

Chapter X - Old Maids

Time wore on, and spring matured. The surface of England began to look pleasant: her fields grew green, her hills fresh, her gardens blooming; but at heart she was no better. Still her poor were wretched, still their employers were harassed. Commerce, in some of its branches, seemed threatened with paralysis, for the war continued; England's blood was shed and her wealth lavished: all, it seemed, to attain most inadequate ends. Some tidings there were indeed occasionally of successes in the Peninsula, but these came in slowly; long intervals occurred between, in which no note was heard but the insolent self-felicitations of Bonaparte on his continued triumphs. Those who suffered from the results of the war felt this tedious, and - as they thought - hopeless, struggle against what their fears or their interests taught them to regard as an invincible power, most insufferable: they demanded peace on any terms: men like Yorke and Moore - and there were thousands whom the war placed where it placed them, shuddering on the verge of bankruptcy - insisted on peace with the energy of desperation.

They held meetings; they made speeches; they got up petitions to extort this boon: on what terms it was made they cared not.

All men, taken singly, are more or less selfish; and taken in bodies they are intensely so. The British merchant is no exception to this rule: the mercantile classes illustrate it strikingly. These classes certainly think too exclusively of making money: they are too oblivious of every national consideration but that of extending England's (i.e., their own) commerce. Chivalrous feeling, disinterestedness, pride in honour, is too dead in their hearts. A land ruled by them alone would too often make ignominious submission - not at all from the motives Christ teaches, but rather from those Mammon instils. During the late war, the tradesmen of England would have endured buffets from the French on the right cheek and on the left; their cloak they would have given to Napoleon, and then have politely offered him their coat also, nor would they have withheld their waistcoat if urged: they would have prayed permission only to retain their one other garment, for the sake of the purse in its pocket. Not one spark of spirit, not one symptom of resistance would they have shown till the hand of the Corsican bandit had grasped that beloved purse: then, perhaps, transfigured at once into British bull-dogs, they would have sprung at the robber's throat, and there they would have fastened, and there hung - inveterate, insatiable, till the treasure had been restored. Tradesmen, when they speak against war, always profess to hate it because it is a bloody and barbarous proceeding: you would think, to hear them talk, that they are peculiarly civilised - especially gentle and kindly of disposition to their fellow-men. This is not the case. Many of them are extremely narrow and cold-hearted, have no good

feeling for any class but their own, are distant - even hostile to all others; call them useless; seem to question their right to exist; seem to grudge them the very air they breathe, and to think the circumstance of their eating, drinking, and living in decent houses, quite unjustifiable. They do not know what others do in the way of helping, pleasing, or teaching their race; they will not trouble themselves to inquire; whoever is not in trade is accused of eating the bread of idleness, of passing a useless existence. Long may it be ere England really becomes a nation of shopkeepers!

We have already said that Moore was no self-sacrificing patriot, and we have also explained what circumstances rendered him specially prone to confine his attention and efforts to the furtherance of his individual interest; accordingly, when he felt himself urged a second time to the brink of ruin, none struggled harder than he against the influences which would have thrust him over. What he could do towards stirring agitation in the North against the war, he did, and he instigated others whose money and connections gave them more power than he possessed. Sometimes, by flashes, he felt there was little reason in the demands his party made on Government: when he heard of all Europe threatened by Bonaparte, and of all Europe arming to resist him; when he saw Russia menaced, and beheld Russia rising, incensed and stern, to defend her frozen soil, her wild provinces of serfs, her dark native despotism, from the tread, the yoke, the tyranny of a foreign victor, he knew that England, a free realm, could not then depute her sons to make concessions and propose terms to the unjust, grasping French leader. When news came from time to time of the movements of that man then representing England in the Peninsula; of his advance from success to success - that advance so deliberate but so unswerving, so circumspect but so certain, so 'unhasting' but so 'unresting'; when he read Lord Wellington's own despatches in the columns of the newspapers, documents written by Modesty to the dictation of Truth - Moore confessed at heart that a power was with the troops of Britain, of that vigilant, enduring, genuine, unostentatious sort, which must win victory to the side it led, in the end. In the end! but that end, he thought, was yet far off; and meantime he, Moore, as an individual, would be crushed, his hopes ground to dust: it was himself he had to care for, his hopes he had to pursue, and he would fulfil his destiny.

