, in the shape of Feelier's brother, who came to and fro every hour to where Mr William Forth Burge was walking up and down the platform, to deliver a report from Miss Burge on the patient's state.

One of these messages was to the effect that the local doctor had been, and said that there was no change; and that he was stopping at home on purpose to meet the great physician when he came.

So was Mr William Forth Burge's carriage, and so was a group of the tradespeople and others, for in the easy-going life of a little country town the loss of a day was as nothing

compared to the chance of seeing the Queen's own physician when he came down.

At last, but not till far in the afternoon, came the lightning message speeding along the wires, "Special left King's Cross 3:30;" and then how slow seemed the rapid special, and by comparison how it lagged upon its way, for it would be quite an hour and a half, the station-master said, perhaps two hours, even at express speed.

And all this time William Forth Burge waited, and would have taken nothing but for the thoughtfulness of the station-master's wife, who brought him some tea.

"No, six, not yet; that's the fast down." Or, "No sir, not yet; that's only the afternoon goods." Or again, "No sir; that's only the slow local. They'll wire me from Marshton when she passes."

This from the chief official; and at last the wired message came, and after what seemed to be an interminable time, a fast engine, tender, one saloon carriage, and brake steamed into the station, and a little, quiet dark man stepped out as the door was held open by the station-master, waiting ready to do honour to the man greater in his power than the magician kings of old, but very weak even then.

"Mr William Forth Burge? Thanks. Carriage waiting. Thanks. Now tell me a little of the case."

This was mastered principally by questions as they drove to the cottage.

"Yes," said the great man. "I see. The old thing, my dear sir. What can you expect with sanitary arrangements such as these?"

He pointed right and left as they drove along, Mr William Forth Burge suddenly checking the driver, as they were about halfway, to pick up Doctor Bartlett, the resident medical man.

Next followed a consultation in the wretched keeping-room of the cottage, the great doctor treating his humble brother with the most profound respect, and then they went up to the bedroom, and little Miss Burge came down to her brother with her handkerchief to her eyes.

A dreary half-hour followed before the doctors came down, the two occupants of the room gazing up at them with appeal in their eyes as they vacated their chairs in the great man's favour.

"I can only say, Mr William Forth Burge, that we must hope," said the great baronet. "It is the most ordinary form of typhoid fever, and must have its course. I may add that I almost regret that you should have called me down, unless my opinion is any comfort to you; for I can neither add to nor detract from the skilful treatment adopted by my *confrère*, Doctor Bartlett, who is carefully watching the case. What we want is the best of nursing; and, at any cost, let the poor girl be taken to some light, wholesome, airy room."

"Might we risk moving her?" panted Mr Burge.

“It is a grave risk; but it must be ventured, with the greatest care, under Doctor Bartlett’s instructions; for I have no hesitation in saying that if our patient stays here she will die.”

“God bless you, Sir Henry; I’d have given all I possess for that!” gasped Burge, as he placed a slip of paper in the doctor’s hands.

There was the drive back to the station, the little train steamed out, and that evening, while poor Feelier Potts slept, Hazel Thorne was carried down to the Burges’ carriage, and lay that night in the west room, to keep on talking incessantly of her cruelty to one who had been so noble, so true, and good, and to make appeals to him for his forgiveness, as she now knew how to value his honest love.

Chapter Forty Four.

Mrs Thorne Receives.

Hazel Thorne’s illness came like a shock to Plumton All Saints, and the opposing members of the committee, who had been instrumental in gaining her dismissal, looked angrily one at the other, as if that other one was specially to blame. The Reverend Henry Lambent sent down messengers to know how Miss Thorne was progressing, and later on sent the same messengers to the Burges’ for news.

“Will you not go down and see Mrs Thorne, Rebecca—Beatrice?” he said, one day, appealingly. “This is a troublous time.”

“We had already felt it to be a duty, Henry, and we will run all risks in such a cause.”

There was not the slightest risk in going to the schoolmistress’s cottage, and the sisters went down, to find Mrs Thorne weak and almost prostrate with illness and anxiety, but ready to draw herself up stiffly to receive her visitors.

“Cissy, Mabel, place chairs for these ladies,” she said. “Miss Lambent will perhaps excuse my rising. I am an invalid.”

Rebecca bowed and glanced at her sister, who made her a sign to proceed.

