Chapter LVIII - After A Lapse

The sea had ebbed and flowed, through a whole year. Through a whole year, the winds and clouds had come and gone; the ceaseless work of Time had been performed, in storm and sunshine. Through a whole year, the tides of human chance and change had set in their allotted courses. Through a whole year, the famous House of Dombey and Son had fought a fight for life, against cross accidents, doubtful rumours, unsuccessful ventures, unpropitious times, and most of all, against the infatuation of its head, who would not contract its enterprises by a hair's breadth, and would not listen to a word of warning that the ship he strained so hard against the storm, was weak, and could not bear it. The year was out, and the great House was down.

One summer afternoon; a year, wanting some odd days, after the marriage in the City church; there was a buzz and whisper upon 'Change of a great failure. A certain cold proud man, well known there, was not there, nor was he represented there. Next day it was noised abroad that Dombey and Son had stopped, and next night there was a List of Bankrupts published, headed by that name.

The world was very busy now, in sooth, and had a deal to say. It was an innocently credulous and a much ill-used world. It was a world in which there was 'no other sort of bankruptcy whatever. There were no conspicuous people in it, trading far and wide on rotten banks of religion, patriotism, virtue, honour. There was no amount worth mentioning of mere paper in circulation, on which anybody lived pretty handsomely, promising to pay great sums of goodness with no effects. There were no shortcomings anywhere, in anything but money. The world was very angry indeed; and the people especially, who, in a worse world, might have been supposed to be apt traders themselves in shows and pretences, were observed to be mightily indignant.

Here was a new inducement to dissipation, presented to that sport of circumstances, Mr Perch the Messenger! It was apparently the fate of Mr Perch to be always waking up, and finding himself famous. He had but yesterday, as one might say, subsided into private life from the celebrity of the elopement and the events that followed it; and now he was made a more important man than ever, by the bankruptcy. Gliding from his bracket in the outer office where he now sat, watching the strange faces of accountants and others, who quickly superseded nearly all the old clerks, Mr Perch had but to show himself in the court outside, or, at farthest, in the bar of the King's Arms, to be asked a multitude of questions, almost certain to include that interesting question, what would he take to drink? Then would Mr Perch descant upon the hours of acute uneasiness he and Mrs Perch had suffered out at Balls Pond, when they first suspected 'things was

going wrong.' Then would Mr Perch relate to gaping listeners, in a low voice, as if the corpse of the deceased House were lying unburied in the next room, how Mrs Perch had first come to surmise that things was going wrong by hearing him (Perch) moaning in his sleep, 'twelve and ninepence in the pound, twelve and ninepence in the pound!' Which act of somnambulism he supposed to have originated in the impression made upon him by the change in Mr Dombey's face. Then would he inform them how he had once said, 'Might I make so bold as ask, Sir, are you unhappy in your mind?' and how Mr Dombey had replied, 'My faithful Perch - but no, it cannot be!' and with that had struck his hand upon his forehead, and said, 'Leave me, Perch!' Then, in short, would Mr Perch, a victim to his position, tell all manner of lies; affecting himself to tears by those that were of a moving nature, and really believing that the inventions of yesterday had, on repetition, a sort of truth about them to-day.

Mr Perch always closed these conferences by meekly remarking, That, of course, whatever his suspicions might have been (as if he had ever had any!) it wasn't for him to betray his trust, was it? Which sentiment (there never being any creditors present) was received as doing great honour to his feelings. Thus, he generally brought away a soothed conscience and left an agreeable impression behind him, when he returned to his bracket: again to sit watching the strange faces of the accountants and others, making so free with the great mysteries, the Books; or now and then to go on tiptoe into Mr Dombey's empty room, and stir the fire; or to take an airing at the door, and have a little more doleful chat with any straggler whom he knew; or to propitiate, with various small attentions, the head accountant: from whom Mr Perch had expectations of a messengership in a Fire Office, when the affairs of the House should be wound up.