He fulfilled it so vigorously, that ere long he came to a decisive rupture with his old Tory friend the Rector. They quarrelled at a public meeting, and afterwards exchanged some pungent letters in the newspapers. Mr Helstone denounced Moore as a Jacobin, ceased to see him, would not even speak to him when they met: he intimated also to his niece, very distinctly, that her communications with Hollow's Cottage must for the present cease; she must give up taking French lessons. The language, he observed, was a bad and frivolous

one at the best, and most of the works it boasted were bad and frivolous, highly injurious in their tendency to weak female minds. He wondered (he remarked parenthetically) what noodle first made it the fashion to teach women French: nothing was more improper for them; it was like feeding a rickety child on chalk and water-gruel; Caroline must give it up, and give up her cousins too: they were dangerous people.

Mr Helstone quite expected opposition to this order; he expected tears. Seldom did he trouble himself about Caroline's movements, but a vague idea possessed him that she was fond of going to Hollow's Cottage: also he suspected that she liked Robert Moore's occasional presence at the Rectory. The Cossack had perceived that whereas if Malone stepped in of an evening to make himself sociable and charming, by pinching the ears of an aged black cat, which usually shared with Miss Helstone's feet the accommodation of her footstool, or by borrowing a fowling-piece, and banging away at a tool-shed door in the garden while enough of daylight remained to show that conspicuous mark - keeping the passage and sitting-room doors meantime uncomfortably open for the convenience of running in and out to announce his failures and successes with noisy brusquerie - he had observed that under such entertaining circumstances Caroline had a trick of disappearing, tripping noiselessly upstairs, and remaining invisible till called down to supper. On the other hand, when Robert Moore was the guest, though he elicited no vivacities from the cat, did nothing to it, indeed, beyond occasionally coaxing it from the stool to his knee, and there letting it purr, climb to his shoulder, and rub its head against his cheek; though there was no ear-splitting cracking off of firearms, no diffusion of sulphurous gunpowder perfume, no noise, no boasting during his stay, that still Caroline sat in the room, and seemed to find wondrous content in the stitching of Jew-basket pin-cushions, and the knitting of Missionary-basket socks.

She was very quiet, and Robert paid her little attention, scarcely ever addressing his discourse to her; but Mr Helstone, not being one of those elderly gentlemen who are easily blinded, on the contrary, finding himself on all occasions extremely wide-awake, had watched them when they bade each other good-night: he had just seen their eyes meet once - only once. Some natures would have taken pleasure in the glance then surprised, because there was no harm and some delight in it. It was by no means a glance of mutual intelligence, for mutual love-secrets existed not between them: there was nothing then of craft and concealment to offend; only Mr Moore's eyes, looking into Caroline's, felt they were clear and gentle, and Caroline's eyes encountering Mr Moore's confessed they were manly and searching: each acknowledged the charm in his or her own way. Moore smiled slightly, and Caroline coloured as slightly. Mr Helstone could, on the

spot, have rated them both: they annoyed him; why? - impossible to say. If you had asked him what Moore merited at that moment, he would have said 'a horsewhip'; if you had inquired into Caroline's deserts, he would have adjudged her a box on the ear; if you had further demanded the reason of such chastisements, he would have stormed against flirtation and love-making, and vowed he would have no such folly going on under his roof.

These private considerations, combined with political reasons, fixed his resolution of separating the cousins. He announced his will to Caroline one evening, as she was sitting at work near the drawing-room window: her face was turned towards him, and the light fell full upon it. It had struck him a few minutes before that she was looking paler and quieter than she used to look; it had not escaped him either that Robert Moore's name had never, for some three weeks past, dropped from her lips; nor during the same space of time had that personage made his appearance at the Rectory. Some suspicion of clandestine meetings haunted him; having but an indifferent opinion of women, he always suspected them: he thought they needed constant watching. It was in a tone drily significant he desired her to cease her daily visits to the Hollow; he expected a start, a look of deprecation: the start he saw but it was a very slight one; no look whatever was directed to him.

