Chapter XIV - Shirley Seeks to Be Saved by Works

'Of course, I know he will marry Shirley,' were her first words when she rose in the morning. 'And he ought to marry her: she can help him,' she added firmly. 'But I shall be forgotten when they are married,' was the cruel succeeding thought. 'Oh! I shall be wholly forgotten! And what - what shall I do when Robert is taken quite from me? Where shall I turn? My Robert! I wish I could justly call him mine: but I am poverty and incapacity; Shirley is wealth and power: and she is beauty too, and love - I cannot deny it. This is no sordid suit: she loves him - not with inferior feelings: she loves, or will love, as he must feel proud to be loved. Not a valid objection can be made. Let them be married then: but afterwards I shall be nothing to him. As for being his sister, and all that stuff, I despise it. I will either be all or nothing to a man like Robert: no feeble shuffling or false cant is endurable. Once let that pair be united, and I will certainly leave them. As for lingering about, playing the hypocrite, and pretending to calm sentiments of friendship, when my soul will be wrung with other feelings, I shall not descend to such degradation. As little could I fill the place of their mutual friend as that of their deadly foe: as little could I stand between them as trample over them. Robert is a first-rate man - in my eyes: I have loved, do love, and must love him. I would be his wife, if I could; as I cannot, I must go where I shall never see him. There is but one alternative - to cleave to him as if I were a part of him, or to be sundered from him wide as the two poles of a sphere. Sunder me then, Providence. Part us speedily.'

Some such aspirations as these were again working in her mind late in the afternoon, when the apparition of one of the personages haunting her thoughts passed the parlour window. Miss Keeldar sauntered slowly by: her gait, her countenance wearing that mixture of wistfulness and carelessness which, when quiescent, was the wonted cast of her look, and character of her bearing. When animated, the carelessness quite vanished, the wistfulness became blent with a genial gaiety, seasoning the laugh, the smile, the glance, with an unique flavour of sentiment, so that mirth from her never resembled 'the crackling of thorns under a pot.'

'What do you mean by not coming to see me this afternoon, as you promised?' was her address to Caroline as she entered the room.

'I was not in the humour,' replied Miss Helstone, very truly.

Shirley had already fixed on her a penetrating eye.

'No,' she said; 'I see you are not in the humour for loving me: you are in one of your sunless, inclement moods, when one feels a fellow-

creature's presence is not welcome to you, You have such moods are you aware of it?'

'Do you mean to stay long, Shirley?'

'Yes; I am come to have my tea, and must have it before I go. I shall take the liberty then of removing my bonnet, without being asked.'

And this she did, and then stood on the rug with her hands behind her.

'A pretty expression you have in your countenance,' she went on, still gazing keenly, though not inimically, rather indeed pityingly at Caroline. 'Wonderfully self-supported you look, you solitude-seeking, wounded deer. Are you afraid Shirley will worry you, if she discovers that you are hurt, and that you bleed?'

'I never do fear Shirley.'

'But sometimes you dislike her: often you avoid her. Shirley can feel when she is slighted and shunned. If you had not walked home in the company you did last night, you would have been a different girl to-day. What time did you reach the Rectory?'

'By ten.'

'Humph! You took three-quarters of an hour to walk a mile. Was it you, or Moore, who lingered so?'

'Shirley, you talk nonsense.'

'He talked nonsense - that I doubt not; or he looked it, which is a thousand times worse: I see the reflection of his eyes on your forehead at this moment. I feel disposed to call him out, if I could only get a trustworthy second: I feel desperately irritated: I felt so last night, and have felt it all day.'

'You don't ask me why,' she proceeded, after a pause, 'you little silent, over-modest thing; and you don't deserve that I should pour out my secrets into your lap without an invitation. Upon my word, I could have found it in my heart to have dogged Moore yesterday evening with dire intent: I have pistols, and can use them.'

'Stuff, Shirley! Which would you have shot - me or Robert?'

'Neither, perhaps - perhaps myself - more likely a bat or a tree-bough. He is a puppy - your cousin: a quiet, serious, sensible, judicious, ambitious puppy. I see him standing before me, talking his half-stern,

half-gentle talk, bearing me down (as I am very conscious he does) with his fixity of purpose, etc.; and then - - I have no patience with him!'

