Chapter XXIV - The Valley of the Shadow of Death

The future sometimes seems to sob a low warning of the events it is bringing us, like some gathering though yet remote storm, which, in tones of the wind, in flushings of the firmament, in clouds strangely torn, announces a blast strong to strew the sea with wrecks; or commissioned to bring in fog the yellow taint of pestilence, covering white Western isles with the poisoned exhalations of the East, dimming the lattices of English homes with the breath of Indian plague. At other times this Future bursts suddenly, as if a rock had rent, and in it a grave had opened, whence issues the body of one that slept. Ere you are aware you stand face to face with a shrouded and unthought-of Calamity - a new Lazarus.

Caroline Helstone went home from Hollow's Cottage in good health, as she imagined. On waking the next morning she felt oppressed with unwonted languor: at breakfast, at each meal of the following day, she missed all sense of appetite: palatable food was as ashes and sawdust to her.

'Am I ill?' she asked, and looked at herself in the glass. Her eyes were bright, their pupils dilated, her cheeks seemed rosier and fuller than usual. 'I look well; why can I not eat?'

She felt a pulse beat fast in her temples: she felt, too, her brain in strange activity: her spirits were raised; hundreds of busy and broken, but brilliant thoughts engaged her mind: a glow rested on them, such as tinged her complexion.

Now followed a hot, parched, thirsty, restless night. Towards morning one terrible dream seized her like a tiger: when she woke, she felt and knew she was ill.

How she had caught the fever (fever it was), she could not tell. Probably in her late walk home, some sweet, poisoned breeze, redolent of honey-dew and miasma, had passed into her lungs and veins, and finding there already a fever of mental excitement, and a languor of long conflict and habitual sadness, had fanned the spark of flame, and left a well-lit fire behind it.

It seemed, however, but a gentle fire: after two hot days and worried nights, there was no violence in the symptoms, and neither her uncle, nor Fanny, nor the doctor, nor Miss Keeldar, when she called, had any fear for her: a few days would restore her, every one believed.

The few days passed, and - though it was still thought it could not long delay - the revival had not begun. Mrs Pryor, who had visited her daily - being present in her chamber one morning when she had been

ill a fortnight - watched her very narrowly for some minutes: she took her hand, and placed her finger on her wrist; then, quietly leaving the chamber, she went to Mr Helstone's study. With him she remained closeted a long time - half the morning. On returning to her sick young friend, she laid aside shawl and bonnet: she stood a while at the bedside, one hand placed in the other, gently rocking herself to and fro, in an attitude and with a movement habitual to her. At last she said - 'I have sent Fanny to Fieldhead to fetch a few things for me, such as I shall want during a short stay here: it is my wish to remain with you till you are better. Your uncle kindly permits my attendance: will it to yourself be acceptable, Caroline?'

'I am sorry you should take such needless trouble. I do not feel very ill, but I cannot refuse resolutely: it will be such comfort to know you are in the house, to see you sometimes in the room; but don't confine yourself on my account, dear Mrs Pryor. Fanny nurses me very well.'

Mrs Pryor - bending over the pale little sufferer - was now smoothing the hair under her cap, and gently raising her pillow. As she performed these offices, Caroline, smiling, lifted her face to kiss her.

'Are you free from pain? Are you tolerably at ease?' was inquired in a low, earnest voice, as the self-elected nurse yielded to the caress.

'I think I am almost happy.'

'You wish to drink? Your lips are parched.'

She held a glass filled with some cooling beverage to her mouth.

'Have you eaten anything to-day, Caroline?'

'I cannot eat.'

'But soon your appetite will return: it must return: that is, I pray God it may!'

In laying her again on the couch, she encircled her in her arms; and while so doing, by a movement which seemed scarcely voluntary, she drew her to her heart, and held her close gathered an instant.

'I shall hardly wish to get well, that I may keep you always,' said Caroline.

Mrs Pryor did not smile at this speech: over her features ran a tremor, which for some minutes she was absorbed in repressing.

'You are more used to Fanny than to me,' she remarked, ere long. 'I should think my attendance must seem strange, officious?'

'No: quite natural, and very soothing. You must have been accustomed to wait on sick people, ma'am. You move about the room so softly, and you speak so quietly, and touch me so gently.'

