

# Ruth



*Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell*

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## CHAPTER I

### The Dressmaker's Apprentice at Work

There is an assize-town in one of the eastern counties which was much distinguished by the Tudor sovereigns, and, in consequence of their favour and protection, attained a degree of importance that surprises the modern traveller.

A hundred years ago its appearance was that of picturesque grandeur. The old houses, which were the temporary residences of such of the county-families as contented themselves with the gaieties of a provincial town, crowded the streets and gave them the irregular but noble appearance yet to be seen in the cities of Belgium. The sides of the streets had a quaint richness, from the effect of the gables, and the stacks of chimneys which cut against the blue sky above; while, if the eye fell lower down, the attention was arrested by all kinds of projections in the shape of balcony and oriel; and it was amusing to see the infinite variety of windows that had been crammed into the walls long before Mr Pitt's days of taxation. The streets below suffered from all these projections and advanced stories above; they were dark, and ill-paved with large, round, jolting pebbles, and with no side-path protected by kerb-stones; there were no lamp-posts for long winter nights; and no regard was paid to the wants of the middle class, who neither drove about in coaches of their own, nor were carried by their own men in their own sedans into the very halls of their friends. The professional men and their wives, the shopkeepers and their spouses, and all such people, walked about at considerable peril both night and day. The broad unwieldy carriages hemmed them up against the houses in the narrow streets. The inhospitable houses projected their flights of steps almost into the carriage-way, forcing pedestrians again into the danger they had avoided for twenty or thirty paces. Then, at night, the only light was derived from the glaring, flaring oil-lamps hung above the doors of the more aristocratic mansions; just allowing space for the passers-by to become visible, before they again disappeared into the darkness, where it was no uncommon thing for robbers to be in waiting for their prey.

The traditions of those bygone times, even to the smallest social particular, enable one to understand more clearly the circumstances which contributed to the formation of character. The daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise, and to break when the right time comes—when an inward necessity for independent individual action arises,

which is superior to all outward conventionalities. Therefore it is well to know what were the chains of daily domestic habit which were the natural leading-strings of our forefathers before they learnt to go alone.

The picturesqueness of those ancient streets has departed now. The Astleys, the Dunstans, the Waverhams—names of power in that district—go up duly to London in the season, and have sold their residences in the county-town fifty years ago, or more. And when the county-town lost its attraction for the Astleys, the Dunstans, the Waverhams, how could it be supposed that the Domvilles, the Bextons, and the Wildes would continue to go and winter there in their second-rate houses, and with their increased expenditure? So the grand old houses stood empty awhile; and then speculators ventured to purchase, and to turn the deserted mansions into many smaller dwellings, fitted for professional men, or even (bend your ear lower, lest the shade of Marmaduke, first Baron Waverham, hear) into shops!

Even that was not so very bad, compared with the next innovation on the old glories. The shopkeepers found out that the once fashionable street was dark, and that the dingy light did not show off their goods to advantage; the surgeon could not see to draw his patient's teeth; the lawyer had to ring for candles an hour earlier than he was accustomed to do when living in a more plebeian street. In short, by mutual consent, the whole front of one side of the street was pulled down, and rebuilt in the flat, mean, unrelieved style of George the Third. The body of the houses was too solidly grand to submit to alteration; so people were occasionally surprised, after passing through a commonplace-looking shop, to find themselves at the foot of a grand carved oaken staircase, lighted by a window of stained glass, storied all over with armorial bearings.

Up such a stair—past such a window (through which the moonlight fell on her with a glory of many colours)—Ruth Hilton passed wearily one January night, now many years ago. I call it night; but, strictly speaking, it was morning. Two o'clock in the morning chimed forth the old bells of St Saviour's. And yet more than a dozen girls still sat in the room into which Ruth entered, stitching away as if for very life, not daring to gape, or show any outward manifestation of sleepiness. They only sighed a little when Ruth told Mrs Mason the hour of the night, as the result of her errand; for they knew that, stay up as late as they might, the work-hours of the next day must begin at eight, and their young limbs were very weary.

Mrs Mason worked away as hard as any of them; but she was older and tougher; and, besides, the gains were hers. But even she perceived that some rest was needed. "Young ladies! there will be an interval allowed of half an hour. Ring the bell, Miss Sutton. Martha shall bring you up some bread and cheese and beer. You will be so good as to eat it standing—away from the dresses—and to have your hands washed ready

for work when I return. In half an hour," said she once more, very distinctly; and then she left the room.

It was curious to watch the young girls as they instantaneously availed themselves of Mrs Mason's absence. One fat, particularly heavy-looking damsel laid her head on her folded arms and was asleep in a moment; refusing to be wakened for her share in the frugal supper, but springing up with a frightened look at the sound of Mrs Mason's returning footstep, even while it was still far off on the echoing stairs. Two or three others huddled over the scanty fireplace, which, with every possible economy of space, and no attempt whatever at anything of grace or ornament, was inserted in the slight, flat-looking wall, that had been run up by the present owner of the property to portion off this division of the grand old drawing-room of the mansion. Some employed the time in eating their bread and cheese, with as measured and incessant a motion of the jaws (and almost as stupidly placid an expression of countenance), as you may see in cows ruminating in the first meadow you happen to pass.

Some held up admiringly the beautiful ball-dress in progress, while others examined the effect, backing from the object to be criticised in the true artistic manner. Others stretched themselves into all sorts of postures to relieve the weary muscles; one or two gave vent to all the yawns, coughs, and sneezes that had been pent up so long in the presence of Mrs Mason. But Ruth Hilton sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage. She put back the blind, and gazed into the quiet moonlight night. It was doubly light—almost as much so as day—for everything was covered with the deep snow which had been falling silently ever since the evening before. The window was in a square recess; the old strange little panes of glass had been replaced by those which gave more light. A little distance off, the feathery branches of a larch waved softly to and fro in the scarcely perceptible night-breeze. Poor old larch! the time had been when it had stood in a pleasant lawn, with the tender grass creeping caressingly up to its very trunk; but now the lawn was divided into yards and squalid back premises, and the larch was pent up and girded about with flag-stones. The snow lay thick on its boughs, and now and then fell noiselessly down. The old stables had been added to, and altered into a dismal street of mean-looking houses, back to back with the ancient mansions. And over all these changes from grandeur to squalor, bent down the purple heavens with their unchanging splendour!

Ruth pressed her hot forehead against the cold glass, and strained her aching eyes in gazing out on the lovely sky of a winter's night. The impulse was strong upon her to snatch up a shawl, and wrapping it round her head, to sally forth and enjoy the glory; and time was when that impulse would have been instantly followed; but now, Ruth's eyes filled with tears, and she stood quite still, dreaming of the days that

were gone. Some one touched her shoulder while her thoughts were far away, remembering past January nights, which had resembled this, and were yet so different.

"Ruth, love," whispered a girl who had unwillingly distinguished herself by a long hard fit of coughing, "come and have some supper. You don't know yet how it helps one through the night."