“We have called, Mrs Thorne, knowing you to be in so sad a state of affliction—”

“To offer a few words of condolence,” said Mrs Thorne, interrupting her. “It is very neighbourly and kind, I am sure I am sorry poor Hazel is too unwell to be here to receive you as well.”

“What insolence!” muttered Beatrice.

“Condolence is hardly the word,” said Rebecca stiffly. “We are very much grieved about Miss Thorne, especially as her illness has come almost like a chastisement for her weakness in

her discharge of her scholastic trust.”

“Oh! You are alluding to the school trifle she did not pay over to the collector at the time,” said Mrs Thorne haughtily. “It is a pity that so much should have been made of so trivial a matter.”

“Trivial, Mrs Thorne! Your daughter’s conduct—”

“Has always been that of a lady, Miss Lambent. Ah! you single ladies don’t know, and of course never will know, the necessities of housekeeping.”

Beatrice winced.

“I used that money as I would small change, and I must say I am surprised at Mr Lambent or his sisters, or the school committee, or whoever it is, being so absurdly particular.”

“Particular, Mrs Thorne!” cried Rebecca, aghast.

“Yes; it is very absurd. By-the-way, I may as well observe that I have this morning received a letter from my late husband’s solicitor, telling me that fifteen hundred pounds, the result of some business arrangement of his, are now lying at my disposal at the bank; and if you will send the properly authorised person down I will give him a cheque.”

“Mrs Thorne!” exclaimed Rebecca, whom this assumption of perfect equality—at times even of superiority—galled terribly, “we came down here to give you a little good advice—to say a few words of sympathy, and to bring you two or three books to read, and ponder over their contents. I am surprised and grieved that you should have taken such a tone.”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Lambent,” retorted Mrs Thorne, who was very pale and much excited; “allow me to tell you that you are making a mistake. I am not in the habit of receiving parochial visits. They may be very acceptable to the poor of your district, but, as a lady, when another lady calls upon me, I look upon it as a visit of ceremony. You will excuse me, but I am not well. My daughter’s illness—my own—rather tells upon me. You will excuse my rising. I beg your pardon, you are forgetting your little books.”

She picked them up from the table, and held them out; the top one was “The Dairyman’s Daughter,” in paper cover.

The Lambent sisters had risen, and were darting indignant looks at Hazel’s mother before she drew their attention to the books they were leaving upon the table; now their anger was hot indeed.

“We brought them for you to read,” cried Rebecca indignantly. “They were for your good. Mrs Thorne, your conduct is insolent in the extreme.”

“Insolent in the extreme,” assented Beatrice.

"I am too unwell to argue with you, ladies," said Mrs Thorne loftily. "Cissy, my child, take those into the kitchen, and give them to one of the school children as they come by. Mabel, my dear, bring mamma a glass of water."

She took not the slightest further notice of her visitors, who looked at one another for a few moments, and then left the house, marching by the window with stately stride, while Mrs Thorne leant back in her chair, saying to herself—

"Next time they call I hope they will remember that I am a lady."

That same evening, as she sat alone, she drew the letter of which she had spoken from her pocket, and read it through again, the second perusal giving her fresh strength and increasing dignity.

"I shall certainly insist now," she said musingly, as she refolded the letter and tapped her left forefinger with the edge, "upon Hazel entering into a matrimonial alliance with Edward Geringer. He is older, certainly; but what of that? He is rich and loves her, and will make her an admirable husband; and when, by-and-by he leaves her, she will still be young and handsome, and, what is better, rich, and not left, as I have been, at the mercy of the world—Lambents and people of that class. Yes, I am in a position now to insist, and I shall write to Edward Geringer at once. Perhaps his coming would have a favourable effect upon Hazel's illness—a foolish, weak girl, to persist in going to that house when I so strongly advised her not."

Mrs Thorne sat musing and building her *châteaux en Espagne*, while the children amused themselves in the garden.

"Yes," she continued, "I am once more, I am thankful to say, no longer dependent upon charity, nor yet upon poor Hazel—weak, foolish child! It is a pity she should have grown so conceited and arbitrary on finding herself at the head of affairs. Ah, these young people—these young people! But I will not blame her, for a great deal was due to the teachings of that training institution. I noticed the change in her directly. It did so put me in mind of young Penton, when he received his commission of ensign in the 200th Foot. He had just the same short, sharp, haughty way that my Hazel assumed, poor child! Ah, well! we have nearly got to the end of the school teaching, and it will be a lesson for us all. It was against my wishes that she took it up—that I will say; and it has been very hard upon me to bring me down to the companionship of such a woman as Mrs Chute. I wish I had never seen her, for I should never have thought of using those school pence if it had not been for her."