'Do you hear me?' he asked.

'Yes, uncle.'

'Of course you mean to attend to what I say?'

'Yes, certainly.'

'And there must be no letter-scribbling to your cousin Hortense: no intercourse whatever. I do not approve of the principles of the family: they are Jacobinical.'

'Very well,' said Caroline quietly. She acquiesced then: there was no vexed flushing of the face, no gathering tears: the shadowy thoughtfulness which had covered her features ere Mr Helstone spoke remained undisturbed: she was obedient.

Yes, perfectly; because the mandate coincided with her own previous judgment; because it was now become pain to her to go to Hollow's Cottage; nothing met her there but disappointment: hope and love had quitted that little tenement, for Robert seemed to have deserted its precincts. Whenever she asked after him - which she very seldom did, since the mere utterance of his name made her face grow hot - the answer was, he was from home, or he was quite taken up with

business: Hortense feared he was killing himself by application: he scarcely ever took a meal in the house; he lived in the counting house.

At church only Caroline had the chance of seeing him, and there she rarely looked at him: it was both too much pain and too much pleasure to look: it excited too much emotion; and that it was all wasted emotion, she had learned well to comprehend.

Once, on a dark, wet Sunday, when there were few people at church, and when especially certain ladies were absent, of whose observant faculties and tomahawk tongues Caroline stood in awe, she had allowed her eye to seek Robert's pew, and to rest a while on its occupant. He was there alone: Hortense had been kept at home by prudent considerations relative to the rain and a new spring 'chapeau.' During the sermon, he sat with folded arms and eyes cast down, looking very sad and abstracted. When depressed, the very hue of his face seemed more dusk than when he smiled, and to-day cheek and forehead wore their most tintless and sober olive. By instinct Caroline knew, as she examined that clouded countenance, that his thoughts were running in no familiar or kindly channel; that they were far away, not merely from her, but from all which she could comprehend, or in which she could sympathise. Nothing that they had ever talked of together was now in his mind: he was wrapped from her by interests and responsibilities in which it was deemed such as she could have no part.

Caroline meditated in her own way on the subject; speculated on his feelings, on his life, on his fears, on his fate; mused over the mystery of 'business,' tried to comprehend more about it than had ever been told her - to understand its perplexities, liabilities, duties, exactions; endeavoured to realise the state of mind of man of a 'man of business,' to enter into it, feel what he would feel, aspire to what he would aspire. Her earnest wish was to see things as they were, and not to be romantic. By dint of effort she contrived to get a glimpse of the light of truth here and there, and hoped that scant ray might suffice to guide her.

'Different, indeed,' she concluded, 'is Robert's mental condition to mine: I think only of him; he has no room, no leisure to think of me. The feeling called love is and has been for two years the predominant emotion of my heart: always there, always awake, always astir: quite other feelings absorb his reflections, and govern his faculties. He is rising now, going to leave the church, for service is over. Will he turn his head towards this pew? - no - not once - he has not one look for me: that is hard: a kind glance would have made me happy till tomorrow. I have not got it; he would not give it; he is gone. Strange that grief should now almost choke me, because another human being's eye has failed to greet mine.'

That Sunday evening, Mr Malone coming, as usual, to pass it with his Rector, Caroline withdrew after tea to her chamber. Fanny, knowing her habits, had lit her a cheerful little fire, as the weather was so gusty and chill. Closeted there, silent and solitary, what could she do but think? She noiselessly paced to and fro the carpeted floor, her head drooped, her hands folded: it was irksome to sit: the current of reflection ran rapidly through her mind: to-night she was mutely excited.

Mute was the room, - mute the house. The double door of the study muffled the voices of the gentlemen: the servants were quiet in the kitchen, engaged with books their young mistress had lent them; books which she had told them were 'fit for Sunday reading.' And she herself had another of the same sort open on the table, but she could not read it: its theology was incomprehensible to her, and her own mind was too busy, teeming, wandering, to listen to the language of another mind.