Miss Keeldar started off on a rapid walk through the room, repeating energetically that she had no patience with men in general, and with her tenant in particular.

'You are mistaken,' urged Caroline, in some anxiety: 'Robert is no puppy or male flirt; I can vouch for that.'

'You vouch for it! Do you think I'll take your word on the subject? There is no one's testimony I would not credit sooner than yours. To advance Moore's fortune, you would cut off your right hand.'

'But not tell lies; and if I speak the truth, I must assure you that he was just civil to me last night - that was all.'

'I never asked what he was - I can guess: I saw him from the window take your hand in his long fingers, just as he went out at my gate.'

'That is nothing. I am not a stranger, you know: I am an old acquaintance, and his cousin.'

'I feel indignant; and that is the long and short of the matter,' responded Miss Keeldar. 'All my comfort,' she added presently, 'is broken up by his manoeuvres. He keeps intruding between you and me: without him we should be good friends; but that six feet of puppy-hood makes a perpetually-recurring eclipse of our friendship. Again and again he crosses and obscures the disk I want always to see clear: ever and anon he renders me to you a mere bore and nuisance.'

'No, Shirley; no.'

'He does. You did not want my society this afternoon, and I feel it hard: you are naturally somewhat reserved, but I am a social personage, who cannot live alone. If we were but left unmolested, I have that regard for you that I could bear you in my presence for ever, and not for the fraction of a second do I ever wish to be rid of you. You cannot say as much respecting me.'

'Shirley, I can say anything you wish: Shirley, I like you.'

'You will wish me at Jericho to-morrow, Lina.'

'I shall not. I am every day growing more accustomed to - fonder of you. You know I am too English to get up a vehement friendship all at once; but you are so much better than common - you are so different

to everyday young ladies - I esteem you - I value you: you are never a burden to me - never. Do you believe what I say?'

'Partly,' replied Miss Keeldar, smiling rather incredulously; 'but you are a peculiar personage: quiet as you look, there is both a force and a depth somewhere within, not easily reached or appreciated: then you certainly are not happy.'

'And unhappy people are rarely good - is that what you mean?'

'Not at all: I mean rather that unhappy people are often pre-occupied, and not in the mood for discoursing with companions of my nature. Moreover, there is a sort of unhappiness which not only depresses, but corrodes - and that, I fear, is your portion. Will pity do you any good, Lina? If it will, take some from Shirley: she offers largely, and warrants the article genuine.'

'Shirley, I never had a sister - you never had a sister; but it flashes on me at this moment how sisters feel towards each other. Affection twined with their life, which no shocks of feeling can uproot, which little quarrels only trample an instant that it may spring more freshly when the pressure is removed: affection that no passion can ultimately outrival, with which even love itself cannot do more than compete in force and truth. Love hurts us so, Shirley: it is so tormenting, so racking, and it burns away our strength with its flame; in affection is no pain and no fire, only sustenance and balm. I am supported and soothed when you - that is, you only - are near, Shirley, Do you believe me now?'

'I am always easy of belief when the creed pleases me. We really are friends then, Lina, in spite of the black eclipse?'

'We really are,' returned the other, drawing Shirley towards her, and making her sit down, 'chance what may.'

'Come, then, we will talk of something else than the Troubler.' But at this moment the Rector came in, and the 'something else' of which Miss Keeldar was about to talk was not again alluded to till the moment of her departure; she then delayed a few minutes in the passage to say. - 'Caroline, I wish to tell you that I have a great weight on my mind: my conscience is quite uneasy, as if I had committed, or was going to commit, a crime. It is not my private conscience, you must understand, but my landed-proprietor and lord-of-the-manor conscience. I have got into the clutch of an eagle with iron talons. I have fallen under a stern influence, which I scarcely approve, but cannot resist. Something will be done ere long, I fear, which it by no means pleases me to think of. To ease my mind, and to prevent harm as far as I can, I mean to enter on a series of good works. Don't be

surprised, therefore, if you see me all at once turn outrageously charitable. I have no idea how to begin, but you must give me some advice: we will talk more on the subject to-morrow; and just ask that excellent person, Miss Ainley, to step up to Fieldhead: I have some notion of putting myself under her tuition - won't she have a precious pupil? Drop a hint to her, Lina, that, though a well-meaning, I am rather a neglected character, and then she will feel less scandalised at my ignorance about clothing societies, and such things.'