To Major Bagstock, the bankruptcy was quite a calamity. The Major was not a sympathetic character - his attention being wholly concentrated on J. B. - nor was he a man subject to lively emotions, except in the physical regards of gasping and choking. But he had so paraded his friend Dombey at the club; had so flourished him at the heads of the members in general, and so put them down by continual assertion of his riches; that the club, being but human, was delighted to retort upon the Major, by asking him, with a show of great concern, whether this tremendous smash had been at all expected, and how his friend Dombey bore it. To such questions, the Major, waxing very purple, would reply that it was a bad world, Sir, altogether; that Joey knew a thing or two, but had been done, Sir, done like an infant; that if you had foretold this, Sir, to J. Bagstock, when he went abroad with Dombey and was chasing that vagabond up and down France, J. Bagstock would have pooh-pooh'd you - would have pooh- pooh'd you, Sir, by the Lord! That Joe had been deceived, Sir, taken in,

hoodwinked, blindfolded, but was broad awake again and staring; insomuch, Sir, that if Joe's father were to rise up from the grave to-morrow, he wouldn't trust the old blade with a penny piece, but would tell him that his son Josh was too old a soldier to be done again, Sir. That he was a suspicious, crabbed, cranky, used-up, J. B. infidel, Sir; and that if it were consistent with the dignity of a rough and tough old Major, of the old school, who had had the honour of being personally known to, and commended by, their late Royal Highnesses the Dukes of Kent and York, to retire to a tub and live in it, by Gad! Sir, he'd have a tub in Pall Mall to-morrow, to show his contempt for mankind!'

Of all this, and many variations of the same tune, the Major would deliver himself with so many apoplectic symptoms, such rollings of his head, and such violent growls of ill usage and resentment, that the younger members of the club surmised he had invested money in his friend Dombey's House, and lost it; though the older soldiers and deeper dogs, who knew Joe better, wouldn't hear of such a thing. The unfortunate Native, expressing no opinion, suffered dreadfully; not merely in his moral feelings, which were regularly fusilladed by the Major every hour in the day, and riddled through and through, but in his sensitiveness to bodily knocks and bumps, which was kept continually on the stretch. For six entire weeks after the bankruptcy, this miserable foreigner lived in a rainy season of boot-jacks and brushes.

Mrs Chick had three ideas upon the subject of the terrible reverse. The first was that she could not understand it. The second, that her brother had not made an effort. The third, that if she had been invited to dinner on the day of that first party, it never would have happened; and that she had said so, at the time.

Nobody's opinion stayed the misfortune, lightened it, or made it heavier. It was understood that the affairs of the House were to be wound up as they best could be; that Mr Dombey freely resigned everything he had, and asked for no favour from anyone. That any resumption of the business was out of the question, as he would listen to no friendly negotiation having that compromise in view; that he had relinquished every post of trust or distinction he had held, as a man respected among merchants; that he was dying, according to some; that he was going melancholy mad, according to others; that he was a broken man, according to all.

The clerks dispersed after holding a little dinner of condolence among themselves, which was enlivened by comic singing, and went off admirably. Some took places abroad, and some engaged in other Houses at home; some looked up relations in the country, for whom they suddenly remembered they had a particular affection; and some advertised for employment in the newspapers. Mr Perch alone

remained of all the late establishment, sitting on his bracket looking at the accountants, or starting off it, to propitiate the head accountant, who was to get him into the Fire Office. The Counting House soon got to be dirty and neglected. The principal slipper and dogs' collar seller, at the corner of the court, would have doubted the propriety of throwing up his forefinger to the brim of his hat, any more, if Mr Dombey had appeared there now; and the ticket porter, with his hands under his white apron, moralised good sound morality about ambition, which (he observed) was not, in his opinion, made to rhyme to perdition, for nothing.

Mr Morfin, the hazel-eyed bachelor, with the hair and whiskers sprinkled with grey, was perhaps the only person within the atmosphere of the House - its head, of course, excepted - who was heartily and deeply affected by the disaster that had befallen it. He had treated Mr Dombey with due respect and deference through many years, but he had never disguised his natural character, or meanly truckled to him, or pampered his master passion for the advancement of his own purposes. He had, therefore, no self-disrespect to avenge; no long-tightened springs to release with a quick recoil. He worked early and late to unravel whatever was complicated or difficult in the records of the transactions of the House; was always in attendance to explain whatever required explanation; sat in his old room sometimes very late at night, studying points by his mastery of which he could spare Mr Dombey the pain of being personally referred to; and then would go home to Islington, and calm his mind by producing the most dismal and forlorn sounds out of his violoncello before going to bed.