"One run—one blow of the fresh air would do me more good," said Ruth.

"Not such a night as this," replied the other, shivering at the very thought.

"And why not such a night as this, Jenny?" answered Ruth. "Oh! at home I have many a time run up the lane all the way to the mill, just to see the icicles hang on the great wheel; and when I was once out, I could hardly find in my heart to come in, even to mother, sitting by the fire;—even to mother," she added, in a low, melancholy tone, which had something of inexpressible sadness in it. "Why, Jenny!" said she, rousing herself, but not before her eyes were swimming with tears, "own, now, that you never saw those dismal, hateful, tumble-down old houses there look half so—what shall I call them? almost beautiful—as they do now, with that soft, pure, exquisite covering; and if they are so improved, think of what trees, and grass, and ivy must be on such a night as this."

Jenny could not be persuaded into admiring the winter's night, which to her came only as a cold and dismal time, when her cough was more troublesome, and the pain in her side worse than usual. But she put her arm round Ruth's neck, and stood by her, glad that the orphan apprentice, who was not yet inured to the hardship of a dressmaker's workroom, should find so much to give her pleasure in such a common occurrence as a frosty night.

They remained deep in separate trains of thought till Mrs Mason's step was heard, when each returned, supperless but refreshed, to her seat.

Ruth's place was the coldest and the darkest in the room, although she liked it the best; she had instinctively chosen it for the sake of the wall opposite to her, on which was a remnant of the beauty of the old drawing-room, which must once have been magnificent, to judge from the faded specimen left. It was divided into panels of pale sea-green, picked out with white and gold; and on these panels were painted—were thrown with the careless, triumphant hand of a master—the most lovely wreaths of flowers, profuse and luxuriant beyond description, and so real-looking, that you could almost fancy you smelt their fragrance, and heard the south wind go softly rustling in and out among the crimson roses—the branches of purple and white lilac—the floating golden-tressed laburnum boughs. Besides these, there were stately white lilies, sacred to the Virgin—hollyhocks, fraxinella, monk's-hood, pansies, primroses; every flower which blooms profusely in charming old-

fashioned country gardens was there, depicted among its graceful foliage, but not in the wild disorder in which I have enumerated them. At the bottom of the panel lay a holly-branch, whose stiff straightness was ornamented by a twining drapery of English ivy and mistletoe and winter aconite; while down either side hung pendant garlands of spring and autumn flowers; and, crowning all, came gorgeous summer with the sweet musk-roses, and the rich-coloured flowers of June and July.

Surely Monnoyer, or whoever the dead and gone artist might be, would have been gratified to know the pleasure his handiwork, even in its wane, had power to give to the heavy heart of a young girl; for they conjured up visions of other sister-flowers that grew, and blossomed, and withered away in her early home.

Mrs Mason was particularly desirous that her workwomen should exert themselves to-night, for, on the next, the annual hunt-ball was to take place. It was the one gaiety of the town since the assize-balls had been discontinued. Many were the dresses she had promised should be sent home "without fail" the next morning; she had not let one slip through her fingers, for fear, if it did, it might fall into the hands of the rival dressmaker, who had just established herself in the very same street.

She determined to administer a gentle stimulant to the flagging spirits, and with a little preliminary cough to attract attention, she began:

"I may as well inform you, young ladies, that I have been requested this year, as on previous occasions, to allow some of my young people to attend in the ante-chamber of the assembly-room with sandal ribbon, pins, and such little matters, and to be ready to repair any accidental injury to the ladies' dresses. I shall send four—of the most diligent." She laid a marked emphasis on the last words, but without much effect; they were too sleepy to care for any of the pomps and vanities, or, indeed, for any of the comforts of this world, excepting one sole thing—their beds.

Mrs Mason was a very worthy woman, but, like many other worthy women, she had her foibles; and one (very natural to her calling) was to pay an extreme regard to appearances. Accordingly, she had already selected in her own mind the four girls who were most likely to do credit to the "establishment;" and these were secretly determined upon, although it was very well to promise the reward to the most diligent. She was really not aware of the falseness of this conduct; being an adept in that species of sophistry with which people persuade themselves that what they wish to do is right.

At last there was no resisting the evidence of weariness. They were told to go to bed; but even that welcome command was languidly obeyed. Slowly they folded up their work, heavily they moved about, until at length all was put away, and they trooped up the wide, dark staircase.



"Oh! how shall I get through five years of these terrible nights! in that close room! and in that oppressive stillness! which lets every sound of the thread be heard as it goes eternally backwards and forwards," sobbed out Ruth, as she threw herself on her bed, without even undressing herself.

"Nay, Ruth, you know it won't be always as it has been to-night. We often get to bed by ten o'clock; and by-and-by you won't mind the closeness of the room. You're worn out to-night, or you would not have minded the sound of the needle; I never hear it. Come, let me unfasten you," said Jenny.

"What is the use of undressing? We must be up again and at work in three hours."

"And in those three hours you may get a great deal of rest, if you will but undress yourself and fairly go to bed. Come, love."

Jenny's advice was not resisted; but before Ruth went to sleep, she said:

"Oh! I wish I was not so cross and impatient. I don't think I used to be."

"No, I am sure not. Most new girls get impatient at first; but it goes off, and they don't care much for anything after awhile. Poor child! she's asleep already," said Jenny to herself.

She could not sleep or rest. The tightness at her side was worse than usual. She almost thought she ought to mention it in her letters home; but then she remembered the premium her father had struggled hard to pay, and the large family, younger than herself, that had to be cared for, and she determined to bear on, and trust that when the warm weather came both the pain and the cough would go away. She would be prudent about herself.

What was the matter with Ruth? She was crying in her sleep as if her heart would break. Such agitated slumber could be no rest; so Jenny awakened her.

"Ruth! Ruth!"

"Oh, Jenny!" said Ruth, sitting up in bed, and pushing back the masses of hair that were heating her forehead, "I thought I saw mamma by the side of the bed, coming, as she used to do, to see if I were asleep and comfortable; and when I tried to take hold of her, she went away and left me alone—I don't know where; so strange!"

"It was only a dream; you know you'd been talking about her to me, and you're feverish with sitting up late. Go to sleep again, and I'll watch, and waken you if you seem uneasy."

"But you'll be so tired. Oh, dear! dear!" Ruth was asleep again, even while she sighed.

Morning came, and though their rest had been short, the girls arose refreshed.

"Miss Sutton, Miss Jennings, Miss Booth, and Miss Hilton, you will see that you are ready to accompany me to the shire-hall by eight o'clock."

One or two of the girls looked astonished, but the majority, having anticipated the selection, and knowing from experience the unexpressed rule by which it was made, received it with the sullen indifference which had become their feeling with regard to most events—a deadened sense of life, consequent upon their unnatural mode of existence, their sedentary days, and their frequent nights of late watching.

But to Ruth it was inexplicable. She had yawned, and loitered, and looked off at the beautiful panel, and lost herself in thoughts of home, until she fully expected the reprimand which at any other time she would have been sure to receive, and now, to her surprise, she was singled out as one of the most diligent!