On the morrow, Caroline found Shirley sitting gravely at her desk, with an account-book, a bundle of bank-notes, and a well-filled purse before her. She was looking mighty serious, but a little puzzled. She said she had been 'casting an eye' over the weekly expenditure in housekeeping at the Hall, trying to find out where she could retrench; that she had also just given audience to Mrs Gill, the cook, and had sent that person away with a notion that her (Shirley's) brain was certainly crazed. 'I have lectured her on the duty of being careful,' said she, 'in a way quite new to her. So eloquent was I on the text of economy, that I surprised myself; for, you see, it is altogether a fresh idea: I never thought, much less spoke, on the subject till lately. But it is all theory; for when I came to the practical part I could retrench nothing. I had not firmness to take off a single pound of butter, or to prosecute to any clear result an inquest into the destiny of either dripping, lard, bread, cold meat, or other kitchen perquisite whatever. I know we never get up illuminations at Fieldhead, but I could not ask the meaning of sundry quite unaccountable pounds of candles: we do not wash for the parish, yet I viewed in silence items of soap and bleaching-powder calculated to satisfy the solicitude of the most anxious inquirer after our position in reference to those articles: carnivorous I am not, nor is Mrs Pryor, nor is Mrs Gill herself, yet I only hemmed and opened my eyes a little wide when I saw butchers' bills whose figures seemed to prove that fact - falsehood, I mean. Caroline, you may laugh at me, but you can't change me. I am a poltroon on certain points - I feel it. There is a base alloy of moral cowardice in my composition. I blushed and hung my head before Mrs Gill, when she ought to have been faltering confessions to me. I found it impossible to get up the spirit even to hint, much less to prove, to her that she was a cheat. I have no calm dignity - no true courage about me.'

'Shirley, what fit of self-injustice is this? My uncle, who is not given to speak well of women, says there are not ten thousand men in England as genuinely fearless as you.'

'I am fearless, physically: I am never nervous about danger. I was not startled from self-possession when Mr Wynne's great red bull rose with a bellow before my face, as I was crossing the cowslip-lea alone, stooped his begrimed, sullen head, and made a run at me: but I was

afraid of seeing Mrs Gill brought to shame and confusion of face. You have twice - ten times my strength of mind on certain subjects, Caroline: you, whom no persuasions can induce to pass a bull, however quiet he looks, would have firmly shown my housekeeper she had done wrong; then you would have gently and wisely admonished her; and at last, I daresay, provided she had seemed penitent, you would have very sweetly forgiven her. Of this conduct I am incapable. However, in spite of exaggerated imposition, I still find we live within our means: I have money in hand, and I really must do some good with it. The Briarfield poor are badly off: they must be helped. What ought I to do, think you, Lina? Had I not better distribute the cash at once?'

'No, indeed, Shirley: you will not manage properly. I have often noticed that your only notion of charity is to give shillings and half-crowns in a careless, freehanded sort of way, which is liable to continual abuse. You must have a prime minister, or you will get yourself into a series of scrapes. You suggested Miss Ainley yourself: to Miss Ainley I will apply; and, meantime, promise to keep quiet, and not begin throwing away your money. What a great deal you have, Shirley! - you must feel very rich with all that?'

'Yes; I feel of consequence. It is not an immense sum, but I feel responsible for its disposal; and really this responsibility weighs on my mind more heavily than I could have expected. They say that there are some families almost starving to death in Briarfield: some of my own cottagers are in wretched circumstances: I must and will help them.'

'Some people say we shouldn't give alms to the poor, Shirley.'

'They are great fools for their pains. For those who are not hungry, it is easy to palaver about the degradation of charity, and so on; but they forget the brevity of life, as well as its bitterness. We have none of us long to live: let us help each other through seasons of want and woe, as well as we can, without heeding in the least the scruples of vain philosophy.'

'But you do help others, Shirley: you give a great deal as it is.'