He was solacing himself with this melodious grumbler one evening, and, having been much dispirited by the proceedings of the day, was scraping consolation out of its deepest notes, when his landlady (who was fortunately deaf, and had no other consciousness of these performances than a sensation of something rumbling in her bones) announced a lady.

'In mourning,' she said.

The violoncello stopped immediately; and the performer, laying it on the sofa with great tenderness and care, made a sign that the lady was to come in. He followed directly, and met Harriet Carker on the stair.

'Alone!' he said, 'and John here this morning! Is there anything the matter, my dear? But no,' he added, 'your face tells quite another story.' 'I am afraid it is a selfish revelation that you see there, then,' she answered.

'It is a very pleasant one,' said he; 'and, if selfish, a novelty too, worth seeing in you. But I don't believe that.'

He had placed a chair for her by this time, and sat down opposite; the violoncello lying snugly on the sofa between them.

'You will not be surprised at my coming alone, or at John's not having told you I was coming,' said Harriet; 'and you will believe that, when I tell you why I have come. May I do so now?'

'You can do nothing better.'

'You were not busy?'

He pointed to the violoncello lying on the sofa, and said 'I have been, all day. Here's my witness. I have been confiding all my cares to it. I wish I had none but my own to tell.'

'Is the House at an end?' said Harriet, earnestly.

'Completely at an end.'

'Will it never be resumed?'

'Never.'

The bright expression of her face was not overshadowed as her lips silently repeated the word. He seemed to observe this with some little involuntary surprise: and said again:

'Never. You remember what I told you. It has been, all along, impossible to convince him; impossible to reason with him; sometimes, impossible even to approach him. The worst has happened; and the House has fallen, never to be built up any more.'

'And Mr Dombey, is he personally ruined?'

'Ruined.'

'Will he have no private fortune left? Nothing?'

A certain eagerness in her voice, and something that was almost joyful in her look, seemed to surprise him more and more; to disappoint him too, and jar discordantly against his own emotions. He drummed with the fingers of one hand on the table, looking wistfully at her, and shaking his head, said, after a pause:

'The extent of Mr Dombey's resources is not accurately within my knowledge; but though they are doubtless very large, his obligations are enormous. He is a gentleman of high honour and integrity. Any man in his position could, and many a man in his position would, have saved himself, by making terms which would have very slightly, almost insensibly, increased the losses of those who had had dealings with him, and left him a remnant to live upon. But he is resolved on payment to the last farthing of his means. His own words are, that they will clear, or nearly clear, the House, and that no one can lose much. Ah, Miss Harriet, it would do us no harm to remember oftener than we do, that vices are sometimes only virtues carried to excess! His pride shows well in this.'

She heard him with little or no change in her expression, and with a divided attention that showed her to be busy with something in her own mind. When he was silent, she asked him hurriedly:

'Have you seen him lately?'

'No one sees him. When this crisis of his affairs renders it necessary for him to come out of his house, he comes out for the occasion, and again goes home, and shuts himself up, and will sea no one. He has written me a letter, acknowledging our past connexion in higher terms than it deserved, and parting from me. I am delicate of obtruding myself upon him now, never having had much intercourse with him in better times; but I have tried to do so. I have written, gone there, entreated. Quite in vain.'

He watched her, as in the hope that she would testify some greater concern than she had yet shown; and spoke gravely and feelingly, as if to impress her the more; but there was no change in her.

'Well, well, Miss Harriet,' he said, with a disappointed air, 'this is not to the purpose. You have not come here to hear this. Some other and pleasanter theme is in your mind. Let it be in mine, too, and we shall talk upon more equal terms. Come!'

'No, it is the same theme,' returned Harriet, with frank and quick surprise. 'Is it not likely that it should be? Is it not natural that John and I should have been thinking and speaking very much of late of these great changes? Mr Dombey, whom he served so many years - you know upon what terms - reduced, as you describe; and we quite rich!'

Good, true face, as that face of hers was, and pleasant as it had been to him, Mr Morfin, the hazel-eyed bachelor, since the first time he had ever looked upon it, it pleased him less at that moment, lighted with a ray of exultation, than it had ever pleased him before.