'I am dexterous in nothing, my dear. You will often find me awkward, but never negligent.'

Negligent, indeed, she was not. From that hour, Fanny and Eliza became ciphers in the sick room: Mrs Pryor made it her domain: she performed all its duties; she lived in it day and night. The patient remonstrated - faintly, however, from the first, and not at all ere long: loneliness and gloom were now banished from her bedside; protection and solace sat there instead. She and her nurse coalesced in wondrous union. Caroline was usually pained to require or receive much attendance: Mrs Pryor, under ordinary circumstances, had neither the habit nor the art of performing little offices of service; but all now passed with such ease - so naturally, that the patient was as willing to be cherished as the nurse was bent on cherishing; no sign of weariness in the latter ever reminded the former that she ought to be anxious. There was, in fact, no very hard duty to perform; but a hireling might have found it hard.

With all this care, it seemed strange the sick girl did not get well; yet such was the case: she wasted like any snow-wreath in thaw; she faded like any flower in drought. Miss Keeldar, on whose thoughts danger or death seldom intruded, had at first entertained no fears at all for her friend; but seeing her change and sink from time to time when she paid her visits, alarm clutched her heart. She went to Mr Helstone and expressed herself with so much energy that that gentleman was at last obliged, however unwillingly, to admit the idea that his niece was ill of something more than a migraine; and when Mrs Pryor came and quietly demanded a physician, he said she might send for two if she liked. One came, but that one was an oracle: he delivered a dark saying of which the future. was to solve the mystery, wrote some prescriptions, gave some directions - the whole with an air of crushing authority - pocketed his fee, and went. Probably, he knew well enough he could do no good; but didn't like to say so.

Still, no rumour of serious illness got wind in the neighbourhood. At Hollow's Cottage it was thought that Caroline had only a severe cold, she having written a note to Hortense to that effect; and Mademoiselle contented herself with sending two pots of currant jam, a receipt for a tisane, and a note of advice.

Mrs Yorke being told that a physician had been summoned', sneered at the hypochondriac fancies of the rich and idle, who, she said, having nothing but themselves to think about, must needs send for a doctor if only so much as their little finger ached.

The 'rich and idle,' represented in the person of Caroline, were meantime falling fast into a condition of prostration, whose quickly consummated debility puzzled all who witnessed it, except one; for that one alone reflected how liable is the undermined structure to sink in sudden ruin.

Sick people often have fancies inscrutable to ordinary attendants, and Caroline had one which even her tender nurse could not at first explain. On a certain day in the week, at a certain hour, she would - whether worse or better - entreat to be taken up and dressed, and suffered to sit in her chair near the window. This station she would retain till noon was past: whatever degree of exhaustion or debility her wan aspect betrayed, she still softly put off all persuasion to seek repose until the church-clock had duly tolled mid-day: the twelve strokes sounded, she grew docile, and would meekly lie down. Returned to the couch, she usually buried her face deep in the pillow, and drew the coverlets close round her, as if to shut out the world and sun, of which she was tired: more than once, as she thus lay, a slight convulsion shook the sick-bed, and a faint sob broke the silence round it. These things were not unnoted by Mrs Pryor.

One Tuesday morning, as usual, she had asked leave to rise, and now she sat wrapped in her white dressing-gown, leaning forward in the easy-chair, gazing steadily and patiently from the lattice. Mrs Pryor was seated a little behind, knitting as it seemed, but, in truth, watching her. A change crossed her pale mournful brow, animating its languor; a light shot into her faded eyes, reviving their lustre; she half rose and looked earnestly out. Mrs Pryor, drawing softly near, glanced over her shoulder. From this window was visible the churchyard, beyond it the road, and there, riding sharply by, appeared a horseman. The figure was not yet too remote for recognition; Mrs Pryor had long sight; she knew Mr Moore. Just as an intercepting rising ground concealed him from view, the clock struck twelve.

'May I lie down again?' asked Caroline.

Her nurse assisted her to bed: having laid her down and drawn the curtain, she stood listening near. The little couch trembled, the suppressed sob stirred the air. A contraction as of anguish altered Mrs Pryor's features; she wrung her hands; half a groan escaped her lips. She now remembered that Tuesday was Whinbury market-day: Mr Moore must always pass the Rectory on his way thither, just ere noon of that day.