Then, too, her imagination was full of pictures; images of Moore; scenes where he and she had been together; winter fireside sketches; a glowing landscape of a hot summer afternoon passed with him in the bosom of Nunnely Wood: divine vignettes of mild spring or mellow autumn moments, when she had sat at his side in Hollow's Copse, listening to the call of the May cuckoo, or sharing the September treasure of nuts and ripe blackberries - a wild dessert which it was her morning's pleasure to collect in a little basket, and cover with green leaves and fresh blossoms, and her afternoon's delight to administer to Moore, berry by berry, and nut by nut, like a bird feeding its fledgling.

Robert's features and form were with her; the sound of his voice was quite distinct in her ear; his few caresses seemed renewed. But these joys being hollow, were, ere long, crushed in: the pictures faded, the voice failed, the visionary clasp melted chill from her hand, and where the warm seal of lips had made impress on her forehead, it felt now as if a sleety raindrop had fallen. She returned from an enchanted region to the real world for Nunnely Wood in June, she saw her narrow chamber; for the songs of birds in alleys, she heard the rain on her casement; for the sigh of the south wind, came the sob of the mournful east; and for Moore's manly companionship, she had the thin illusion of her own dim shadow on the wall. Turning from the pale phantom which reflected herself in its outline, and her reverie in the drooped attitude of its dim head and colourless tresses, she sat down - inaction would suit the frame of mind into which she was now declining - she said to herself - 'I have to live, perhaps, till seventy years. As far as I know, I have good health: half a century of existence may lie before me. How am I to occupy it? What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave?'

She reflected.

'I shall not be married, it appears,' she continued. 'I suppose, as Robert does not care for me, I shall never have a husband to love, nor little children to take care of. Till lately I had reckoned securely on the duties and affections of wife and mother to occupy my existence. I considered, somehow, as a matter of course, that I was growing up to the ordinary destiny, and never troubled myself to seek any other; but now, I perceive plainly, I may have been mistaken. Probably I shall be an old maid. I shall live to see Robert married to some one else, some rich lady: I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?'

She mused again.

'Ah! I see,' she pursued presently: 'that is the question which most old maids are puzzled to solve; other people solve it for them by saying, 'Your place is to do good to others, to be helpful whenever help is wanted.' That is right in some measure, and a very convenient doctrine for the people who hold it; but I perceive that certain sets of human beings are very apt to maintain that other sets should give up their lives to them and their service, and then they requite them by praise: they call them devoted and virtuous. Is this enough? Is it to live? Is there not a terrible hollowness, mockery, want, craving, in that existence which is given away to others, for want of something of your own to bestow it on? I suspect there is. Does virtue lie in abnegation of self? I do not believe it. Undue humility makes tyranny; weak concession creates selfishness. The Romish religion especially teaches renunciation of self, submission to others, and nowhere are found so many grasping tyrants as in the ranks of the Romish priesthood. Each human being has his share of rights. I suspect it would conduce to the happiness and welfare of all, if each knew his allotment, and held to it as tenaciously as the martyr to his creed. Queer thoughts these, that surge in my mind: are they right thoughts? I am not certain.

'Well, life is short at the best: seventy years, they say, pass like a vapour, like a dream when one awaketh; and every path trod by human feet terminates in one bourne - the grave: the little chink in the surface of this great globe - the furrow where the mighty husbandman with the scythe deposits the seed he has shaken from the ripe stem; and there it falls, decays, and thence it springs again, when the world has rolled round a few times more. So much for the body: the soul meantime wings its long flight upward, folds its wings on the brink of the sea of fire and glass, and gazing down through the burning clearness, finds there mirrored the vision of the Christian's triple Godhead: the Sovereign Father; the mediating Son; the Creator Spirit. Such words, at least, have been chosen to express what is

inexpressible, to describe what baffles description. The soul's real hereafter, who shall guess?'

Her fire was decayed to its last cinder; Malone had departed; and now the study bell rang for prayers.