'I need not remind you,' said Harriet, casting down her eyes upon her black dress, 'through what means our circumstances changed. You have not forgotten that our brother James, upon that dreadful day, left no will, no relations but ourselves.'

The face was pleasanter to him now, though it was pale and melancholy, than it had been a moment since. He seemed to breathe more cheerily.

'You know,' she said, 'our history, the history of both my brothers, in connexion with the unfortunate, unhappy gentleman, of whom you have spoken so truly. You know how few our wants are - John's and mine - and what little use we have for money, after the life we have led together for so many years; and now that he is earning an income that is ample for us, through your kindness. You are not unprepared to hear what favour I have come to ask of you?'

'I hardly know. I was, a minute ago. Now, I think, I am not.'

'Of my dead brother I say nothing. If the dead know what we do - but you understand me. Of my living brother I could say much; but what need I say more, than that this act of duty, in which I have come to ask your indispensable assistance, is his own, and that he cannot rest until it is performed!'

She raised her eyes again; and the light of exultation in her face began to appear beautiful, in the observant eyes that watched her.

'Dear Sir,' she went on to say, 'it must be done very quietly and secretly. Your experience and knowledge will point out a way of doing it. Mr Dombey may, perhaps, be led to believe that it is something saved, unexpectedly, from the wreck of his fortunes; or that it is a voluntary tribute to his honourable and upright character, from some of those with whom he has had great dealings; or that it is some old lost debt repaid. There must be many ways of doing it. I know you will choose the best. The favour I have come to ask is, that you will do it for us in your own kind, generous, considerate manner. That you will never speak of it to John, whose chief happiness in this act of restitution is to do it secretly, unknown, and unapproved of: that only a very small part of the inheritance may be reserved to us, until Mr Dombey shall have possessed the interest of the rest for the remainder of his life; that you will keep our secret, faithfully - but that I am sure you will; and that, from this time, it may seldom be whispered, even between you and me, but may live in my thoughts only as a new reason for thankfulness to Heaven, and joy and pride in my brother.'

Such a look of exultation there may be on Angels' faces when the one repentant sinner enters Heaven, among ninety-nine just men. It was

not dimmed or tarnished by the joyful tears that filled her eyes, but was the brighter for them.

'My dear Harriet,' said Mr Morfin, after a silence, 'I was not prepared for this. Do I understand you that you wish to make your own part in the inheritance available for your good purpose, as well as John's?'

'Oh, yes,' she returned 'When we have shared everything together for so long a time, and have had no care, hope, or purpose apart, could I bear to be excluded from my share in this? May I not urge a claim to be my brother's partner and companion to the last?'

'Heaven forbid that I should dispute it!' he replied.

'We may rely on your friendly help?' she said. 'I knew we might!'

'I should be a worse man than, - than I hope I am, or would willingly believe myself, if I could not give you that assurance from my heart and soul. You may, implicitly. Upon my honour, I will keep your secret. And if it should be found that Mr Dombey is so reduced as I fear he will be, acting on a determination that there seem to be no means of influencing, I will assist you to accomplish the design, on which you and John are jointly resolved.'

She gave him her hand, and thanked him with a cordial, happy face.

'Harriet,' he said, detaining it in his. 'To speak to you of the worth of any sacrifice that you can make now - above all, of any sacrifice of mere money - would be idle and presumptuous. To put before you any appeal to reconsider your purpose or to set narrow limits to it, would be, I feel, not less so. I have no right to mar the great end of a great history, by any obtrusion of my own weak self. I have every right to bend my head before what you confide to me, satisfied that it comes from a higher and better source of inspiration than my poor worldly knowledge. I will say only this: I am your faithful steward; and I would rather be so, and your chosen friend, than I would be anybody in the world, except yourself.'

She thanked him again, cordially, and wished him good-night. 'Are you going home?' he said. 'Let me go with you.'

'Not to-night. I am not going home now; I have a visit to make alone. Will you come to-morrow?'

'Well, well,' said he, 'I'll come to-morrow. In the meantime, I'll think of this, and how we can best proceed. And perhaps I'll think of it, dear Harriet, and - and - think of me a little in connexion with it.'