Caroline wore continually round her neck a slender braid of silk, attached to which was some trinket. Mrs Pryor had seen the bit of gold glisten; but had not yet obtained a fair view of it. Her patient never parted with it: when dressed it was hidden in her bosom; as she lay in bed she always held it in her hand. That Tuesday afternoon the transient doze - more like lethargy than sleep - which sometimes abridged the long days, had stolen over her: the weather was hot: while turning in febrile restlessness, she had pushed the coverlets a little aside; Mrs Pryor bent to replace them; the small, wasted hand, lying nerveless on the sick girl's breast, clasped as usual her jealously-guarded treasure: those fingers whose attenuation it gave pain to see, were now relaxed in sleep: Mrs Pryor gently disengaged the braid, drawing out a tiny locket - a slight thing it was, such as it suited her small purse to purchase: under its crystal face appeared a curl of black hair - too short and crisp to have been severed from a female head.

Some agitated movement occasioned a twitch of the silken chain: the sleeper started and woke. Her thoughts were usually now somewhat scattered on waking; her look generally wandering. Half-rising, as if in terror, she exclaimed - 'Don't take it from me, Robert! Don't! It is my last comfort - let me keep it. I never tell any one whose hair it is - I never show it.'

Mrs Pryor had already disappeared behind the curtain: reclining far back in a deep arm-chair by the bedside, she was withdrawn from view. Caroline looked abroad into the chamber: she thought it empty. As her stray ideas returned slowly, each folding its weak wings on the mind's sad shore, like birds exhausted, - beholding void, and perceiving silence round her, she believed herself alone. Collected, she was not yet: perhaps healthy self-possession and self-control were to be hers no more; perhaps that world the strong and prosperous live in had already rolled from beneath her feet for ever: so, at least, it often seemed to herself. In health, she had never been accustomed to think aloud; but now words escaped her lips unawares.

'Oh! I should see him once more before all is over! Heaven might favour me thus far?' she cried. 'God grant me a little comfort before I die!' was her humble petition.

'But he will not know I am ill till I am gone; and he will come when they have laid me out, and I am senseless, cold, and stiff.

'What can my departed soul feel then? Can it see or know what happens to the clay? Can spirits, through any medium, communicate with living flesh? Can the dead at all revisit those they leave? Can they come in the elements? Will wind, water, fire, lend me a path to Moore?

'Is it for nothing the wind sounds almost articulately sometimes - sings as I have lately heard it sing at night - or passes the casement sobbing, as if for sorrow to come? Does nothing, then, haunt it - nothing inspire it?

'Why, it suggested to me words one night: it poured a strain which I could have written down, only I was appalled, and dared not rise to seek pencil and paper by the dim watch-light.

'What is that electricity they speak of, whose changes make us well or ill; whose lack or excess blasts; whose even balance revives? What are all those influences that are about us in the atmosphere, that keep playing over our nerves like fingers on stringed instruments, and call forth now a sweet note, and now a wail-now an exultant swell, and, anon, the saddest cadence?

'Where is the other world? In what will another life consist? Who do I ask? Have I not cause to think that the hour is hasting but too fast when the veil must be rent for me? Do I not know the Grand Mystery is likely to burst prematurely on me? Great Spirit! in whose goodness I confide; whom, as my Father, I have petitioned night and morning from early infancy, help the weak creation of Thy hands! Sustain me through the ordeal I dread and must undergo! Give me strength! Give me patience! Give me - oh! give me faith!'

She fell back on her pillow. Mrs Pryor found means to steal quietly from the room: she re-entered it soon after, apparently as composed as if she had really not overheard this strange soliloquy.

The next day several callers came. It had become known that Miss Helstone was worse. Mr Hall and his sister Margaret arrived: both, after they had been in the sick-room, quitted it in tears; they had found the patient more altered than they expected. Hortense Moore came. Caroline seemed stimulated by her presence: she assured her, smiling, she was not dangerously ill; she talked to her in a low voice, but cheerfully: during her stay, excitement kept up the flush of her complexion: she looked better.

'How is Mr Robert?' asked Mrs Pryor, as Hortense was preparing to take leave.

'He was very well when he left.'

'Left! Is he gone from home?'

