

## Chapter 50

### Sundered

During the next few weeks Ruth continued very ill. Although the delirium had left her and did not return, her manner was still very strange, and it was remarkable that she slept but little and at long intervals. Mrs Owen came to look after her every day, not going back to her own home till the evening. Frankie used to call for her as he came out of school and then they used to go home together, taking little Freddie Easton with them also, for his own mother was not able to look after him and Mary Linden had so much other work to do.

On Wednesday evening, when the child was about five weeks old, as Mrs Owen was wishing her good night, Ruth took hold of her hand and after saying how grateful she was for all that she had done, she asked whether--supposing anything happened to herself--Nora would promise to take charge of Freddie for Easton. Owen's wife gave the required promise, at the same time affecting to regard the supposition as altogether unlikely, and assuring her that she would soon be better, but she secretly wondered why Ruth had not mentioned the other child as well.

Nora went away about five o'clock, leaving Ruth's bedroom door open so that Mrs Linden could hear her call if she needed anything. About a quarter of an hour after Nora and the two children had gone, Mary

Linden went upstairs to see Ruth, who appeared to have fallen fast asleep; so she returned to her needlework downstairs. The weather had been very cloudy all day, there had been rain at intervals and it was a dark evening, so dark that she had to light the lamp to see her work. Charley sat on the hearthrug in front of the fire repairing one of the wheels of a wooden cart that he had made with the assistance of another boy, and Elsie busied herself preparing the tea.

Easton was not yet home; Rushton & Co. had a few jobs to do and he had been at work since the previous Thursday. The place where he was working was some considerable distance away, so it was nearly half past six when he came home. They heard him at the gate and at her mother's direction Elsie went quickly to the front door, which was ajar, to ask him to walk as quietly as possible so as not to wake Ruth.

Mary had prepared the table for his tea in the kitchen, where there was a bright fire with the kettle singing on the hob. He lit the lamp and after removing his hat and overcoat, put the kettle on the fire and while he was waiting for it to boil he went softly upstairs. There was no lamp burning in the bedroom and the place would have been in utter darkness but for the red glow of the fire, which did not dispel the prevailing obscurity sufficiently to enable him to discern the different objects in the room distinctly. The intense silence that reigned struck him with a sudden terror. He crossed swiftly over to the bed and a moment's examination sufficed to tell him that it was empty. He called her name, but there was no answer, and a hurried search only made it certain that she was nowhere in the house.

Mrs Linden now remembered what Owen's wife had told her of the strange request that Ruth had made, and as she recounted it to Easton, his fears became intensified a thousandfold. He was unable to form any opinion of the reason of her going or of where she had gone, as he rushed out to seek for her. Almost unconsciously he directed his steps to Owen's house, and afterwards the two men went to every place where they thought it possible she might have gone, but without finding any trace of her.

Her father lived a short distance outside the town, and this was one of the first places they went to, although Easton did not think it likely she would go there, for she had not been on friendly terms with her stepmother, and as he had anticipated, it was a fruitless journey.

They sought for her in every conceivable place, returning often to Easton's house to see if she had come home, but they found no trace of her, nor met anyone who had seen her, which was, perhaps, because the dreary, rain-washed streets were deserted by all except those whose business compelled them to be out.

About eleven o'clock Nora was standing at the front door waiting for Owen and Easton, when she thought she could discern a woman's figure in the shadow of the piers of the gate opposite. It was an unoccupied house with a garden in front, and the outlines of the bushes it contained were so vague in the darkness that it was impossible to be certain; but the longer she looked the more convinced she became that

there was someone there. At last she summoned sufficient courage to cross over the road, and as she nervously drew near the gate it became evident that she had not been mistaken. There was a woman standing there--a woman with a child in her arms, leaning against one of the pillars and holding the iron bars of the gate with her left hand. It was Ruth. Nora recognized her even in the semi-darkness. Her attitude was one of extreme exhaustion, and as Nora touched her, she perceived that she was wet through and trembling; but although she was almost fainting with fatigue she would not consent to go indoors until repeatedly assured that Easton was not there, and that Nora would not let him see her if he came. And when at length she yielded and went into the house she would not sit down or take off her hat or jacket until--crouching on the floor beside Nora's chair with her face hidden in the latter's lap--she had sobbed out her pitiful confession, the same things that she had unwittingly told to the same hearer so often before during the illness, the only fact that was new was the account of her wanderings that night.