Mrs Thorne smoothed down her black silk apron, and sat thinking for some time before exclaiming—

"Yes, I will write a cheque for the amount and send it in a note, with my compliments, to Mr Lambent. It will be the most ladylike way of proceeding. The children shall put on their best hats and take it up. It will be better than trusting the money to the school children or the post. I will do it at once."

The poor, weak woman smiled with satisfaction as she took out the thin oblong book that had been sent to her that morning, and wrote out a cheque for the amount due for the children's school pence, carefully blotting and folding it, and placing it in a sheet of note-paper inscribed, "With Mrs Thorne's compliments."

"Of course it ought to go to Mr Piper; but I shall send it to the vicar, and he must pay it himself. Good gracious!"

She had just directed the envelope to the Reverend Henry Lambent, when she saw him pass the window; and as she sat listening, her heart beating heavily the while, there was a gentle tap at the door, which was standing open, and the vicar's voice said softly—"May I come in?"

"Yes; I—that is—Yes, pray come—in, Mr Lambent; but if you have called on account of your sisters' visit to me this morning, I—"

"My visit was to you alone, Mrs Thorne," said the vicar gravely.

"But I must protest against any such visits as your sisters'!"

"My dear Mrs Thorne," said the vicar sadly, "I have come to you, a lady who has known great trouble, as a friend. My dear madam, I have a very painful communication to make. Your daughter—"

"Not worse, Mr Lambent?" cried Mrs Thorne piteously. "Don't say she's worse!"

There was a painful silence, and then the vicar sighed heavily as he said—

"Her state is very dangerous indeed."

Chapter Forty Five.

A Breach of Promise of Marriage.

Hazel seemed to have borne the moving well, and the doctor smiled his satisfaction at seeing his patient in such light and cheerful quarters; but the days had gone on without change. Night and day there had been the same weary, restless wandering of the fevered brain—the same constant talking of the troubles of the past; and little Miss Burge sobbed aloud sometimes as she listened to some of the revelations of Hazel's breast.

"Poor dear!" she said, and she strove to give the sufferer the rest and ease that would not come, as hour by hour she watched the terrible inroads the fever made in her care-worn face.

"She's getting that thin, doctor, it's quite pitiful," she said; but only to receive the same answer.

“Wait till the fever has exhausted itself, my dear madam, and we will soon build up fresh tissue, and you shall see her gain strength every hour.”

But the fever did not exhaust itself, and in spite of every care Hazel's state grew critical indeed.

“If I might only see her, dear,” said Mr William Forth Burge; “if I might only speak to her once. I wouldn't want to come in.”

“No, Bill dear,” said the little woman firmly; “not yet. The doctor says it is best not, and you must wait.”

“Does—does she ever in her wanderings—a—a—does she ever speak about me, Betsey?”

“Yes; sometimes she says you have been very kind.”

“She has said that?”

“Yes, dear; but she is not herself, Bill dear. She's quite off her head. I wouldn't build up any hopes upon that.”

“No, I won't,” he said hastily. “I don't expect anything—I don't want anything, only to see her well again. But it does me good to think she can think of me ever so little while she is ill.”

“You see, dear, it's her wandering,” said his sister; “that's all.”

“But tell me, Betsey, tell me again, do you think she will get over it?” he said imploringly.

She looked at him with the tears trickling down her face, but she did not answer.

“He comes, you see, and smiles and rubs his hands, and says, ‘She's no worse—she's no worse, Mr William Forth Burge, sir;’ but I can't trust him, Betsey, like I can you. There,” he cried, “see: I'm quite calm, and I'll bear it like a man. Tell me, do you think she'll get over it?”

“Bill dear, I can't tell you a lie, but I don't think there's any present danger. I do think, though, you ought to send for the poor girl's brother, and let him be down.”

William Forth Burge uttered a low groan, for he read the worst in his sister's eyes.

“I'll send for him directly, dear,” he said; and he rose and staggered from the room.

It was in the morning, and the message for Percy to come down at once was sent; after which, in a dull, heavy way, Burge stood staring before him, trying to get his brain to act clearly, as he asked himself what he ought to do next.

“I think I ought to go down to her mother,” he said softly; “and I will.”

In this intent he went softly out into the hall, when little Miss Burge came hastily down the stairs, and her brother gasped as he placed one hand upon his side.