He handed her down to a coach she had in waiting at the door; and if his landlady had not been deaf, she would have heard him muttering as he went back upstairs, when the coach had driven off, that we were creatures of habit, and it was a sorrowful habit to be an old bachelor.

The violoncello lying on the sofa between the two chairs, he took it up, without putting away the vacant chair, and sat droning on it, and slowly shaking his head at the vacant chair, for a long, long time. The expression he communicated to the instrument at first, though monstrously pathetic and bland, was nothing to the expression he communicated to his own face, and bestowed upon the empty chair: which was so sincere, that he was obliged to have recourse to Captain Cuttle's remedy more than once, and to rub his face with his sleeve. By degrees, however, the violoncello, in unison with his own frame of mind, glided melodiously into the Harmonious Blacksmith, which he played over and over again, until his ruddy and serene face gleamed like true metal on the anvil of a veritable blacksmith. In fine, the violoncello and the empty chair were the companions of his bachelorhood until nearly midnight; and when he took his supper, the violoncello set up on end in the sofa corner, big with the latent harmony of a whole foundry full of harmonious blacksmiths, seemed to ogle the empty chair out of its crooked eyes, with unutterable intelligence.

When Harriet left the house, the driver of her hired coach, taking a course that was evidently no new one to him, went in and out by bye-ways, through that part of the suburbs, until he arrived at some open ground, where there were a few quiet little old houses standing among gardens. At the garden-gate of one of these he stopped, and Harriet alighted.

Her gentle ringing at the bell was responded to by a dolorous-looking woman, of light complexion, with raised eyebrows, and head drooping on one side, who curtseyed at sight of her, and conducted her across the garden to the house.

'How is your patient, nurse, to-night?' said Harriet.

'In a poor way, Miss, I am afraid. Oh how she do remind me, sometimes, of my Uncle's Betsey Jane!' returned the woman of the light complexion, in a sort of doleful rapture.

'In what respect?' asked Harriet.

'Miss, in all respects,' replied the other, 'except that she's grown up, and Betsey Jane, when at death's door, was but a child.'

'But you have told me she recovered,' observed Harriet mildly; 'so there is the more reason for hope, Mrs Wickam.'

'Ah, Miss, hope is an excellent thing for such as has the spirits to bear it!' said Mrs Wickam, shaking her head. 'My own spirits is not equal to it, but I don't owe it any grudge. I envys them that is so blest!'

'You should try to be more cheerful,' remarked Harriet.

'Thank you, Miss, I'm sure,' said Mrs Wickam grimly. 'If I was so inclined, the loneliness of this situation - you'll excuse my speaking so free - would put it out of my power, in four and twenty hours; but I ain't at all. I'd rather not. The little spirits that I ever had, I was bereaved of at Brighton some few years ago, and I think I feel myself the better for it.'

In truth, this was the very Mrs Wickam who had superseded Mrs Richards as the nurse of little Paul, and who considered herself to have gained the loss in question, under the roof of the amiable Pipchin. The excellent and thoughtful old system, hallowed by long prescription, which has usually picked out from the rest of mankind the most dreary and uncomfortable people that could possibly be laid hold of, to act as instructors of youth, finger-posts to the virtues, matrons, monitors, attendants on sick beds, and the like, had established Mrs Wickam in very good business as a nurse, and had led to her serious qualities being particularly commended by an admiring and numerous connexion.

Mrs Wickam, with her eyebrows elevated, and her head on one side, lighted the way upstairs to a clean, neat chamber, opening on another chamber dimly lighted, where there was a bed. In the first room, an old woman sat mechanically staring out at the open window, on the darkness. In the second, stretched upon the bed, lay the shadow of a figure that had spurned the wind and rain, one wintry night; hardly to be recognised now, but by the long black hair that showed so very black against the colourless face, and all the white things about it.

Oh, the strong eyes, and the weak frame! The eyes that turned so eagerly and brightly to the door when Harriet came in; the feeble head that could not raise itself, and moved so slowly round upon its pillow!

'Alice!' said the visitor's mild voice, 'am I late to-night?'

'You always seem late, but are always early.'

Harriet had sat down by the bedside now, and put her hand upon the thin hand lying there.