It was then explained that some police intelligence about the rioters of whom he was in pursuit, had, that morning, called him away to Birmingham, and probably a fortnight might elapse ere he returned.

'He is not aware that Miss Helstone is very ill?'

'Oh! no. He thought, like me, that she had only a bad cold.' After this visit, Mrs Pryor took care not to approach Caroline's couch for above an hour: she heard her weep, and dared not look on her tears.

As evening closed in, she brought her some tea. Caroline, opening her eyes from a moment's slumber, viewed her nurse with an unrecognising glance.

'I smelt the honey-suckles in the glen this summer morning,' she said, 'as I stood at the counting-house window.'

Strange words like these from pallid lips pierce a loving listener's heart more poignantly than steel. They sound romantic, perhaps, in books: in real life, they are harrowing.

'My darling, do you know me?' said Mrs Pryor.

'I went in to call Robert to breakfast: I have been with him in the garden: he asked me to go: a heavy dew has refreshed the flowers: the peaches are ripening.'

'My darling! my darling!' again and again repeated the nurse.

'I thought it was daylight - long after sunrise: it looks dark - is the moon now set?'

That moon, lately risen, was gazing full and mild upon her: floating in deep blue space, it watched her unclouded.

'Then it is not morning? I am not at the cottage? Who is this? - I see a shape at my bedside.'

'It is myself - it is your friend - your nurse - your - - Lean your head on my shoulder collect yourself.' (In a lower tone.) 'Oh God, take pity! Give her life, and me strength! Send me courage - teach me words!'

Some minutes passed in silence. The patient lay mute and passive in the trembling arms - on the throbbing bosom of the nurse.

'I am better now,' whispered Caroline at last, 'much better - I feel where I am: this is Mrs Pryor near me: I was dreaming - I talk when I wake up from dreams: people often do in illness. How fast your heart beats, ma'am! Do not be afraid.'

'It is not fear, child; only a little anxiety, which will pass. I have brought you some tea, Cary; your uncle made it himself. You know he

says he can make a better cup of tea than any housewife can. Taste it. He is concerned to hear that you eat so little: he would be glad if you had a better appetite.'

'I am thirsty: let me drink.'

She drank eagerly.

'What o'clock is it, ma'am?' she asked.

'Past nine.'

'Not later? Oh! I have yet a long night before me: but the tea has made me strong: I will sit up.'

Mrs Pryor raised her, and arranged her pillows.

'Thank Heaven! I am not always equally miserable, and ill, and hopeless. The afternoon has been bad since Hortense went: perhaps the evening may be better. It is a fine night, I think? The moon shines clear.'

'Very fine: a perfect summer night. The old church-tower gleams white almost as silver.'

'And does the churchyard look peaceful?'

'Yes, and the garden also: dew glistens on the foliage.'

'Can you see many long weeds and nettles amongst the graves; or do they look turfy and flowery?'

'I see closed daisy-heads, gleaming like pearls on some mounds. Thomas has mown down the dock-leaves and rank grass, and cleared all away.'

'I always like that to be done: it soothes one's mind to see the place in order: and, I dare say, within the church just now that moonlight shines as softly as in my room. It will fall through the east window full on the Helstone monument. When I close my eyes I seem to see poor papa's epitaph in black letters on white marble. There is plenty of room for other inscriptions underneath.'

'William Farren came to look after your flowers this morning: he was afraid, now you cannot tend them yourself, they would be neglected. He has taken two of your favourite plants home to nurse for you.'

'If I were to make a will, I would leave William all my plants; Shirley my trinkets - except one, which must not be taken off my neck: and you, ma'am, my books.' (After a pause.) 'Mrs Pryor, I feel a longing wish for something.'

'For what, Caroline?'

'You know I always delight to hear you sing: sing me a hymn just now: sing that hymn which begins:

Our God, our help in ages past, - Our hope for years to come; Our shelter from the stormy blast; Our refuge, haven, home!'

Mrs Pryor at once complied.

No wonder Caroline liked to hear her sing: her voice, even in speaking, was sweet and silver clear; in song it was almost divine: neither flute nor dulcimer has tones so pure. But the tone was secondary compared to the expression which trembled through: a tender vibration from a feeling heart.