Much as she longed for the delight of seeing the noble shire-hall—the boast of the county—and of catching glimpses of the dancers, and hearing the band; much as she longed for some variety to the dull, monotonous life she was leading, she could not feel happy to accept a privilege, granted, as she believed, in ignorance of the real state of the case; so she startled her companions by rising abruptly and going up to Mrs Mason, who was finishing a dress which ought to have been sent home two hours before:

"If you please, Mrs Mason, I was not one of the most diligent; I am afraid—I believe—I was not diligent at all. I was very tired; and I could not help thinking, and when I think, I can't attend to my work." She stopped, believing she had sufficiently explained her meaning; but Mrs Mason would not understand, and did not wish for any further elucidation.

"Well, my dear, you must learn to think and work too; or, if you can't do both, you must leave off thinking. Your guardian, you know, expects you to make great progress in your business, and I am sure you won't disappoint him."

But that was not to the point. Ruth stood still an instant, although Mrs Mason resumed her employment in a manner which any one but a "new girl" would have known to be intelligible enough, that she did not wish for any more conversation just then.

"But as I was not diligent I ought not to go, ma'am. Miss Wood was far more industrious than I, and many of the others."

"Tiresome girl!" muttered Mrs Mason; "I've half a mind to keep her at home for plaguing me so." But, looking up, she was struck afresh with the remarkable beauty which Ruth possessed; such a credit to the house, with her waving outline of figure, her striking face, with dark eyebrows and dark lashes, combined with auburn hair and a fair complexion. No! diligent or idle, Ruth Hilton must appear to-night.

"Miss Hilton," said Mrs Mason, with stiff dignity, "I am not accustomed (as these young ladies can tell you) to have my decisions questioned. What I say, I mean; and I have my reasons. So sit down, if you please, and take care and be ready by eight. Not a word more," as she fancied she saw Ruth again about to speak.

"Jenny! you ought to have gone, not me," said Ruth, in no low voice to Miss Wood, as she sat down by her.

"Hush! Ruth. I could not go if I might, because of my cough. I would rather give it up to you than any one, if it were mine to give. And suppose it is, and take the pleasure as my present, and tell me every bit about it when you come home to-night."

"Well! I shall take it in that way, and not as if I'd earned it, which I haven't. So thank you. You can't think how I shall enjoy it now. I did work diligently for five minutes last night, after I heard of it, I wanted to go so much. But I could not keep it up. Oh, dear! and I shall really hear a band! and see the inside of that beautiful shire-hall!"

## CHAPTER II

### Ruth Goes to the Shire-Hall

In due time that evening, Mrs Mason collected "her young ladies" for an inspection of their appearance before proceeding to the shire-hall. Her eager, important, hurried manner of summoning them was not unlike that of a hen clucking her chickens together; and to judge from the close investigation they had to undergo, it might have been thought that their part in the evening's performance was to be far more important than that of temporary ladies'-maids.

"Is that your best frock, Miss Hilton?" asked Mrs Mason, in a half-dissatisfied tone, turning Ruth about; for it was only her Sunday black silk, and was somewhat worn and shabby.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Ruth, quietly.

"Oh! indeed. Then it will do" (still the half-satisfied tone). "Dress, young ladies, you know, is a very secondary consideration. Conduct is everything. Still, Miss Hilton, I think you should write and ask your guardian to send you money for another gown. I am sorry I did not think of it before."

"I do not think he would send any if I wrote," answered Ruth, in a low voice. "He was angry when I wanted a shawl, when the cold weather set in."

Mrs Mason gave her a little push of dismissal, and Ruth fell into the ranks by her friend, Miss Wood.

"Never mind, Ruthie; you're prettier than any of them," said a merry, good-natured girl, whose plainness excluded her from any of the envy of rivalry.

"Yes! I know I am pretty," said Ruth, sadly, "but I am sorry I have no better gown, for this is very shabby. I am ashamed of it myself, and I can see Mrs Mason is twice as much ashamed. I wish I need not go. I did not know we should have to think about our own dress at all, or I should not have wished to go."

"Never mind, Ruth," said Jenny, "you've been looked at now, and Mrs Mason will soon be too busy to think about you and your gown."

"Did you hear Ruth Hilton say she knew she was pretty?" whispered one girl to another, so loudly that Ruth caught the words.

"I could not help knowing," answered she, simply, "for many people have told me so."

At length these preliminaries were over, and they were walking briskly through the frosty air; the free motion was so inspiring that Ruth almost danced along, and quite forgot all about shabby gowns and grumbling guardians. The shire-hall was even more striking than she had expected. The sides of the staircase were painted with figures that showed ghostly in the dim light, for only their faces looked out of the dark, dingy canvas, with a strange fixed stare of expression.

The young milliners had to arrange their wares on tables in the ante-room, and make all ready before they could venture to peep into the ball-room, where the musicians were already tuning their instruments, and where one or two char-women (strange contrast! with their dirty, loose attire, and their incessant chatter, to the grand echoes of the vaulted room) were completing the dusting of benches and chairs.

They quitted the place as Ruth and her companions entered. They had talked lightly and merrily in the ante-room, but now their voices were hushed, awed by the old magnificence of the vast apartment. It was so large, that objects showed dim at the further end, as through a mist. Full-length figures of county worthies hung around, in all varieties of costume, from the days of Holbein to the present time. The lofty roof was indistinct, for the lamps were not fully lighted yet; while through the richly-painted Gothic window at one end the moonbeams fell, many-tinted, on the floor, and mocked with their vividness the struggles of the artificial light to illuminate its little sphere.

High above sounded the musicians, fitfully trying some strain of which they were not certain. Then they stopped playing and talked, and their voices sounded goblin-like in their dark recess, where candles were carried about in an uncertain wavering manner, reminding Ruth of the flickering zigzag motion of the will-o'-the-wisp.

Suddenly the room sprang into the full blaze of light, and Ruth felt less impressed with its appearance, and more willing to obey Mrs Mason's sharp summons to her wandering flock, than she had been

when it was dim and mysterious. They had presently enough to do in rendering offices of assistance to the ladies who thronged in, and whose voices drowned all the muffled sound of the band Ruth had longed so much to hear. Still, if one pleasure was less, another was greater than she had anticipated.

"On condition" of such a number of little observances that Ruth thought Mrs Mason would never have ended enumerating them, they were allowed during the dances to stand at a side-door and watch. And what a beautiful sight it was! Floating away to that bounding music—now far away, like garlands of fairies, now near, and showing as lovely women, with every ornament of graceful dress—the elite of the county danced on, little caring whose eyes gazed and were dazzled. Outside all was cold, and colourless, and uniform, one coating of snow over all. But inside it was warm, and glowing, and vivid; flowers scented the air, and wreathed the head, and rested on the bosom, as if it were midsummer. Bright colours flashed on the eye and were gone, and succeeded by others as lovely in the rapid movement of the dance. Smiles dimpled every face, and low tones of happiness murmured indistinctly through the room in every pause of the music.