“Bill—Bill,” she whispered excitedly, “she is talking sensibly, and she wants to see you.”

“Wants to see me?” he panted. “No, no; she is wandering, poor girl!”

“No, no, dear,” cried little Miss Burge, clinging to his arm; “she has asked for you hundreds of times when she was wandering, and I wouldn’t tell you—I thought it wouldn’t be right. But now she’s quite herself, and she’s asking for you to come.”

“But ought I,” he said, “in my own house?”

“Yes—now,” whispered back his sister. “But Bill dear, she’s wasted away to a shadow, she’s weak as weak, and you must not say a word more to her than if she was a friend or you were her brother.”

“No, no,” he said hoarsely.

“Come, then. She wants to speak to you, and it may do her good.”

Trembling with excitement, William Forth Burge softly followed his sister up the stairs, trying to smile and look composed, so as to present an encouraging aspect to the invalid, telling himself, heartsore though he was, that it was his duty, and that it would have a good effect; but as he entered the room and saw the change that had taken place, he uttered a low groan, and stood as if nailed to the floor.

For Hazel was changed indeed. Her cheeks were sunken and her eyes looked unnaturally large, but the restless, pained expression had passed away, and the light of recognition was in her eyes, as she tried to raise one hand, which fell back upon the coverlet.

He saw her lips part, and she smiled at him as he stood there by the door. This brought him back to himself, and he went hurriedly towards the bedside.

“It was selfish of me to ask you to come,” she said softly; “but you have both shown that you do not fear the fever.”

“Fear it, my dear? No!” he said, taking her thin white hand, kissing it, and making as if to lay it reverently back upon the coverlet; but the fingers closed round his, and a thrill of joy shot through his breast, as it seemed for the moment that she was clinging to him.

“How am I ever to thank you enough?” she said, in a faint whisper. “Why have you brought me here? It troubles me. I feel as if I should make you suffer.”

“But you mustn’t talk now, my darling,” whispered little Miss Burge. “Wait till the doctor has been, and only lie still now and rest your poor self.”

“Yes—rest,” she said feebly—“rest. I feel so easy now. All that dreadful pain has gone.”

“Thank God!”

She turned her eyes upon the speaker with a grateful look and smiled faintly, motioning to him to take the chair by the bedside.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered. “Yes; keep hold of my hand. You have been so kind, and I seem to see it all now so plainly.”

“But my darling, you must not talk. There, just say a word or two to him, and then he must go. I’m going to ask the doctor to come and see you now.”

“No: let him wait. I must talk now. Perhaps to-night my senses will go again, and I shall be wandering on and on amongst the troubles once more.”

“Then you will be very still, dear.”

“Yes; I only want to lie and rest. Don’t leave me, Mr Burge. Hold my hand.”

There was a sweet, calm look upon her face as she lay there, holding feebly by the hand that tenderly grasped hers, and her eyes half-closed as if in sleep.

From time to time William Forth Burge exchanged glances with his sister, but the looks he received in return were always encouraging, and he sat there, care-worn and anxious, but at the same time feeling supremely happy.

An hour had passed before Hazel spoke again, and then it was in a dreamy, thoughtful whisper.

“I’ve been thinking about the past,” she said, “and recalling all that has been done for me. I cannot talk much; but, Mr Burge, I can feel it all. Don’t—don’t think me ungrateful.”

“No, no,” he whispered, as he bent down and kissed her hand; “I never could.”

“I was thinking about—about when you asked me—to be your wife.”

“Yes, yes, my dear!” he said eagerly; “but I was mad then. It was only an old fellow’s fancy. I could not help it. It was foolish, and I ought to have known better. But we know one another now, and all you’ve got to do, my dear, is to grow well and strong, and find out that William Burge is man enough to do what’s right.”

She lay thinking for some little time, and then he felt that a feeble effort was being made to draw his hand closer to her face, and yielding it, once more a wild throb ran through his nerves, for she feebly drew his hand to her cheek and held it there.

“I was very blind then,” she said in a whisper; “but I am not blind now.”

She spoke with her eyes closed, the restful look intensifying as the time glided on.

After a while the woman who had acted as nurse announced the coming of the doctor, who brightened and looked pleased as he saw the change.

“Yes,” he said; “the fever has left her. Now we must build her up again.”

And after satisfying himself about his patient’s state, he beckoned Miss Burge from the room, and gave the fullest instructions as to the course to be pursued, promised to come in again that evening, and went away.