'Not enough: I must give more, or, I tell you, my brother's blood will some day be crying to Heaven against me. For, after all, if political incendiaries come here to kindle conflagration in the neighbourhood, and my property is attacked, I shall defend it like a tigress - I know I shall. Let me listen to Mercy as long as she is near me: her voice once drowned by the shout of ruffian defiance, and I shall be full of impulses to resist and quell. If once the poor gather and rise in the

form of the mob, I shall turn against them as an aristocrat: if they bully me, I must defy; if they attack, I must resist, - and I will.'

'You talk like Robert.'

'I feel like Robert, only more fierily. Let them meddle with Robert, or Robert's mill, or Robert's interests, and I shall hate them. At present I am no patrician, nor do I regard the poor around me as plebeians; but if once they violently wrong me or mine, and then presume to dictate to us, I shall quite forget pity for their wretchedness and respect for their poverty, in scorn of their ignorance and wrath at their insolence.'

'Shirley - how your eyes flash!'

'Because my soul burns. Would you, any more than me, let Robert be borne down by numbers?'

'If I had your power to aid Robert, I would use it as you mean to use it. If I could be such a friend to him as you can be, I would stand by him, as you mean to stand by him - till death.'

'And now, Lina, though your eyes don't flash, they glow. You drop your lids; but I saw a kindled spark. However, it is not yet come to fighting. What I want to do is to prevent mischief. I cannot forget, either day or night, that these embittered feelings of the poor against the rich have been generated in suffering: they would neither hate nor envy us if they did not deem us so much happier than themselves. To allay this suffering, and thereby lessen this hate, let me, out of my abundance, give abundantly: and that the donation may go farther, let it be made wisely. To that intent, we must introduce some clear, calm, practical sense into our councils: so go, and fetch Miss Ainley.'

Without another word, Caroline put on her bonnet and departed. It may, perhaps, appear strange that neither she nor Shirley thought of consulting Mrs Pryor on their scheme; but they were wise in abstaining. To have consulted her - and this they knew by instinct - would only have been to involve her in painful embarrassment. She was far better informed, better read, a deeper thinker than Miss Ainley, but of administrative energy, of executive activity, she had none. She would subscribe her own modest mite to a charitable object willingly, - secret almsgiving suited her; but in public plans, on a large scale, she could take no part: as to originating them, that was out of the question. This Shirley knew, and therefore she did not trouble Mrs Pryor by unavailing conferences, which could only remind her of her own deficiencies, and do no good.

It was a bright day for Miss Ainley when she was summoned to Fieldhead to deliberate on projects so congenial to her; when she was

seated with all honour and deference at a table with paper, pen, ink and - what was best of all - cash before her, and requested to draw up a regular plan for administering relief to the destitute poor of Briarfield. She, who knew them all, had studied their wants, had again and again felt in what way they might best be succoured, could the means of succour only be found, was fully competent to the undertaking, and a meek exultation gladdened her kind heart as she felt herself able to answer clearly and promptly the eager questions put by the two young girls; as she showed them in her answers how much and what serviceable knowledge she had acquired of the condition of her fellow-creatures round her.

Shirley placed at her disposal £300, and at sight of the money Miss Ainley's eyes filled with joyful tears; for she already saw the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the sick comforted thereby. She quickly drew up a simple, sensible plan for its expenditure; and she assured them brighter times would now come round, for she doubted not the lady of Fieldhead's example would be followed by others: she should try to get additional subscriptions, and to form a fund; but first she must consult the clergy: yes, on that point, she was peremptory: Mr Helstone, Dr. Boultby, Mr Hall, must be consulted - (for not only must Briarfield be relieved, but Whinbury and Nunnely) - it would, she averred, be presumption in her to take a single step unauthorised by them.

The clergy were sacred beings in Miss Ainley's eyes: no matter what might be the insignificance of the individual, his station made him holy. The very curates - who, in their trivial arrogance, were hardly worthy to tie her patten- strings, or carry her cotton umbrella, or check woollen-shawl - she, in her pure, sincere enthusiasm, looked upon as sucking saints. No matter how clearly their little vices and enormous absurdities were pointed out to her, she could not see them: she was blind to ecclesiastical defects: the white surplice covered a multitude of sins.