Ruth did not care to separate the figures that formed a joyous and brilliant whole; it was enough to gaze, and dream of the happy smoothness of the lives in which such music, and such profusion of flowers, of jewels, elegance of every description, and beauty of all shapes and hues, were everyday things. She did not want to know who the people were; although to hear a catalogue of names seemed to be the great delight of most of her companions.

In fact, the enumeration rather disturbed her; and to avoid the shock of too rapid a descent into the commonplace world of Miss Smiths and Mr Thomsons, she returned to her post in the ante-room. There she stood thinking, or dreaming. She was startled back to actual life by a voice close to her. One of the dancing young ladies had met with a misfortune. Her dress, of some gossamer material, had been looped up by nosegays of flowers, and one of these had fallen off in the dance, leaving her gown to trail. To repair this, she had begged her partner to bring her to the room where the assistants should have been. None were there but Ruth.

"Shall I leave you?" asked the gentleman. "Is my absence necessary?"

"Oh, no!" replied the lady. "A few stitches will set all to rights. Besides, I dare not enter that room by myself." So far she spoke sweetly and prettily. But now she addressed Ruth. "Make haste. Don't keep me an hour." And her voice became cold and authoritative.

She was very pretty, with long dark ringlets and sparkling black eyes. These had struck Ruth in the hasty glance she had taken, before she knelt down to her task. She also saw that the gentleman was young and elegant.

"Oh, that lovely galop! How I long to dance to it! Will it never be done? What a frightful time you are taking; and I'm dying to return in time for this galop!"

By way of showing a pretty, childlike impatience, she began to beat time with her feet to the spirited air the band was playing. Ruth could not darn the rent in her dress with this continual motion, and she looked up to remonstrate. As she threw her head back for this purpose, she caught the eye of the gentleman who was standing by; it was so expressive of amusement at the airs and graces of his pretty partner, that Ruth was infected by the feeling, and had to bend her face down to conceal the smile that mantled there. But not before he had seen it, and not before his attention had been thereby drawn to consider the kneeling figure, that, habited in black up to the throat, with the noble head bent down to the occupation in which she was engaged, formed such a contrast to the flippant, bright, artificial girl who sat to be served with an air as haughty as a queen on her throne.

"Oh, Mr Bellingham! I'm ashamed to detain you so long. I had no idea any one could have spent so much time over a little tear. No wonder Mrs Mason charges so much for dress-making, if her work-women are so slow."

It was meant to be witty, but Mr Bellingham looked grave. He saw the scarlet colour of annoyance flush to that beautiful cheek which was partially presented to him. He took a candle from the table, and held it so that Ruth had more light. She did not look up to thank him, for she felt ashamed that he should have seen the smile which she had caught from him.

"I am sorry I have been so long, ma'am," said she, gently, as she finished her work. "I was afraid it might tear out again if I did not do it carefully." She rose.

"I would rather have had it torn than have missed that charming galop," said the young lady, shaking out her dress as a bird shakes its plumage. "Shall we go, Mr Bellingham?" looking up at him.

He was surprised that she gave no word or sign of thanks to the assistant. He took up a camellia that some one had left on the table.

"Allow me, Miss Duncombe, to give this in your name to this young lady, as thanks for her dexterous help."

"Oh—of course," said she.

Ruth received the flower silently, but with a grave, modest motion of her head. They had gone, and she was once more alone. Presently, her companions returned.

"What was the matter with Miss Duncombe? Did she come here?" asked they.

"Only her lace dress was torn, and I mended it," answered Ruth, quietly.

"Did Mr Bellingham come with her? They say he's going to be married to her; did he come, Ruth?"

"Yes," said Ruth, and relapsed into silence.

Mr Bellingham danced on gaily and merrily through the night, and flirted with Miss Duncombe, as he thought good. But he looked often to the side-door where the milliner's apprentices stood; and once he recognised the tall, slight figure, and the rich auburn hair of the girl in black; and then his eye sought for the camellia. It was there, snowy white in her bosom. And he danced on more gaily than ever.

The cold grey dawn was drearily lighting up the streets when Mrs Mason and her company returned home. The lamps were extinguished, yet the shutters of the shops and dwelling-houses were not opened. All sounds had an echo unheard by day. One or two houseless beggars sat on doorsteps, and, shivering, slept, with heads bowed on their knees, or resting against the cold hard support afforded by the wall.

Ruth felt as if a dream had melted away, and she were once more in the actual world. How long it would be, even in the most favourable chance, before she should again enter the shire-hall! or hear a band of music! or even see again those bright, happy people—as much without any semblance of care or woe as if they belonged to another race of beings. Had they ever to deny themselves a wish, much less a want? Literally and figuratively, their lives seemed to wander through flowery pleasure-paths. Here was cold, biting mid-winter for her, and such as her—for those poor beggars almost a season of death; but to Miss Duncombe and her companions, a happy, merry time, when flowers still bloomed, and fires crackled, and comforts and luxuries were piled around them like fairy gifts. What did they know of the meaning of the word, so terrific to the poor? What was winter to them? But Ruth fancied that Mr Bellingham looked as if he could understand the feelings of those removed from him by circumstance and station. He had drawn up the windows of his carriage, it is true, with a shudder.

Ruth, then, had been watching him.

Yet she had no idea that any association made her camellia precious to her. She believed it was solely on account of its exquisite beauty that she tended it so carefully. She told Jenny every particular of its presentation, with open, straight-looking eye, and without the deepening of a shade of colour.

"Was it not kind of him? You can't think how nicely he did it, just when I was a little bit mortified by her ungracious ways."

"It was very nice, indeed," replied Jenny. "Such a beautiful flower! I wish it had some scent."

"I wish it to be exactly as it is; it is perfect. So pure!" said Ruth, almost clasping her treasure as she placed it in water. "Who is Mr Bellingham?"

"He is son to that Mrs Bellingham of the Priory, for whom we made the grey satin pelisse," answered Jenny, sleepily.

"That was before my time," said Ruth. But there was no answer. Jenny was asleep.

It was long before Ruth followed her example. Even on a winter day, it was clear morning light that fell upon her face as she smiled in her slumber. Jenny would not waken her, but watched her face with admiration; it was so lovely in its happiness.

"She is dreaming of last night," thought Jenny.

It was true she was; but one figure flitted more than all the rest through her visions. He presented flower after flower to her in that baseless morning dream, which was all too quickly ended. The night before, she had seen her dead mother in her sleep, and she wakened, weeping. And now she dreamed of Mr Bellingham, and smiled.

And yet, was this a more evil dream than the other?

The realities of life seemed to cut more sharply against her heart than usual that morning. The late hours of the preceding nights, and perhaps the excitement of the evening before, had indisposed her to bear calmly the rubs and crosses which beset all Mrs Mason's young ladies at times.