The next day Caroline had to spend altogether alone, her uncle being gone to dine with his friend Dr. Boulton, vicar of Whinbury. The whole time she was talking inwardly in the same strain; looking forwards, asking what she was to do with life. Fanny, as she passed in and out of the room occasionally, intent on housemaid errands, perceived that her young mistress sat very still. She was always in the same place, always bent industriously over a piece of work: she did not lift her head to speak to Fanny, as her custom was; and when the latter remarked that the day was fine, and she ought to take a walk, she only said - 'It is cold.'

You are very diligent at that sewing, Miss Caroline,' continued the girl, approaching her little table.

'I am tired of it, Fanny.'

'Then why do you go on with it? Put it down: read, or do something to amuse you.'

'It is solitary in this house, Fanny: don't you think so?'

'I don't find it so, miss. Me and Eliza are company for one another; but you are quite too still - you should visit more. Now, be persuaded; go upstairs and dress yourself smart, and go and take tea, in a friendly way, with Miss Mann or Miss Ainley: I am certain either of those ladies would be delighted to see you.'

'But their houses are dismal: they are both old maids. I am certain old maids are a very unhappy race.'

'Not they, miss: they can't be unhappy; they take such care of themselves. They are all selfish.'

'Miss Ainley is not selfish, Fanny: she is always doing good. How devotedly kind she was to her stepmother, as long as the old lady lived; and now when she is quite alone in the world, without brother or sister, or any one to care for her, how charitable she is to the poor, as far as her means permit! Still nobody thinks much of her, or has pleasure in going to see her: and how gentlemen always sneer at her!'

'They shouldn't, miss; I believe she is a good woman: but gentlemen think only of ladies' looks.'

'I'll go and see her,' exclaimed Caroline, starting up: 'and if she asks me to stay to tea, I'll stay. How wrong it is to neglect people because they are not pretty, and young, and merry! And I will certainly call to see Miss Mann, too: she may not be amiable; but what has made her unamiable? What has life been to her?'

Fanny helped Miss Helstone to put away her work, and afterwards assisted her to dress.

'You'll not be an old maid, Miss Caroline,' she said, as she tied the sash of her brown-silk frock, having previously smoothed her soft, full, and shining curls; 'there are no signs of an old maid about you.'

Caroline looked at the little mirror before her, and she thought there were some signs. She could see that she was altered within the last month; that the hues of her complexion were paler, her eyes changed - a wan shade seemed to circle them, her countenance was dejected: she was not, in short, so pretty or so fresh as she used to be. She distantly hinted this to Fanny, from whom she got no direct answer, only a remark that people did vary in their looks; but that at her age a little falling away signified nothing, - she would soon come round again, and be plumper and rosier than ever. Having given this assurance, Fanny showed singular zeal in wrapping her up in warm shawls and handkerchiefs, till Caroline, nearly smothered with the weight, was fain to resist further additions.

She paid her visits: first to Miss Mann, for this was the most difficult point: Miss Mann was certainly not quite a lovable person. Till now, Caroline had always unhesitatingly declared she disliked her, and more than once she had joined her cousin Robert in laughing at some of her peculiarities. Moore was not habitually given to sarcasm, especially on anything humbler or weaker than himself; but he had once or twice happened to be in the room when Miss Mann had made a call on his sister, and after listening to her conversation and viewing her features for a time, he had gone out into the garden where his little cousin was tending some of his favourite flowers, and while standing near and watching her, he had amused himself with comparing fair youth - delicate and attractive - with shrivelled old, livid and loveless, and in jestingly repeating to a smiling girl the vinegar discourse of a cankered old maid. Once on such an occasion, Caroline had said to him, looking up from the luxuriant creeper she was binding to its frame, 'Ah! Robert, you do not like old maids. I, too, should come under the lash of your sarcasm, if I were an old maid.'

'You an old maid!' he had replied. 'A piquant notion suggested by lips of that tint and form. I can fancy you, though, at forty, quietly dressed, pale and sunk, but still with that straight nose, white forehead, and those soft eyes. I suppose, too, you will keep your voice,

which has another 'timbre' than that hard, deep organ of Miss Mann's. Courage, Cary! - even at fifty you will not be repulsive.'