Shirley, knowing this harmless infatuation on the part of her recently chosen prime minister, stipulated expressly that the curates were to have no voice in the disposal of the money; that their meddling fingers were not to be inserted into the pie. The rectors, of course, must be paramount, and they might be trusted: they had some experience, some sagacity, and Mr Hall, at least, had sympathy and loving-kindness for his fellowmen; but as for the youth under them, they must be set aside, kept down, and taught that subordination and silence best became their years and capacity.

It was with some horror Miss Ainley heard this language: Caroline, however, interposing with a mild word or two in praise of Mr Sweeting, calmed her again. Sweeting was, indeed, her own favourite: she

endeavoured to respect Messrs. Malone and Donne; but the slices of sponge-cake, and glasses of cowslip or primrose wine, she had at different times administered to Sweeting when he came to see her in her little cottage, were ever offered with sentiments of truly motherly regard. The same innocuous collation she had once presented to Malone; but that personage evinced such open scorn of the offering, she had never ventured to renew it. To Donne she always served the treat, and was happy to see his approbation of it proved beyond a doubt, by the fact of his usually eating two pieces of cake, and putting a third in his pocket.

Indefatigable in her exertions where good was to be done, Miss Ainley would immediately have set out on a walk of ten miles round to the three rectors, in order to show her plan, and humbly solicit their approval: but Miss Keeldar interdicted this, and proposed, as an amendment, to collect the clergy in a small select reunion that evening at Fieldhead. Miss Ainley was to meet them, and the plan was to be discussed in full privy council.

Shirley managed to get the senior priesthood together accordingly; and before the old maid's arrival she had, further, talked all the gentlemen into the most charming mood imaginable. She herself had taken in hand Dr. Boultby and Mr Helstone. The first was a stubborn old Welshman, hot, opinionated, and obstinate, but withal a man who did a great deal of good, though not without making some noise about it: the latter we know. She had rather a friendly feeling for both; especially for old Helstone; and it cost her no trouble to be quite delightful to them, She took them round the garden; she gathered them flowers; she was like a kind daughter to them. Mr Hall she left to Caroline - or rather, it was to Caroline's care Mr Hall consigned himself.

He generally sought Caroline in every party where she and he happened to be. He was not generally a lady's man, though all ladies liked him: something of a book-worm he was, nearsighted, spectacled, now and then abstracted. To old ladies he was kind as a son. To men of every occupation and grade he was acceptable: the truth, simplicity, frankness of his manners, the nobleness of his integrity, the reality and elevation of his piety, won him friends in every grade: his poor clerk and sexton delighted in him; the noble patron of his living esteemed him highly. It was only with young, handsome, fashionable, and stylish ladies he felt a little shy: being himself a plain man - plain in aspect, plain in manners, plain in speech - he seemed to fear their dash, elegance, and airs. But Miss Helstone had neither dash nor airs, and her native elegance was of a very quiet order - quiet as the beauty of a ground-loving hedge-flower. He was a fluent, cheerful, agreeable talker. Caroline could talk, too, in a tête-ô-tête: she liked Mr Hall to come and take the seat next her in a party, and thus secure her from

Peter Augustus Malone, Joseph Donne, or John Sykes; and Mr Hall never failed to avail himself of this privilege when he possibly could. Such preference shown by a single gentleman to a single lady would certainly, in ordinary cases, have set in motion the tongues of the gossips; but Cyril Hall was forty-five years old, slightly bald and slightly grey, and nobody ever said or thought he was likely to be married to Miss Helstone. Nor did he think so himself: he was wedded already to his books and his parish: his kind sister Margaret, spectacled and learned like himself, made him happy in his single state; he considered it too late to change. Besides, he had known Caroline as a pretty little girl: she had sat on his knee many a time; he had bought her toys and given her books; he felt that her friendship for him was mixed with a sort of filial respect; he could not have brought himself to attempt to give another colour to her sentiments, and his serene mind could glass a fair image without feeling its depths troubled by the reflection.

When Miss Ainley arrived, she was made kindly welcome by every one: Mrs Pryor and Margaret Hall made room for her on the sofa between them; and when the three were seated, they formed a trio which the gay and thoughtless would have scorned, indeed, as quite worthless and unattractive - a middle-aged widow and two plain spectacled old maids - yet which had its own quiet value, as many a suffering and friendless human being knew.