For Mrs Mason, though the first dressmaker in the county, was human after all; and suffered, like her apprentices, from the same causes that affected them. This morning she was disposed to find fault with everything, and everybody. She seemed to have risen with the determination of putting the world and all that it contained (her world, at least) to rights before night; and abuses and negligences, which had long passed unproved, or winked at, were to-day to be dragged to light, and sharply reprimanded. Nothing less than perfection would satisfy Mrs Mason at such times.

She had her ideas of justice, too; but they were not divinely beautiful and true ideas; they were something more resembling a grocer's, or tea-dealer's ideas of equal right. A little over-indulgence last night was to be balanced by a good deal of over-severity to-day; and this manner of rectifying previous errors fully satisfied her conscience.

Ruth was not inclined for, or capable of, much extra exertion; and it would have tasked all her powers to have pleased her superior. The work-room seemed filled with sharp calls. "Miss Hilton! where have you put the blue Persian? Whenever things are mislaid, I know it has been Miss Hilton's evening for siding away!"

"Miss Hilton was going out last night, so I offered to clear the workroom for her. I will find it directly, ma'am," answered one of the girls.

"Oh, I am well aware of Miss Hilton's custom of shuffling off her duties upon any one who can be induced to relieve her," replied Mrs Mason.



Ruth reddened, and tears sprang to her eyes; but she was so conscious of the falsity of the accusation, that she rebuked herself for being moved by it, and, raising her head, gave a proud look round, as if in appeal to her companions.

"Where is the skirt of Lady Farnham's dress? The flounces not put on! I am surprised. May I ask to whom this work was entrusted yesterday?" inquired Mrs Mason, fixing her eyes on Ruth.

"I was to have done it, but I made a mistake, and had to undo it. I am very sorry."

"I might have guessed, certainly. There is little difficulty, to be sure, in discovering, when work has been neglected or spoilt, into whose hands it has fallen."

Such were the speeches which fell to Ruth's share on this day of all days, when she was least fitted to bear them with equanimity.

In the afternoon it was necessary for Mrs Mason to go a few miles into the country. She left injunctions, and orders, and directions, and prohibitions without end; but at last she was gone, and in the relief of her absence, Ruth laid her arms on the table, and, burying her head, began to cry aloud, with weak, unchecked sobs.

"Don't cry, Miss Hilton,"—"Ruthie, never mind the old dragon,"—"How will you bear on for five years, if you don't spirit yourself up not to care a straw for what she says?"—were some of the modes of comfort and sympathy administered by the young workwomen.

Jenny, with a wiser insight into the grievance and its remedy, said:

"Suppose Ruth goes out instead of you, Fanny Barton, to do the errands. The fresh air will do her good; and you know you dislike the cold east winds, while Ruth says she enjoys frost and snow, and all kinds of shivery weather."

Fanny Barton was a great sleepy-looking girl, huddling over the fire. No one so willing as she to relinquish the walk on this bleak afternoon, when the east wind blew keenly down the street, drying up the very snow itself. There was no temptation to come abroad, for those who were not absolutely obliged to leave their warm rooms; indeed, the dusk hour showed that it was the usual tea-time for the humble inhabitants of that part of the town through which Ruth had to pass on her shopping expedition. As she came to the high ground just above the river, where the street sloped rapidly down to the bridge, she saw the flat country beyond all covered with snow, making the black dome of the cloud-laden sky appear yet blacker; as if the winter's night had never fairly gone away, but had hovered on the edge of the world all through the short bleak day. Down by the bridge (where there was a little shelving bank, used as a landing-place for any pleasure-boats that could float on that shallow stream) some children were playing, and defying the cold; one of them had got a large washing-tub, and with the

use of a broken oar kept steering and pushing himself hither and thither in the little creek, much to the admiration of his companions, who stood gravely looking on, immovable in their attentive observation of the hero, although their faces were blue with cold, and their hands crammed deep into their pockets with some faint hope of finding warmth there. Perhaps they feared that, if they unpacked themselves from their lumpy attitudes and began to move about, the cruel wind would find its way into every cranny of their tattered dress. They were all huddled up, and still; with eyes intent on the embryo sailor. At last, one little man, envious of the reputation that his playfellow was acquiring by his daring, called out:

"I'll set thee a craddy, Tom! Thou dar'n't go over yon black line in the water, out into the real river."

Of course the challenge was not to be refused, and Tom paddled away towards the dark line, beyond which the river swept with smooth, steady current. Ruth (a child in years herself) stood at the top of the declivity watching the adventurer, but as unconscious of any danger as the group of children below. At their playfellow's success, they broke through the calm gravity of observation into boisterous marks of applause, clapping their hands, and stamping their impatient little feet, and shouting, "Well done, Tom; thou hast done it rarely!"

Tom stood in childish dignity for a moment, facing his admirers; then, in an instant, his washing-tub boat was whirled round, and he lost his balance, and fell out; and both he and his boat were carried away slowly, but surely, by the strong full river which eternally moved onwards to the sea.

The children shrieked aloud with terror; and Ruth flew down to the little bay, and far into its shallow waters, before she felt how useless such an action was, and that the sensible plan would have been to seek for efficient help. Hardly had this thought struck her, when, louder and sharper than the sullen roar of the stream that was ceaselessly and unrelentingly flowing on, came the splash of a horse galloping through the water in which she was standing. Past her like lightning—down in the stream, swimming along with the current—a stooping rider—an outstretched, grasping arm—a little life redeemed, and a child saved to those who loved it! Ruth stood dizzy and sick with emotion while all this took place; and when the rider turned his swimming horse, and slowly breasted up the river to the landing-place, she recognised him as the Mr Bellingham of the night before. He carried the unconscious child across his horse; the body hung in so lifeless a manner that Ruth believed it was dead, and her eyes were suddenly blinded with tears. She waded back to the beach, to the point towards which Mr Bellingham was directing his horse.

"Is he dead?" asked she, stretching out her arms to receive the little fellow; for she instinctively felt that the position in which he hung was

not the most conducive to returning consciousness, if, indeed, it would ever return.

"I think not," answered Mr Bellingham, as he gave the child to her, before springing off his horse. "Is he your brother? Do you know who he is?"

"Look!" said Ruth, who had sat down upon the ground, the better to prop the poor lad, "his hand twitches! he lives! oh, sir, he lives! Whose boy is he?" (to the people, who came hurrying and gathering to the spot at the rumour of an accident).

"He's old Nelly Brownson's," said they. "Her grandson."

"We must take him into a house directly," said she. "Is his home far off?"

"No, no; it's just close by."

"One of you go for a doctor at once," said Mr Bellingham, authoritatively, "and bring him to the old woman's without delay. You must not hold him any longer," he continued, speaking to Ruth, and remembering her face now for the first time; "your dress is dripping wet already. Here! you fellow, take him up, d'ye see!"

But the child's hand had nervously clenched Ruth's dress, and she would not have him disturbed. She carried her heavy burden very tenderly towards a mean little cottage indicated by the neighbours; an old crippled woman was coming out of the door, shaking all over with agitation.