'You are better?'

Mrs Wickam, standing at the foot of the bed, like a disconsolate spectre, most decidedly and forcibly shook her head to negative this position.

'It matters very little!' said Alice, with a faint smile. 'Better or worse to-day, is but a day's difference - perhaps not so much.'

Mrs Wickam, as a serious character, expressed her approval with a groan; and having made some cold dabs at the bottom of the bedclothes, as feeling for the patient's feet and expecting to find them stony; went clinking among the medicine bottles on the table, as who should say, 'while we are here, let us repeat the mixture as before.'

'No,' said Alice, whispering to her visitor, 'evil courses, and remorse, travel, want, and weather, storm within, and storm without, have worn my life away. It will not last much longer.

She drew the hand up as she spoke, and laid her face against it.

'I lie here, sometimes, thinking I should like to live until I had had a little time to show you how grateful I could be! It is a weakness, and soon passes. Better for you as it is. Better for me!'

How different her hold upon the hand, from what it had been when she took it by the fireside on the bleak winter evening! Scorn, rage, defiance, recklessness, look here! This is the end.

Mrs Wickam having clinked sufficiently among the bottles, now produced the mixture. Mrs Wickam looked hard at her patient in the act of drinking, screwed her mouth up tight, her eyebrows also, and shook her head, expressing that tortures shouldn't make her say it was a hopeless case. Mrs Wickam then sprinkled a little cooling-stuff about the room, with the air of a female grave-digger, who was strewing ashes on ashes, dust on dust - for she was a serious character - and withdrew to partake of certain funeral baked meats downstairs.

'How long is it,' asked Alice, 'since I went to you and told you what I had done, and when you were advised it was too late for anyone to follow?'

'It is a year and more,' said Harriet.

'A year and more,' said Alice, thoughtfully intent upon her face. 'Months upon months since you brought me here!'

Harriet answered 'Yes.'

'Brought me here, by force of gentleness and kindness. Me!' said Alice, shrinking with her face behind her hand, 'and made me human by woman's looks and words, and angel's deeds!'

Harriet bending over her, composed and soothed her. By and bye, Alice lying as before, with the hand against her face, asked to have her mother called.

Harriet called to her more than once, but the old woman was so absorbed looking out at the open window on the darkness, that she did not hear. It was not until Harriet went to her and touched her, that she rose up, and came.

'Mother,' said Alice, taking the hand again, and fixing her lustrous eyes lovingly upon her visitor, while she merely addressed a motion of her finger to the old woman, 'tell her what you know.'

'To-night, my deary?'

'Ay, mother,' answered Alice, faintly and solemnly, 'to-night!'

The old woman, whose wits appeared disorderly by alarm, remorse, or grief, came creeping along the side of the bed, opposite to that on which Harriet sat; and kneeling down, so as to bring her withered face upon a level with the coverlet, and stretching out her hand, so as to touch her daughter's arm, began:

'My handsome gal - '

Heaven, what a cry was that, with which she stopped there, gazing at the poor form lying on the bed!

'Changed, long ago, mother! Withered, long ago,' said Alice, without looking at her. 'Don't grieve for that now.

'My daughter,' faltered the old woman, 'my gal who'll soon get better, and shame 'em all with her good looks.'

Alice smiled mournfully at Harriet, and fondled her hand a little closer, but said nothing.

'Who'll soon get better, I say,' repeated the old woman, menacing the vacant air with her shrivelled fist, 'and who'll shame 'em all with her good looks - she will. I say she will! she shall!' - as if she were in passionate contention with some unseen opponent at the bedside, who contradicted her - 'my daughter has been turned away from, and

cast out, but she could boast relationship to proud folks too, if she chose. Ah! To proud folks! There's relationship without your clergy and your wedding rings - they may make it, but they can't break it - and my daughter's well related. Show me Mrs Dombey, and I'll show you my Alice's first cousin.'

Harriet glanced from the old woman to the lustrous eyes intent upon her face, and derived corroboration from them.