Shirley opened the business and showed the plan.

'I know the hand which drew up that,' said Mr Hall, glancing at Miss Ainley, and smiling benignantly: his approbation was won at once. Boultby heard and deliberated with bent brow and protruded under lip: his consent he considered too weighty to be given in a hurry. Helstone glanced sharply round with an alert, suspicious expression, as if he apprehended that female craft was at work, and that something in petticoats was somehow trying underhand to acquire too much influence, and make itself of too much importance. Shirley caught and comprehended the expression - 'This scheme is nothing,' said she carelessly; 'it is only an outline - a mere suggestion; you, gentlemen, are requested to draw up rules of your own.'

And she directly fetched her writing-case, smiling queerly to herself as she bent over the table where it stood: she produced a sheet of paper, a new pen, drew an arm-chair to the table, and presenting her hand to old Helstone, begged permission to instal him in it. For a minute he was a little stiff, and stood wrinkling his copper-coloured forehead strangely. At last he muttered - 'Well, you are neither my wife nor my daughter, so I'll be led for once; but mind - I know I am led: your little female manoeuvres don't blind me.'

'Oh!' said Shirley, dipping the pen in the ink, and putting it into his hand, 'you must regard me as Captain Keeldar to-day. This is quite a gentleman's affair - yours and mine entirely, Doctor' (so she had dubbed the Rector). 'The ladies there are only to be our aides-de-camp, and at their peril they speak, till we have settled the whole business.'

He smiled a little grimly, and began to write. He soon interrupted himself to ask questions, and consult his brethren, disdainfully lifting his glance over the curly heads of the two girls, and the demure caps of the elder ladies, to meet the winking glasses and grey pates of the priests. In the discussion which ensued, all three gentlemen, to their infinite credit, showed a thorough acquaintance with the poor of their parishes, - an even minute knowledge of their separate wants. Each rector knew where clothing was needed, where food would be most acceptable, where money could be bestowed with a probability of it being judiciously laid out. Wherever their memories fell short, Miss Ainley or Miss Hall, if applied to, could help them out; but both ladies took care not to speak unless spoken to. Neither of them wanted to be foremost but each sincerely desired to be useful, and useful the clergy consented to make them: with which boon they were content.

Shirley stood behind the rectors, leaning over their shoulders now and then to glance at the rules drawn up, and the list of cases making out, listening to all they said, and still at intervals smiling her queer smile - a smile not ill- natured, but significant: too significant to be generally thought amiable. Men rarely like such of their fellows as read their inward nature too clearly and truly. It is good for women, especially, to be endowed with a soft blindness: to have mild, dim eyes, that never penetrate below the surface of things - that take all for what it seems: thousands, knowing this, keep their eyelids drooped, on system; but the most downcast glance has its loophole, through which it can, on occasion, take its sentinel-survey of life. I remember once seeing a pair of blue eyes, that were usually thought sleepy, secretly on the alert, and I knew by their expression - an expression which chilled my blood, it was in that quarter so wondrously unexpected - that for years they had been accustomed to silent soul-reading. The world called the owner of these blue eyes 'bonne petite femme' (she was not an Englishwoman): I learned her nature afterwards - got it off by heart - studied it in its farthest, most hidden recesses - she was the finest, deepest, subtlest schemer in Europe.

When all was at length settled to Miss Keeldar's mind, and the clergy had entered so fully into the spirit of her plans as to head the subscription-list with their signatures for £50 each, she ordered supper to be served; having previously directed Mrs Gill to exercise her utmost skill in the preparation of this repast. Mr Hall was no bon-

vivant: he was naturally an abstemious man, indifferent to luxury; but Boultby and Helstone both liked good cookery; the recherché supper consequently put them into excellent humour: they did justice to it, though in a gentlemanly way - not in the mode Mr Donne would have done, had he been present. A glass of fine wine was likewise tasted, with discerning though most decorous relish. Captain Keeldar was complimented on his taste; the compliment charmed him: it had been his aim to gratify and satisfy his priestly guests: he had succeeded, and was radiant with glee.