"Dear heart!" said she, "he's the last of 'em all, and he's gone afore me."

"Nonsense," said Mr Bellingham, "the boy is alive, and likely to live."

But the old woman was helpless and hopeless, and insisted on believing that her grandson was dead; and dead he would have been if it had not been for Ruth, and one or two of the more sensible neighbours, who, under Mr Bellingham's directions, bustled about, and did all that was necessary until animation was restored.

"What a confounded time these people are in fetching the doctor," said Mr Bellingham to Ruth, between whom and himself a sort of silent understanding had sprung up from the circumstance of their having been the only two (besides mere children) who had witnessed the accident, and also the only two to whom a certain degree of cultivation had given the power of understanding each other's thoughts and even each other's words.

"It takes so much to knock an idea into such stupid people's heads. They stood gaping and asking which doctor they were to go for, as if it signified whether it was Brown or Smith, so long as he had his wits about him. I have no more time to waste here, either; I was on the gallop when I caught sight of the lad; and, now he has fairly sobbed and opened his eyes, I see no use in my staying in this stifling atmosphere. May I trouble you with one thing? Will you be so good as to see that the little

fellow has all that he wants? If you'll allow me, I'll leave you my purse," continued he, giving it to Ruth, who was only too glad to have this power entrusted to her of procuring one or two requisites which she had perceived to be wanted. But she saw some gold between the network; she did not like the charge of such riches.

"I shall not want so much, really, sir. One sovereign will be plenty—more than enough. May I take that out, and I will give you back what is left of it when I see you again? or, perhaps I had better send it to you, sir?"

"I think you had better keep it all at present. Oh! what a horrid dirty place this is; insufferable two minutes longer. You must not stay here; you'll be poisoned with this abominable air. Come towards the door, I beg. Well, if you think one sovereign will be enough, I will take my purse; only, remember you apply to me if you think they want more."

They were standing at the door, where some one was holding Mr Bellingham's horse. Ruth was looking at him with her earnest eyes (Mrs Mason and her errands quite forgotten in the interest of the afternoon's event), her whole thoughts bent upon rightly understanding and following out his wishes for the little boy's welfare; and until now this had been the first object in his own mind. But at this moment the strong perception of Ruth's exceeding beauty came again upon him. He almost lost the sense of what he was saying, he was so startled into admiration. The night before, he had not seen her eyes; and now they looked straight and innocently full at him, grave, earnest, and deep. But when she instinctively read the change in the expression of his countenance, she dropped her large white veiling lids; and he thought her face was lovelier still.

The irresistible impulse seized him to arrange matters so that he might see her again before long.

"No!" said he. "I see it would be better that you should keep the purse. Many things may be wanted for the lad which we cannot calculate upon now. If I remember rightly, there are three sovereigns and some loose change; I shall, perhaps, see you again in a few days, when, if there be any money left in the purse, you can restore it to me."

"Oh, yes, sir," said Ruth, alive to the magnitude of the wants to which she might have to administer, and yet rather afraid of the responsibility implied in the possession of so much money.

"Is there any chance of my meeting you again in this house?" asked he.

"I hope to come whenever I can, sir; but I must run in errand-times, and I don't know when my turn may be."

"Oh"—he did not fully understand this answer—"I should like to know how you think the boy is going on, if it is not giving you too much trouble; do you ever take walks?"

"Not for walking's sake, sir."

"Well!" said he, "you go to church, I suppose? Mrs Mason does not keep you at work on Sundays, I trust?"

"Oh, no, sir. I go to church regularly."

"Then, perhaps, you will be so good as to tell me what church you go to, and I will meet you there next Sunday afternoon?"

"I go to St Nicholas', sir. I will take care and bring you word how the boy is, and what doctor they get; and I will keep an account of the money I spend."

"Very well; thank you. Remember, I trust to you."

He meant that he relied on her promise to meet him; but Ruth thought that he was referring to the responsibility of doing the best she could for the child. He was going away, when a fresh thought struck him, and he turned back into the cottage once more, and addressed Ruth, with a half smile on his countenance:

"It seems rather strange, but we have no one to introduce us; my name is Bellingham—yours is—?"

"Ruth Hilton, sir," she answered, in a low voice, for, now that the conversation no longer related to the boy, she felt shy and restrained.

He held out his hand to shake hers, and just as she gave it to him, the old grandmother came tottering up to ask some question. The interruption jarred upon him, and made him once more keenly alive to the closeness of the air, and the squalor and dirt by which he was surrounded.

"My good woman," said he to Nelly Brownson, "could you not keep your place a little neater and cleaner? It is more fit for pigs than human beings. The air in this room is quite offensive, and the dirt and filth is really disgraceful."

By this time he was mounted, and, bowing to Ruth, he rode away.

Then the old woman's wrath broke out.

"Who may you be, that knows no better manners than to come into a poor woman's house to abuse it?—fit for pigs, indeed! What d'ye call yon fellow?"

"He is Mr Bellingham," said Ruth, shocked at the old woman's apparent ingratitude. "It was he that rode into the water to save your grandson. He would have been drowned but for Mr Bellingham. I thought once they would both have been swept away by the current, it was so strong."

"The river is none so deep, either," the old woman said, anxious to diminish as much as possible the obligation she was under to one who had offended her. "Some one else would have saved him, if this fine young spark had never been near. He's an orphan, and God watches over orphans, they say. I'd rather it had been any one else as had picked him out, than one who comes into a poor body's house only to abuse it."

"He did not come in only to abuse it," said Ruth, gently. "He came with little Tom; he only said it was not quite so clean as it might be."

"What! you're taking up the cry, are you? Wait till you are an old woman like me, crippled with rheumatiz, and a lad to see after like Tom, who is always in mud when he isn't in water; and his food and mine to scrape together (God knows we're often short, and do the best I can), and water to fetch up that steep brow."

She stopped to cough; and Ruth judiciously changed the subject, and began to consult the old woman as to the wants of her grandson, in which consultation they were soon assisted by the medical man.

When Ruth had made one or two arrangements with a neighbour, whom she asked to procure the most necessary things, and had heard from the doctor that all would be right in a day or two, she began to quake at the recollection of the length of time she had spent at Nelly Brownson's, and to remember, with some affright, the strict watch kept by Mrs Mason over her apprentices' out-goings and in-comings on working days. She hurried off to the shops, and tried to recall her wandering thoughts to the respective merits of pink and blue as a match to lilac, found she had lost her patterns, and went home with ill-chosen things, and in a fit of despair at her own stupidity.

The truth was, that the afternoon's adventure filled her mind; only, the figure of Tom (who was now safe, and likely to do well) was receding into the background, and that of Mr Bellingham becoming more prominent than it had been. His spirited and natural action of galloping into the water to save the child, was magnified by Ruth into the most heroic deed of daring; his interest about the boy was tender, thoughtful benevolence in her eyes, and his careless liberality of money was fine generosity; for she forgot that generosity implies some degree of self-denial. She was gratified, too, by the power of dispensing comfort he had entrusted to her, and was busy with Alnaschar visions of wise expenditure, when the necessity of opening Mrs Mason's house-door summoned her back into actual present life, and the dread of an immediate scolding.