The day glided on, and William Forth Burge kept his place by the bedside, feeling that it was his by right; and then, at times, suffering from a terrible depression, as he told himself that he ought to go, and not presume upon the weakness of one who was in his charge. Hazel lay with her eyes half-closed, apparently in a restful, dreamy state, rousing herself a little when her tender nurse administered to her food or medicine, and then turning her eyes for a few moments to the occupant of the chair by the bedside, smiling at him sadly, afterwards, with a restful sigh, letting her cheek lie against his hand.

“I should like to have seen my little sisters,” she said once softly, “and my poor mother; but it would be cruel to bring them here. I should like to kiss poor Ophelia too.” She laughed faintly here, as if amused. “Poor child!—so good at heart. Poor child!”

There was another long interval of genuine sleep now, which lasted until evening, when Hazel awoke with a frightened start crying out painfully.

“What is it, my pet?” whispered little Miss Burge, bending over the bed, and parting the hair from Hazel’s hot wet brow. “There—there; you’re better now.”

The light of recognition came, and she darted a swift, clear look at the speaker, then turned excitedly to the bedside where William Forth Burge still sat holding her hand.

The peaceful smile came back as she saw him there, and she began speaking in a quick, excited way:—

“I have been dreaming—I thought I had told him it was impossible again—that I could not; for I loved some one else. But I do not. It was a weak girl’s fancy. Miss Burge, I should like to kiss you, dear; but it would be unkind. Touch my face—my lips with your fingers.”

“My darling, I have no fear,” sobbed the little woman; and she bent down and kissed the poor girl passionately, but only to rise in alarm, and make a sign to her brother, which he interpreted aright, and was about to rise and seek for help; but Hazel clung to his hand in alarm.

“No, no! don’t go!” she said hoarsely. “I could not bear it now.”

“I’ll run, Bill!” panted Miss Burge; but a word from Hazel stayed her.

“No; stop!” she whispered. “God knows best, Miss Burge. Lift me a little more. Let my head rest on your shoulder—so!”

William Forth Burge raised the thin, slight form tenderly and reverently, till Hazel's head rested upon his broad shoulder, and he held her there; but she was not satisfied till he had placed her arm so that it half embraced his neck, and there she lay, gazing with her unnaturally bright, wistful eyes in his, while the great tears slowly welled over their bounds and trickled down his heavy face.

“Miss Burge,” she said again, and there was something very strange and wild in her voice, “I was weak and foolish once; but now it is too late, I have grown wiser—just at last. This is going to be my husband. In his dear memory I shall be his wife, for I love him now—with all my heart!”

She closed her eyes for a few moments, and without a sound little Miss Burge stretched out one hand to the bell, making a sign to the nurse who answered, and then glided away.

There was a long, deep silence then, broken only by a sob from Miss Burge, who now sank upon her knees by the bedside.

Hazel's eyes opened again, and she gazed about her wildly, and as if in fear; but the restful smile came back, and she sighed as if relieved; and again there was a long silence, during which the watchers waited impatiently for the doctor's step.

And so the minutes glided by, and the night came on apace—a night they felt would be black and deep, for all hope was gone.

Then Hazel spoke again, and her voice sounded clearer and more distinct—

“I shall not hurt you now,” she said softly, and her thin, wasted hand rose from the counterpane, seemed to tremble in the air for a moment, and then nestled in William Forth Burge's breast. “Kiss me,” she said softly; “think that—at last—I loved you. So tired—let me sleep!”

Is there truth in the old superstitious stories that we hear? True in their spiritual sense or no, just then a black pigeon that had hovered about the house for days alighted upon the window-sill, and the rustle of its wings sounded loud and painful in the oppressive stillness of that evening.

From the fields the soft lowing of the kine came mellowed and sweet, and from the wood behind the house a thrush sang its evening hymn to the passing day, while, as the west grew less ruddy, the soft dawn-like light intensified in the north.

It needed but one sound to add to the solemnity of the time, and that was the heavy knoll of the church bell, which rang out the curfew, as it had announced the hour from the far-back days when it was cast and blessed, and holy hands first hung it there.

Just then little Miss Burge uttered a faint ejaculation of relief, for there was a quick step upon the gravel; but ere it reached the door there was a deep sigh in the shadowed room, Hazel's large, soft eyes grew dilate, and their light was for ever gone; another bridegroom had snatched her from her simple-hearted lover's arms—and that bridegroom was Death!

The End.

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