She cried so bitterly and looked so forlorn and heartbroken and ashamed as she faltered out her woeful story; so consumed with self-condemnation, making no excuse for herself except to repeat over and over again that she had never meant to do wrong, that Nora could not refrain from weeping also as she listened.

It appeared that, unable to bear the reproach that Easton's presence seemed to imply, or to endure the burden of her secret any longer, and always haunted by the thought of the lake in the park, Ruth had formed

the dreadful resolution of taking her own life and the child's. When she arrived at the park gates they were closed and locked for the night but she remembered that there was another means of entering--the place at the far end of the valley where the park was not fenced in, so she had gone there--nearly three miles--only to find that railings had recently been erected and therefore it was no longer possible to get into the park by that way. And then, when she found it impossible to put her resolve into practice, she had realized for the first time the folly and wickedness of the act she had meant to commit. But although she had abandoned her first intention, she said she could never go home again; she would take a room somewhere and get some work to do, or perhaps she might be able to get a situation where they would allow her to have the child with her, or failing that she would work and pay someone to look after it; but she could never go home any more. If she only had somewhere to stay for a few days until she could get something to do, she was sure she would be able to earn her living, but she could not go back home; she felt that she would rather walk about the streets all night than go there again.

It was arranged that Ruth should have the small apartment which had been Frankie's playroom, the necessary furniture being obtained from a second-hand shop close by. Easton did not learn the real reason of her flight until three days afterwards. At first he attributed it to a recurrence of the mental disorder that she had suffered from after the birth of the child, and he had been glad to leave her at Owen's place in Nora's care, but on the evening of the third day when he returned home from work, he found a letter in Ruth's handwriting which told him

all there was to tell.

When he recovered from the stupefaction into which he was thrown by the perusal of this letter, his first thought was to seek out Slyme, but he found upon inquiring that the latter had left the town the previous morning. Slyme's landlady said he had told her that he had been offered several months' work in London, which he had accepted. The truth was that Slyme had heard of Ruth's flight--nearly everyone knew about it as a result of the inquiries that had been made for her--and, guessing the cause, he had prudently cleared out.

Easton made no attempt to see Ruth, but he went to Owen's and took Freddie away, saying he would pay Mrs Linden to look after the child whilst he was at work. His manner was that of a deeply injured man--the possibility that he was in any way to blame for what had happened did not seem to occur to his mind at all.

As for Ruth she made no resistance to his taking the child away from her, although she cried about it in secret. She got some work a few days afterwards--helping the servants at one of the large boarding-houses on the Grand Parade.

Nora looked after the baby for her while she was at work, an arrangement that pleased Frankie vastly; he said it was almost as good as having a baby of their very own.

For the first few weeks after Ruth went away Easton tried to persuade

himself that he did not very much regret what had happened. Mrs Linden looked after Freddie, and Easton tried to believe that he would really be better off now that he had only himself and the child to provide for.

At first, whenever he happened to meet Owen, they used to speak of Ruth, or to be more correct, Easton used to speak of her; but one day when the two men were working together Owen had expressed himself rather offensively. He seemed to think that Easton was more to blame than she was; and afterwards they avoided the subject, although Easton found it difficult to avoid the thoughts the other man's words suggested.

Now and then he heard of Ruth and learnt that she was still working at the same place; and once he met her suddenly and unexpectedly in the street. They passed each other hurriedly and he did not see the scarlet flush that for an instant dyed her face, nor the deathly pallor that succeeded it.

He never went to Owen's place or sent any communication to Ruth, nor did she ever send him any; but although Easton did not know it she frequently saw Freddie, for when Elsie Linden took the child out she often called to see Mrs Owen.