'Miss Mann did not make herself, or tune her voice, Robert.'

'Nature made her in the mood in which she makes her briars and thorns; whereas for the creation of some women, she reserves the May morning hours, when with light and dew she woos the primrose from the turf, and the lily from the wood-moss.'

.....

Ushered into Miss Mann's little parlour, Caroline found her, as she always found her, surrounded by perfect neatness, cleanliness, and comfort (after all, is it not a virtue in old maids that solitude rarely makes them negligent or disorderly?); no dust on her polished furniture, none on her carpet, fresh flowers in the vase on her table, a bright fire in the grate. She herself sat primly and somewhat grimly-tidy in a cushioned rocking-chair, her hands busied with some knitting: this was her favourite work, as it required the least exertion. She scarcely rose as Caroline entered; to avoid excitement was one of Miss Mann's aims in life: she had been composing herself ever since she came down in the morning, and had just attained a certain lethargic state of tranquillity when the visitor's knock at the door startled her, and undid her day's work. She was scarcely pleased, therefore, to see Miss Helstone: she received her with reserve, bade her be seated with austerity, and when she got her placed opposite, she fixed her with her eye.

This was no ordinary doom - to be fixed with Miss Mann's eye. Robert Moore had undergone it once, and had never forgotten the circumstance.

He considered it quite equal to anything Medusa could do: he professed to doubt whether, since that infliction, his flesh had been quite what it was before - whether there was not something stony in its texture. The gaze had had such an effect on him as to drive him promptly from the apartment and house; it had even sent him straightway up to the Rectory, where he had appeared in Caroline's presence with a very queer face, and amazed her by demanding a cousinly salute on the spot, to rectify a damage that had been done him.

Certainly Miss Mann had a formidable eye for one of the softer sex: it was prominent, and showed a great deal of the white, and looked as steadily, as unwinkingly, at you as if it were a steel ball soldered in her head; and when, while looking, she began to talk in an indescribably dry monotonous tone - a tone without vibration or

inflection - you felt as if a graven image of some bad spirit were addressing you. But it was all a figment of fancy, a matter of surface. Miss Mann's goblin-grimness scarcely went deeper than the angel-sweetness of hundreds of beauties. She was a perfectly honest, conscientious woman, who had performed duties in her day from whose severe anguish many a human Peri, gazelle-eyed, silken-tressed, and silver-tongued, would have shrunk appalled: she had passed alone through protracted scenes of suffering, exercised rigid self-denial, made large sacrifices of time, money, health, for those who had repaid her only by ingratitude, and now her main - almost her sole - fault was, that she was censorious.

Censorious she certainly was. Caroline had not sat five minutes ere her hostess, still keeping her under the spell of that dread and Gorgon gaze, began flaying alive certain of the families in the neighbourhood. She went to work at this business in a singularly cool, deliberate manner, like some surgeon practising with his scalpel on a lifeless subject: she made few distinctions; she allowed scarcely any one to be good; she dissected impartially almost all her acquaintance. If her auditress ventured now and then to put in a palliative word, she set it aside with a certain disdain. Still, though thus pitiless in moral anatomy, she was no scandal-monger: she never disseminated really malignant or dangerous reports: it was not her heart so much as her temper that was wrong.

Caroline made this discovery for the first time to-day; and moved thereby to regret divers unjust judgments she had more than once passed on the crabbed old maid, she began to talk to her softly, not in sympathising words, but with a sympathising voice. The loneliness of her condition struck her visitor in a new light; as did also the character of her ugliness - a bloodless pallor of complexion, and deeply worn lines of feature. The girl pitied the solitary and afflicted woman; her looks told what she felt: a sweet countenance is never so sweet as when the moved heart animates it with compassionate tenderness. Miss Mann, seeing such a countenance raised to her, was touched in her turn: she acknowledged her sense of the interest thus unexpectedly shown in her, who usually met with only coldness and ridicule, by replying to her candidly. Communicative on her own affairs she usually was not, because no one cared to listen to her; but to-day she became so, and her confidant shed tears as she heard her speak: for she told of cruel, slow-wasting, obstinate sufferings. Well might she be corpse-like; well might she look grim, and never smile; well might she wish to avoid excitement, to gain and retain composure! Caroline, when she knew all, acknowledged that Miss Mann was rather to be admired for fortitude than blamed for moroseness. Reader! when you behold an aspect for whose constant gloom and frown you cannot account, whose unvarying cloud exasperates you by its apparent causelessness, be sure that there is a