For this time, however, she was spared; but spared for such a reason that she would have been thankful for some blame in preference to her impunity. During her absence, Jenny's difficulty of breathing had suddenly become worse, and the girls had, on their own responsibility, put her to bed, and were standing round her in dismay, when Mrs Mason's return home (only a few minutes before Ruth arrived) fluttered them back into the workroom.

And now, all was confusion and hurry; a doctor to be sent for; a mind to be unburdened of directions for a dress to a forewoman, who was too ill to understand; scoldings to be scattered with no illiberal hand amongst a group of frightened girls, hardly sparing the poor invalid herself for her inopportune illness. In the middle of all this turmoil, Ruth crept quietly to her place, with a heavy saddened heart at the indisposition of the gentle forewoman. She would gladly have nursed

Jenny herself, and often longed to do it, but she could not be spared. Hands, unskilful in fine and delicate work, would be well enough qualified to tend the sick, until the mother arrived from home. Meanwhile, extra diligence was required in the workroom; and Ruth found no opportunity of going to see little Tom, or to fulfil the plans for making him and his grandmother more comfortable, which she had proposed to herself. She regretted her rash promise to Mr Bellingham, of attending to the little boy's welfare; all that she could do was done by means of Mrs Mason's servant, through whom she made inquiries, and sent the necessary help.

The subject of Jenny's illness was the prominent one in the house. Ruth told of her own adventure, to be sure; but when she was at the very crisis of the boy's fall into the river, the more fresh and vivid interest of some tidings of Jenny was brought into the room, and Ruth ceased, almost blaming herself for caring for anything besides the question of life or death to be decided in that very house.

Then a pale, gentle-looking woman was seen moving softly about; and it was whispered that this was the mother come to nurse her child. Everybody liked her, she was so sweet-looking, and gave so little trouble, and seemed so patient, and so thankful for any inquiries about her daughter, whose illness, it was understood, although its severity was mitigated, was likely to be long and tedious. While all the feelings and thoughts relating to Jenny were predominant, Sunday arrived. Mrs Mason went the accustomed visit to her father's, making some little show of apology to Mrs Wood for leaving her and her daughter; the apprentices dispersed to the various friends with whom they were in the habit of spending the day; and Ruth went to St Nicholas', with a sorrowful heart, depressed on account of Jenny, and self-reproachful at having rashly undertaken what she had been unable to perform.

As she came out of church, she was joined by Mr Bellingham. She had half hoped that he might have forgotten the arrangement, and yet she wished to relieve herself of her responsibility. She knew his step behind her, and the contending feelings made her heart beat hard, and she longed to run away.

"Miss Hilton, I believe," said he, overtaking her, and bowing forward, so as to catch a sight of her rose-red face. "How is our little sailor going on? Well, I trust, from the symptoms the other day."

"I believe, sir, he is quite well now. I am very sorry, but I have not been able to go and see him. I am so sorry—I could not help it. But I have got one or two things through another person. I have put them down on this slip of paper; and here is your purse, sir, for I am afraid I can do nothing more for him. We have illness in the house, and it makes us very busy."

Ruth had been so much accustomed to blame of late, that she almost anticipated some remonstrance or reproach now, for not having fulfilled

her promise better. She little guessed that Mr Bellingham was far more busy trying to devise some excuse for meeting her again, during the silence that succeeded her speech, than displeased with her for not bringing a more particular account of the little boy, in whom he had ceased to feel any interest.

She repeated, after a minute's pause:

"I am very sorry I have done so little, sir."

"Oh, yes, I am sure you have done all you could. It was thoughtless in me to add to your engagements."

"He is displeased with me," thought Ruth, "for what he believes to have been neglect of the boy, whose life he risked his own to save. If I told all, he would see that I could not do more; but I cannot tell him all the sorrows and worries that have taken up my time."

"And yet I am tempted to give you another little commission, if it is not taking up too much of your time, and presuming too much on your good-nature," said he, a bright idea having just struck him. "Mrs Mason lives in Heneage Place, does not she? My mother's ancestors lived there; and once, when the house was being repaired, she took me in to show me the old place. There was an old hunting-piece painted on a panel over one of the chimney-pieces; the figures were portraits of my ancestors. I have often thought I should like to purchase it, if it still remained there. Can you ascertain this for me, and bring me word next Sunday?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Ruth, glad that this commission was completely within her power to execute, and anxious to make up for her previous seeming neglect. "I'll look directly I get home, and ask Mrs Mason to write and let you know."

"Thank you," said he, only half satisfied; "I think perhaps, however, it might be as well not to trouble Mrs Mason about it; you see, it would compromise me, and I am not quite determined to purchase the picture; if you would ascertain whether the painting is there, and tell me, I would take a little time to reflect, and afterwards I could apply to Mrs Mason myself."

"Very well, sir; I will see about it." So they parted.

Before the next Sunday, Mrs Wood had taken her daughter to her distant home, to recruit in that quiet place. Ruth watched her down the street from an upper window, and, sighing deep and long, returned to the workroom, whence the warning voice and the gentle wisdom had departed.



## CHAPTER III

### Sunday at Mrs Mason's

Mr Bellingham attended afternoon service at St Nicholas' church the next Sunday. His thoughts had been far more occupied by Ruth than hers by him, although his appearance upon the scene of her life was more an event to her than it was to him. He was puzzled by the impression she had produced on him, though he did not in general analyse the nature of his feelings, but simply enjoyed them with the delight which youth takes in experiencing new and strong emotion.

He was old compared to Ruth, but young as a man; hardly three-and-twenty. The fact of his being an only child had given him, as it does to many, a sort of inequality in those parts of the character which are usually formed by the number of years that a person has lived.

The unevenness of discipline to which only children are subjected; the thwarting, resulting from over-anxiety; the indiscreet indulgence, arising from a love centred all in one object; had been exaggerated in his education, probably from the circumstance that his mother (his only surviving parent) had been similarly situated to himself.

He was already in possession of the comparatively small property he inherited from his father. The estate on which his mother lived was her own; and her income gave her the means of indulging or controlling him, after he had grown to man's estate, as her wayward disposition and her love of power prompted her.

Had he been double-dealing in his conduct towards her, had he condescended to humour her in the least, her passionate love for him would have induced her to strip herself of all her possessions to add to his dignity or happiness. But although he felt the warmest affection for her, the regardlessness which she had taught him (by example, perhaps, more than by precept) of the feelings of others, was continually prompting him to do things that she, for the time being, resented as mortal affronts. He would mimic the clergyman she specially esteemed, even to his very face; he would refuse to visit her schools for months and months; and, when wearied into going at last, revenge himself by puzzling the children with the most ridiculous questions (gravely put) that he could imagine.