As time went on and the resentment he had felt towards her lost its first bitterness, Easton began to think there was perhaps some little justification for what Owen had said, and gradually there grew within him an immense desire for reconciliation--to start afresh and to forget

all that had happened; but the more he thought of this the more hopeless and impossible of realization it seemed.

Although perhaps he was not conscious of it, this desire arose solely from selfish motives. The money he earned seemed to melt away almost as soon as he received it; to his surprise he found that he was not nearly so well off in regard to personal comfort as he had been formerly, and the house seemed to grow more dreary and desolate as the wintry days dragged slowly by. Sometimes--when he had the money--he sought forgetfulness in the society of Crass and the other frequenters of the Cricketers, but somehow or other he could not take the same pleasure in the conversation of these people as formerly, when he had found it--as he now sometimes wondered to remember--so entertaining as to almost make him forget Ruth's existence.

One evening about three weeks before Christmas, as he and Owen were walking homewards together from work, Easton reverted for the first time to their former conversation. He spoke with a superior air: his manner and tone indicating that he thought he was behaving with great generosity. He would be willing to forgive her and have her back, he said, if she would come: but he would never be able to tolerate the child. Of course it might be sent to an orphanage or some similar institution, but he was afraid Ruth would never consent to that, and he knew that her stepmother would not take it.

'If you can persuade her to return to you, we'll take the child,' said Owen.



'Do you think your wife would be willing?'

'She has already suggested doing so.'

'To Ruth?'

'No: to me. We thought it a possible way for you, and my wife would like to have the child.'

'But would you be able to afford it?' said Easton.

'We should manage all right.'

'Of course,' said Easton, 'if Slyme comes back he might agree to pay something for its keep.'

Owen flushed.

'I wouldn't take his money.'

After a long pause Easton continued: 'Would you mind asking Mrs Owen to suggest it to Ruth?'

'If you like I'll get her to suggest it--as a message from you.'

'What I meant,' said Easton hesitatingly, 'was that your wife might

just suggest it--casual like--and advise her that it would be the best way, and then you could let me know what Ruth said.'

'No,' replied Owen, unable any longer to control his resentment of the other's manner, 'as things stand now, if it were not for the other child, I should advise her to have nothing further to do with you. You seem to think that you are acting a very generous part in being "willing" to have her back, but she's better off now than she was with you. I see no reason--except for the other child--why she should go back to you. As far as I understand it, you had a good wife and you ill-treated her.'

'I never ill-treated her! I never raised my hand to her--at least only once, and then I didn't hurt her. Does she say I ill-treated her.'

'Oh no: from what my wife tells me she only blames herself, but I'm drawing my own conclusions. You may not have struck her, but you did worse--you treated her with indifference and exposed her to temptation. What has happened is the natural result of your neglect and want of care for her. The responsibility for what has happened is mainly yours, but apparently you wish to pose now as being very generous and to "forgive her"--you're "willing" to take her back; but it seems to me that it would be more fitting that you should ask her to forgive you.'

Easton made no answer and after a long silence the other continued:

'I would not advise her to go back to you on such terms as you seem to

think right, because if you became reconciled on such terms I don't think either of you could be happy. Your only chance of happiness is to realize that you have both done wrong; that each of you has something to forgive; to forgive and never speak of it again.'

Easton made no reply and a few minutes afterwards, their ways diverging, they wished each other 'Good night'.

They were working for Rushton--painting the outside of a new conservatory at Mr Sweater's house, 'The Cave'. This job was finished the next day and at four o'clock the boy brought the handcart, which they loaded with their ladders and other materials. They took these back to the yard and then, as it was Friday night, they went up to the front shop and handed in their time sheets. Afterwards, as they were about to separate, Easton again referred to the subject of their conversation of the previous evening. He had been very reserved and silent all day, scarcely uttering a word except when the work they had been engaged in made it necessary to do so, and there was now a sort of catch in his voice as he spoke.

'I've been thinking over what you said last night; it's quite true. I've been a great deal to blame. I wrote to Ruth last night and admitted it to her. I'll take it as a favour if you and your wife will say what you can to help me get her back.'

Owen stretched out his hand and as the other took it, said: 'You may rely on us both to do our best.'