The servants in the kitchen, hearing the strain, stole to the stair-foot to listen: even old Helstone, as he walked in the garden, pondering over the unaccountable and feeble nature of women, stood still amongst his borders to catch the mournful melody more distinctly. Why it reminded him of his forgotten dead wife, he could not tell; nor why it made him more concerned than he had hitherto been for Caroline's fading girlhood. He was glad to recollect that he had promised to pay Wynne, the magistrate, a visit that evening. Low spirits and gloomy thoughts were very much his aversions: when they attacked him he usually found means to make them march in double-quick time. The hymn followed him faintly as he crossed the fields: he hastened his customary sharp pace, that he might get beyond its reach.

Thy word commands our flesh to dust, -
'Return, ye sons of men';
All nations rose from earth at first
And turn to earth again.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone
Short as the watch that ends' the night
Before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;

They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

Like flowery fields, the nations stand,
Fresh in the morning light
The flowers beneath the mower's hand
Lie withering ere 'tis night.

Our God, our help in ages past, -
Our hope for years to come;
Be Thou our guard while troubles last,
O Father, be our home!

'Now sing a song - a Scottish song,' suggested Caroline when the hymn was over, - 'Ye banks and braes o' bonny Doon.'

Again Mrs Pryor obeyed, or essayed to obey. At the close of the first stanza she stopped: she could get no further: her full heart flowed over.

'You are weeping at the pathos of the air: come here and I will comfort you,' said Caroline, in a pitying accent. Mrs Pryor came: she sat down on the edge of her patient's bed, and allowed the wasted arms to encircle her.

'You often soothe me, let me soothe you,' murmured the young girl, kissing her cheek. 'I hope,' she added, 'it is not for me you weep?'

No answer followed.

'Do you think I shall not get better? I do not feel very ill - only weak.'

'But your mind, Caroline: your mind is crushed: your heart is almost broken, you have been so neglected, so repulsed, left so desolate.'

'I believe grief is, and always has been, my worst ailment. I sometimes think, if an abundant gush of happiness came on me, I could revive yet.'

'Do you wish to live?'

'I have no object in life.'

'You love me, Caroline?'

'Very much, - very truly, - inexpressibly sometimes: just now I feel as if I could almost grow to your heart.'

'I will return directly, dear,' remarked Mrs Pryor, as she laid Caroline down.

Quitting her, she glided to the door, softly turned the key in the lock, ascertained that it was fast, and came back. She bent over her. She threw back the curtain to admit the moonlight more freely. She gazed intently on her face.

'Then, if you love me,' said she, speaking quickly, with an altered voice: 'if you feel as if - to use your own words - you could 'grow to my heart,' it will be neither shock nor pain for you to know that that heart is the source whence yours was filled: that from my veins issued the tide which flows in yours; that you are mine - my daughter - my own child.'

'Mrs Pryor - - '

'My own child!'

'That is - that means - you have adopted me?'

'It means that, if I have given you nothing else, I at least gave you life; that I bore you - nursed you; that I am your true mother; no other woman can claim the title - it is mine.'

'But Mrs James Helston - but my father's wife, whom I do not remember ever to have seen, she is my mother?'

'She is your mother: James Helstone was my husband. I say you are mine. I have proved it. I thought perhaps you were all his, which would have been a cruel dispensation for me: I find it is not so. God permitted me to be the parent of my child's mind; it belongs to me: it is my property - my right. These features are James's own. He had a fine face when he was young, and not altered by error. Papa, my darling, gave you your blue eyes and soft brown hair: he gave you the oval of your face and the regularity of your lineaments; the outside he conferred; but the heart and the brain are mine: the germs are from me, and they are improved, they are developed to excellence. I esteem and approve my child as highly as I do most fondly love her.'

'Is what I hear true? Is it no dream?'

'I wish it were as true that the substance and colour of health were restored to your cheek.'

'My own mother! is she one I can be so fond of as I can of you? People generally did not like her, so I have been given to understand.'

'They told you that? Well, your mother now tells you, that, not having the gift to please people generally, for their approbation she does not care: her thoughts are centred in her child: does that child welcome or reject her?'

'But if you are my mother, the world is all changed to me. Surely I can live - I should like to recover - - '

'You must recover. You drew life and strength from my breast when you were a tiny, fair infant, over whose blue eyes I used to weep, fearing I beheld in your very beauty the sign of qualities that had entered my heart like iron, and pierced through my soul like a sword. Daughter! we have been long parted: I return now to cherish you again.'