'What!' cried the old woman, her nodding head bridling with a ghastly vanity. 'Though I am old and ugly now, - much older by life and habit than years though, - I was once as young as any. Ah! as pretty too, as many! I was a fresh country wench in my time, darling,' stretching out her arm to Harriet, across the bed, 'and looked it, too. Down in my country, Mrs Dombey's father and his brother were the gayest gentlemen and the best-liked that came a visiting from London - they have long been dead, though! Lord, Lord, this long while! The brother, who was my Ally's father, longest of the two.'

She raised her head a little, and peered at her daughter's face; as if from the remembrance of her own youth, she had flown to the remembrance of her child's. Then, suddenly, she laid her face down on the bed, and shut her head up in her hands and arms.

'They were as like,' said the old woman, without looking up, as you could see two brothers, so near an age - there wasn't much more than a year between them, as I recollect - and if you could have seen my gal, as I have seen her once, side by side with the other's daughter, you'd have seen, for all the difference of dress and life, that they were like each other. Oh! is the likeness gone, and is it my gal - only my gal - that's to change so!'

'We shall all change, mother, in our turn,' said Alice.

'Turn!' cried the old woman, 'but why not hers as soon as my gal's! The mother must have changed - she looked as old as me, and full as wrinkled through her paint - but she was handsome. What have I done, I, what have I done worse than her, that only my gal is to lie there fading!' With another of those wild cries, she went running out into the room from which she had come; but immediately, in her uncertain mood, returned, and creeping up to Harriet, said:

'That's what Alice bade me tell you, deary. That's all. I found it out when I began to ask who she was, and all about her, away in Warwickshire there, one summer-time. Such relations was no good to me, then. They wouldn't have owned me, and had nothing to give me. I should have asked 'em, maybe, for a little money, afterwards, if it hadn't been for my Alice; she'd a'most have killed me, if I had, I think

She was as proud as t'other in her way,' said the old woman, touching the face of her daughter fearfully, and withdrawing her hand, 'for all she's so quiet now; but she'll shame 'em with her good looks yet. Ha, ha! She'll shame 'em, will my handsome daughter!'

Her laugh, as she retreated, was worse than her cry; worse than the burst of imbecile lamentation in which it ended; worse than the doting air with which she sat down in her old seat, and stared out at the darkness.

The eyes of Alice had all this time been fixed on Harriet, whose hand she had never released. She said now:

'I have felt, lying here, that I should like you to know this. It might explain, I have thought, something that used to help to harden me. I had heard so much, in my wrongdoing, of my neglected duty, that I took up with the belief that duty had not been done to me, and that as the seed was sown, the harvest grew. I somehow made it out that when ladies had bad homes and mothers, they went wrong in their way, too; but that their way was not so foul a one as mine, and they had need to bless God for it.' That is all past. It is like a dream, now, which I cannot quite remember or understand. It has been more and more like a dream, every day, since you began to sit here, and to read to me. I only tell it you, as I can recollect it. Will you read to me a little more?'

Harriet was withdrawing her hand to open the book, when Alice detained it for a moment.

'You will not forget my mother? I forgive her, if I have any cause. I know that she forgives me, and is sorry in her heart. You will not forget her?'

'Never, Alice!'

'A moment yet. Lay your head so, dear, that as you read I may see the words in your kind face.'

Harriet complied and read - read the eternal book for all the weary, and the heavy-laden; for all the wretched, fallen, and neglected of this earth - read the blessed history, in which the blind lame palsied beggar, the criminal, the woman stained with shame, the shunned of all our dainty clay, has each a portion, that no human pride, indifference, or sophistry, through all the ages that this world shall last, can take away, or by the thousandth atom of a grain reduce - read the ministry of Him who, through the round of human life, and all its hopes and griefs, from birth to death, from infancy to age, had

sweet compassion for, and interest in, its every scene and stage, its every suffering and sorrow.

'I shall come,' said Harriet, when she shut the book, 'very early in the morning.'

The lustrous eyes, yet fixed upon her face, closed for a moment, then opened; and Alice kissed and blest her.

The same eyes followed her to the door; and in their light, and on the tranquil face, there was a smile when it was closed.

They never turned away. She laid her hand upon her breast, murmuring the sacred name that had been read to her; and life passed from her face, like light removed.

Nothing lay there, any longer, but the ruin of the mortal house on which the rain had beaten, and the black hair that had fluttered in the wintry wind.