canker somewhere, and a canker not the less deeply corroding because concealed.

Miss Mann felt that she was understood partly, and wished to be understood further; for however old, plain, humble, desolate, afflicted we may be, so long as our hearts preserve the feeblest spark of life, they preserve also, shivering near that pale ember, a starved, ghostly longing for appreciation and affection. To this extenuated spectre, perhaps, a crumb is not thrown once a year; but when ahungred and athirst to famine - when all humanity has forgotten the dying tenant of a decaying house - Divine Mercy remembers the mourner, and a shower of manna falls for lips that earthly nutriment is to pass no more. Biblical promises, heard first in health, but then unheeded, come whispering to the couch of sickness: it is felt that a pitying God watches what all mankind have forsaken; the tender compassion of Jesus is recalled and relied on: the faded eye, gazing beyond Time, sees a Home, a Friend, a Refuge in Eternity.

Miss Mann, drawn on by the still attention of her listener, proceeded to allude to circumstances in her past life. She spoke like one who tells the truth - simply, and with a certain reserve: she did not boast, nor did she exaggerate. Caroline found that the old maid had been a most devoted daughter and sister, an unwearied watcher by lingering deathbeds; that to prolonged and unrelaxing attendance on the sick, the malady that now poisoned her own life owed its origin; that to one wretched relative she had been a support and succour in the depths of self-earned degradation, and that it was still her hand which kept him from utter destitution. Miss Helstone stayed the whole evening, omitting to pay her other intended visit; and when she left Miss Mann, it was with the determination to try in future to excuse her faults, never again to make light of her peculiarities or to laugh at her plainness; and, above all things, not to neglect her, but to come once a week, and to offer her from one human heart at least, the homage of affection and respect: she felt she could now sincerely give her a small tribute of each feeling.

Caroline, on her return, told Fanny she was very glad she had gone out, as she felt much better for the visit. The next day she failed not to seek Miss Ainley. This lady was in narrower circumstances than Miss Mann, and her dwelling was more humble: it was, however, if possible, yet more exquisitely clean; though the decayed gentlewoman could not afford to keep a servant, but waited on herself, and had only the occasional assistance of a little girl who lived in a cottage near.

Not only was Miss Ainley poorer, but she was even plainer than the other old maid. In her first youth she must have been ugly; now, at the age of fifty, she was very ugly. At first sight, all but peculiarly well-disciplined minds were apt to turn from her with annoyance: to

conceive against her a prejudice, simply on the ground of her unattractive look. Then she was prim in dress and manner: she looked, spoke, and moved the complete old maid.

Her welcome to Caroline was formal, even in its kindness - for it was kind; but Miss Helstone excused this. She knew something of the benevolence of the heart which beat under that starched kerchief; all the neighbourhood - at least all the female neighbourhood - knew something of it: no one spoke against Miss Ainley except lively young gentlemen, and inconsiderate old ones, who declared her hideous.

Caroline was soon at home in that tiny parlour; a kind hand took from her her shawl and bonnet, and installed her in the most comfortable seat near the fire. The young and the antiquated woman were presently deep in kindly conversation, and soon Caroline became aware of the power a most serene, unselfish, and benignant mind could exercise over those to whom it was developed. She talked never of herself - always of others. Their faults she passed over; her theme was their wants, which she sought to supply; their sufferings, which she longed to alleviate. She was religious - a professor of religion - what some would call 'a saint,' and she referred to religion often in sanctioned phrase - in phrase which those who possess a perception of the ridiculous, without owning the power of exactly testing and truly judging character, would certainly have esteemed a proper subject for satire - a matter for mimicry and laughter. They would have been hugely mistaken for their pains. Sincerity is never ludicrous; it is always respectable. Whether truth - be it religious or moral truth - speak eloquently and in well-chosen language or not, its voice should be heard with reverence. Let those who cannot nicely, and with certainty, discern the difference between the tones of hypocrisy and those of sincerity, never presume to laugh at all, lest they should have the miserable misfortune to laugh in the wrong place, and commit impiety when they think they are achieving wit.