She held her to her bosom: she cradled her in her arms: she rocked her softly, as if lulling a young child to sleep.

'My mother! My own mother!'

The offspring nestled to the parent; that parent, feeling the endearment and hearing the appeal, gathered her closer still. She covered her with noiseless kisses: she murmured love over her, like a cushat fostering its young.

There was silence in the room for a long while.

. . . . . .

'Does my uncle know?'

'Your uncle knows: I told him when I first came to stay with you here.'

'Did you recognise me when we first met at Fieldhead?'

'How could it be otherwise? Mr and Miss Helstone being announced, I was prepared to see my child.'

'It was that then which moved you: I saw you disturbed.'

'You saw nothing, Caroline, I can cover my feelings. You can never tell what an age of strange sensation I lived, during the two minutes that elapsed between the report of your name and your entrance. You can never tell how your look, mien, carriage, shook me.'

'Why? Were you disappointed?'

'What will she be like? I had asked myself; and when I saw what you were like, I could have dropped.'

'Mamma, why?'

'I trembled in your presence. I said I will never own her; she shall never know me.'

'But I said and did nothing remarkable. I felt a little diffident at the thought of an introduction to strangers, that was all.'

'I soon saw you were diffident; that was the first thing which reassured me: had you been rustic, clownish, awkward, I should have been content.'

'You puzzle me.'

'I had reason to dread a fair outside, to mistrust a popular bearing, to shudder before distinction, grace, and courtesy. Beauty and affability had come in my way when I was recluse, desolate, young, and ignorant: a toil-worn governess perishing of uncheered labour, breaking down before her time. These, Caroline, when they smiled on me, I mistook for angels! I followed them home, and when into their hands I had given without reserve my whole chance of future happiness, it was my lot to witness a transfiguration on the domestic hearth: to see the white mask lifted, the bright disguise put away, and opposite me sat down - O God! I have suffered!'

She sank on the pillow.

'I have suffered! None saw - none knew: there was no sympathy - no redemption - no redress!'

'Take comfort, mother: it is over now.'

'It is over, and not fruitlessly. I tried to keep the word of His patience: He kept me in the days of my anguish. I was afraid with terror - I was troubled: through great tribulation He brought me through to a salvation revealed in this last time. My fear had torment - He has cast it out: He has given me in its stead perfect love. . . . But, Caroline - - '

Thus she invoked her daughter after a pause.

'Mother!'

'I charge you, when you next look on your father's monument, to respect the name chiselled there. To you he did only good. On you he

conferred his whole treasure of beauties; nor added to them one dark defect. All you derived from him is excellent. You owe him gratitude. Leave, between him and me, the settlement of our mutual account: meddle not: God is the arbiter. This world's laws never came near us - never! They were powerless as a rotten bulrush to protect me! - impotent as idiot babblings to restrain him! As you said, it is all over now: the grave lies between us. There he sleeps - in that church! To his dust I say this night, what I have never said before, 'James, slumber peacefully! See! your terrible debt is cancelled! Look! I wipe out the long, black account with my own hand! James, your child atones: this living likeness of you - this thing with your perfect features - this one good gift you gave me has nestled affectionately to my heart, and tenderly called me 'mother.' Husband! rest forgiven!'

'Dearest mother, that is right! Can papa's spirit hear us? Is he comforted to know that we still love him?'

'I said nothing of love: I spoke of forgiveness. Mind the truth, child - I said nothing of love! On the threshold of eternity, should he be there to see me enter, will I maintain that.'

'Oh, mother! you must have suffered!'

'Oh, child! the human heart can suffer. It can hold more tears than the ocean holds waters. We never know how deep - how wide it is, till misery begins to unbind her clouds, and fill it with rushing blackness.'

'Mother, forget.'

'Forget!' she said, with the strangest spectre of a laugh. 'The north pole will rush to the south, and the headlands of Europe be locked into the bays of Australia ere I forget.'

'Hush, mother! rest! - be at peace!'

And the child lulled the parent, as the parent had erst lulled the child. At last Mrs Pryor wept: she then grew calmer. She resumed those tender cares agitation had for a moment suspended. Replacing her daughter on the couch, she smoothed the pillow, and spread the sheet. The soft hair whose locks were loosened, she rearranged, the damp brow she refreshed with a cool, fragrant essence.

'Mamma, let them bring a candle, that I may see you; and tell my uncle to come into this room by-and-by: I want to hear him say that I am your daughter: and, mamma, take your supper here; don't leave me for one minute to-night.'

'Oh, Caroline! it is well you are gentle. You will say to me go, and I shall go; come, and I shall come; do this, and I shall do it. You inherit a certain manner as well as certain features. It will be always 'mamma' prefacing a mandate: softly spoken though from you, thank God! Well'(she added, under her breath), 'he spoke softly too, once, - like a flute breathing tenderness; and then, when the world was not by to listen, discords that split the nerves and curdled the blood - sounds to inspire insanity.'

'It seems so natural, mamma, to ask you for this and that. I shall want nobody but you to be near me, or to do anything for me; but do not let me be troublesome: check me, if I encroach.'

'You must not depend on me to check you: you must keep guard over yourself. I have little moral courage: the want of it is my bane. It is that which has made me an unnatural parent - which has kept me apart from my child during the ten years which have elapsed since my husband's death left me at liberty to claim her: it was that which first unnerved my arms and permitted the infant I might have retained a while longer to be snatched prematurely from their embrace.'

'How, mamma?'

'I let you go as a babe, because you were pretty, and I feared your loveliness; deeming it the stamp of perversity. They sent me your portrait, taken at eight years old; that portrait confirmed my fears. Had it shown me a sunburnt little rustic - a heavy, blunt-featured, commonplace child - I should have hastened to claim you; but there, under the silver paper, I saw blooming the delicacy of an aristocratic flower - 'little lady' was written on every trait. I had too recently crawled from under the yoke of the fine gentleman - escaped, galled, crushed, paralysed, dying - to dare to encounter his still finer and most fairy-like representative. My sweet little lady overwhelmed me with dismay: her air of native elegance froze my very marrow. In my experience I had not met with truth, modesty, good principle as the concomitants of beauty. A form so straight and fine, I argued, must conceal a mind warped and cruel. I had little faith in the power of education to rectify such a mind; or rather, I entirely misdoubted my own ability to influence it. Caroline, I dared not undertake to rear you: I resolved to leave you in your uncle's hands. Matthewson Helstone I knew, if an austere, was an upright man. He and all the world thought hardly of me for my strange, unmotherly resolve, and I deserved to be misjudged.'

'Mamma, why did you call yourself Mrs Pryor?'

'It was a name in my mother's family. I adopted it that I might live unmolested. My married name recalled too vividly my married life: I

could not bear it. Besides, threats were uttered of forcing me to return to bondage: it could not be; rather a bier for a bed - the grave for a home. My new name sheltered me: I resumed under its screen my old occupation of teaching. At first, it scarcely procured me the means of sustaining life; but how savoury was hunger when I fasted in peace! How safe seemed the darkness and chill of an unkindled hearth, when no lurid reflection from terror crimsoned its desolation! How serene was solitude, when I feared not the irruption of violence and vice.'

'But, mamma, you have been in this neighbourhood before. How did it happen, that when you re-appeared here with Miss Keeldar, you were not recognised?'

'I only paid a short visit, as a bride, twenty years ago; and then I was very different to what I am now - slender, almost as slender as my daughter is at this day: my complexion - my very features are changed; my hair, my style of dress - everything is altered. You cannot fancy me a slim young person, attired in scanty drapery of white muslin, with bare arms, bracelets and necklace of beads, and hair disposed in round Grecian curls above my forehead?'

'You must, indeed, have been different. Mamma, I heard the front door open: if it is my uncle coming in, just ask him to step upstairs, and let me hear his assurance that I am truly awake and collected, and not dreaming or delirious.'

The Rector, of his own accord, was mounting the stairs; and Mrs Pryor summoned him to his niece's apartment.

'She's not worse, I hope?' he inquired hastily.

'I think her better; she is disposed to converse - she seems stronger,'

'Good!' said he, brushing quickly into the room. 'Ha, Cary! how do? Did you drink my cup of tea? I made it for you just as I like it myself.'