Not from Miss Ainley's own lips did Caroline hear of her good works; but she knew much of them nevertheless; her beneficence was the familiar topic of the poor in Briarfield. They were not works of almsgiving: the old maid was too poor to give much, though she straitened herself to privation that she might contribute her mite when needful: they were the works of a Sister of Charity, far more difficult to perform than those of a Lady Bountiful. She would watch by any sick-bed: she seemed to fear no disease; she would nurse the poorest whom none else would nurse: she was serene, humble, kind, and equable through everything.

For this goodness she got but little reward in this life. Many of the poor became so accustomed to her services that they hardly thanked her for them: the rich heard them mentioned with wonder, but were

silent, from a sense of shame at the difference between her sacrifices and their own. Many ladies, however, respected her deeply: they could not help it; one gentleman - one only - gave her his friendship and perfect confidence: this was Mr Hall, the vicar of Nunnely. He said, and said truly, that her life came nearer the life of Christ than that of any other human being he had ever met with. You must not think, reader, that in sketching Miss Ainley's character, I depict a figment of imagination - no - we seek the originals of such portraits in real life only.

Miss Helstone studied well the mind and heart now revealed to her. She found no high intellect to admire: the old maid was merely sensible, but she discovered so much goodness, so much usefulness, so much mildness, patience, truth, that she bent her own mind before Miss Ainley's in reverence. What was her love of nature, what was her sense of beauty, what were her more varied and fervent emotions, what was her deeper power of thought, what her wider capacity to comprehend, compared to the practical excellence of this good woman? Momently, they seemed only beautiful forms of selfish delight; mentally, she trod them under foot.

It is true, she still felt with pain that the life which made Miss Ainley happy could not make her happy: pure and active as it was, in her heart she deemed it deeply dreary because it was so loveless - to her ideas, so forlorn. Yet, doubtless, she reflected, it needed only habit to make it practicable and agreeable to any one: it was despicable, she felt, to pine sentimentally, to cherish secret griefs, vain memories; to be inert, to waste youth in aching languor, to grow old doing nothing.

'I will bestir myself,' was her resolution, 'and try to be wise if I cannot be good.'

She proceeded to make inquiry of Miss Ainley if she could help her in anything. Miss Ainley, glad of an assistant, told her that she could, and indicated some poor families in Briarfield that it was desirable she should visit; giving her likewise, at her further request, some work to do for certain poor women who had many children, and who were unskilled in using the needle for themselves.

Caroline went home, laid her plans, and took a resolve not to swerve from them. She allotted a certain portion of her time for her various studies, and a certain portion for doing anything Miss Ainley might direct her to do; the remainder was to be spent in exercise; not a moment was to be left for the indulgence of such fevered thoughts as had poisoned last Sunday evening.

To do her justice, she executed her plans conscientiously, perseveringly. It was very hard work at first - it was even hard work to

the end, but it helped her to stem and keep down anguish: it forced her to be employed; it forbade her to brood; and gleams of satisfaction chequered her grey life here and there when she found she had done good, imparted pleasure, or allayed suffering.

Yet I must speak truth; these efforts brought her neither health of body nor continued peace of mind: with them all, she wasted, grew more joyless and more wan; with them all, her memory kept harping on the name of Robert Moore; an elegy over the past still rung constantly in her ear; a funereal inward cry haunted and harassed her: the heaviness of a broken spirit, and of pining and palsying faculties, settled slow on her buoyant youth. Winter seemed conquering her spring: the mind's soil and its treasures were freezing gradually to barren stagnation.