'I drank it every drop, uncle: it did me good - it has made me quite alive. I have a wish for company, so I begged Mrs Pryor to call you in.'

The respected ecclesiastic looked pleased, and yet embarrassed. He was willing enough to bestow his company on his sick niece for ten minutes, since it was her whim to wish it; but what means to employ for her entertainment, he knew not: he hemmed - he fidgeted.

'You'll be up in a trice,' he observed, by way of saying something. 'The little weakness will soon pass off; and then you must drink port-wine - a pipe, if you can - and eat game and oysters: I'll get them for you, if

they are to be had anywhere. Bless me! we'll make you as strong as Samson before we've done with you.'

'Who is that lady, uncle, standing beside you at the bed-foot?'

'Good God!' he ejaculated. 'She's not wandering - is she, ma'am?'

Mrs Pryor smiled.

'I am wandering in a pleasant world,' said Caroline, in a soft, happy voice, 'and I want you to tell me whether it is real or visionary. What lady is that? Give her a name, uncle?'

'We must have Dr. Rile again, ma'am, or better still, MacTurk: he's less of a humbug. Thomas must saddle the pony, and go for him.'

'No: I don't want a doctor; mamma shall be my only physician. Now, do you understand, uncle?'

Mr Helstone pushed up his spectacles from his nose to his forehead, handled his snuff-box, and administered to himself a portion of the contents. Thus fortified, he answered briefly - 'I see daylight. You've told her then, ma'am?'

'And is it true?' demanded Caroline, rising on her pillow. 'Is she really my mother?'

'You won't cry, or make any scene, or turn hysterical, if I answer Yes?'

'Cry? I'd cry if you said No. It would be terrible to be disappointed now. But give her a name: how do you call her?'

'I call this stout lady in a quaint black dress, who looks young enough to wear much smarter raiment, if she would - I call her Agnes Helstone: she married my brother James, and is his widow.'

'And my mother?'

'What a little sceptic it is! Look at her small face, Mrs Pryor, scarcely larger than the palm of my hand, alive with acuteness and eagerness.' (To Caroline.) 'She had the trouble of bringing you into the world at any rate: mind you show your duty to her by quickly getting well, and repairing the waste of these cheeks. Heigho! she used to be plump: what she has done with it all, I can't, for the life of me, divine.'

'If wishing to get well will help me, I shall not be long sick, This morning, I had no reason and no strength to wish it.'

Fanny here tapped at the door, and said that supper was ready.

'Uncle, if you please, you may send me a little bit of supper - anything you like, from your own plate. That is wiser than going into hysterics, - is it not?'

'It is spoken like a sage, Cary: see if I don't cater for you judiciously. When women are sensible - and, above all, intelligible - I can get on with them. It is only the vague, superfine sensations, and extremely wire-drawn notions, that put me about. Let a woman ask me to give her an edible or a wearable - be the same a roc's egg or the breastplate of Aaron, a share of St. John's locusts and honey or the leathern girdle about his loins - I can, at least, understand the demand: but when they pine for they know not what - sympathy - sentiment - some of these indefinite abstractions - I can't do it: I don't know it; I haven't got it. Madam, accept my arm.'

Mrs Pryor signified that she should stay with her daughter that evening. Helstone, accordingly, left them together. He soon returned, bringing a plate in his own consecrated hand.

'This is chicken,' he said; 'but we'll have partridge tomorrow. Lift her up, and put a shawl over her. On my word, I understand nursing. Now, here is the very same little silver fork you used when you first came to the Rectory: that strikes me as being what you may call a happy thought - a delicate attention. Take it, Cary, and munch away cleverly.'

Caroline did her best. Her uncle frowned to see that her powers were so limited: he prophesied, however, great things for the future; and as she praised the morsel he had brought, and smiled gratefully in his face, he stooped over her pillow, kissed her, and said, with a broken, rugged accent - 'Good night, bairnie! God bless thee!'

Caroline enjoyed such peaceful rest that night, circled by her mother's arms, and pillowed on her breast, that she forgot to wish for any other stay; and though more than one feverish dream came to her in slumber, yet, when she woke up panting, so happy and contented a feeling returned with returning consciousness, that her agitation was soothed almost as soon as felt.

As to the mother, she spent the night like Jacob at Peniel. Till break of day, she wrestled with God in earnest prayer.