All these boyish tricks annoyed and irritated her far more than the accounts which reached her of more serious misdoings at college and in town. Of these grave offences she never spoke; of the smaller misdeeds she hardly ever ceased speaking.

Still, at times, she had great influence over him, and nothing delighted her more than to exercise it. The submission of his will to hers

was sure to be liberally rewarded; for it gave her great happiness to extort, from his indifference or his affection, the concessions which she never sought by force of reason, or by appeals to principle—concessions which he frequently withheld, solely for the sake of asserting his independence of her control.

She was anxious for him to marry Miss Duncombe. He cared little or nothing about it—it was time enough to be married ten years hence; and so he was dawdling through some months of his life—sometimes flirting with the nothing-loath Miss Duncombe, sometimes plaguing, and sometimes delighting his mother, at all times taking care to please himself—when he first saw Ruth Hilton, and a new, passionate, hearty feeling shot through his whole being. He did not know why he was so fascinated by her. She was very beautiful, but he had seen others equally beautiful, and with many more *agaceries* calculated to set off the effect of their charms.

There was, perhaps, something bewitching in the union of the grace and loveliness of womanhood with the *naïveté*, simplicity, and innocence of an intelligent child. There was a spell in the shyness, which made her avoid and shun all admiring approaches to acquaintance. It would be an exquisite delight to attract and tame her wildness, just as he had often allured and tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park.

By no over-bold admiration, or rash, passionate word, would he startle her; and, surely, in time she might be induced to look upon him as a friend, if not something nearer and dearer still.

In accordance with this determination, he resisted the strong temptation of walking by her side the whole distance home after church. He only received the intelligence she brought respecting the panel with thanks, spoke a few words about the weather, bowed, and was gone. Ruth believed she should never see him again; and, in spite of sundry self-upbraidings for her folly, she could not help feeling as if a shadow were drawn over her existence for several days to come.

Mrs Mason was a widow, and had to struggle for the sake of the six or seven children left dependent on her exertions; thus there was some reason, and great excuse, for the pinching economy which regulated her household affairs.

On Sundays she chose to conclude that all her apprentices had friends who would be glad to see them to dinner, and give them a welcome reception for the remainder of the day; while she, and those of her children who were not at school, went to spend the day at her father's house, several miles out of the town. Accordingly, no dinner was cooked on Sundays for the young workwomen; no fires were lighted in any rooms to which they had access. On this morning they breakfasted in Mrs Mason's own parlour, after which the room was closed against them through the day by some understood, though unspoken prohibition.

What became of such as Ruth, who had no home and no friends in that large, populous, desolate town? She had hitherto commissioned the servant, who went to market on Saturdays for the family, to buy her a bun or biscuit, whereon she made her fasting dinner in the deserted workroom, sitting in her walking-dress to keep off the cold, which clung to her in spite of shawl and bonnet. Then she would sit at the window, looking out on the dreary prospect till her eyes were often blinded by tears; and, partly to shake off thoughts and recollections, the indulgence in which she felt to be productive of no good, and partly to have some ideas to dwell upon during the coming week beyond those suggested by the constant view of the same room, she would carry her Bible, and place herself in the window-seat on the wide landing, which commanded the street in front of the house. From thence she could see the irregular grandeur of the place; she caught a view of the grey church-tower, rising hoary and massive into mid-air; she saw one or two figures loiter along on the sunny side of the street, in all the enjoyment of their fine clothes and Sunday leisure; and she imagined histories for them, and tried to picture to herself their homes and their daily doings.

And before long, the bells swung heavily in the church-tower, and struck out with musical clang the first summons to afternoon church.

After church was over, she used to return home to the same window-seat, and watch till the winter twilight was over and gone, and the stars came out over the black masses of houses. And then she would steal down to ask for a candle, as a companion to her in the deserted workroom. Occasionally the servant would bring her up some tea; but of late Ruth had declined taking any, as she had discovered she was robbing the kind-hearted creature of part of the small provision left out for her by Mrs Mason. She sat on, hungry and cold, trying to read her Bible, and to think the old holy thoughts which had been her childish meditations at her mother's knee, until one after another the apprentices returned, weary with their day's enjoyment, and their week's late watching; too weary to make her in any way a partaker of their pleasure by entering into details of the manner in which they had spent their day.

And last of all, Mrs Mason returned; and, summoning her "young people" once more into the parlour, she read a prayer before dismissing them to bed. She always expected to find them all in the house when she came home, but asked no questions as to their proceedings through the day; perhaps because she dreaded to hear that one or two had occasionally nowhere to go, and that it would be sometimes necessary to order a Sunday's dinner, and leave a lighted fire on that day.

For five months Ruth had been an inmate at Mrs Mason's, and such had been the regular order of the Sundays. While the forewoman stayed there, it is true, she was ever ready to give Ruth the little variety of hearing of recreations in which she was no partaker; and however tired

Jenny might be at night, she had ever some sympathy to bestow on Ruth for the dull length of day she had passed. After her departure, the monotonous idleness of the Sunday seemed worse to bear than the incessant labour of the work-days; until the time came when it seemed to be a recognised hope in her mind, that on Sunday afternoons she should see Mr Bellingham, and hear a few words from him, as from a friend who took an interest in her thoughts and proceedings during the past week.

Ruth's mother had been the daughter of a poor curate in Norfolk, and, early left without parents or home, she was thankful to marry a respectable farmer a good deal older than herself. After their marriage, however, everything seemed to go wrong. Mrs Hilton fell into a delicate state of health, and was unable to bestow the ever-watchful attention to domestic affairs so requisite in a farmer's wife. Her husband had a series of misfortunes—of a more important kind than the death of a whole brood of turkeys from getting among the nettles, or the year of bad cheeses spoilt by a careless dairymaid—which were the consequences (so the neighbours said) of Mr Hilton's mistake in marrying a delicate, fine lady. His crops failed; his horses died; his barn took fire; in short, if he had been in any way a remarkable character, one might have supposed him to be the object of an avenging fate, so successive were the evils which pursued him; but as he was only a somewhat commonplace farmer, I believe we must attribute his calamities to some want in his character of the one quality required to act as keystone to many excellences. While his wife lived, all worldly misfortunes seemed as nothing to him; her strong sense and lively faculty of hope upheld him from despair; her sympathy was always ready, and the invalid's room had an atmosphere of peace and encouragement, which affected all who entered it. But when Ruth was about twelve, one morning in the busy hay-time, Mrs Hilton was left alone for some hours. This had often happened before, nor had she seemed weaker than usual when they had gone forth to the field; but on their return, with merry voices, to fetch the dinner prepared for the haymakers, they found an unusual silence brooding over the house; no low voice called out gently to welcome them, and ask after the day's progress; and, on entering the little parlour, which was called Mrs Hilton's, and was sacred to her, they found her lying dead on her accustomed sofa. Quite calm and peaceful she lay; there had been no struggle at last; the struggle was for the survivors, and one sank under it. Her husband did not make much ado at first—at least, not in outward show; her memory seemed to keep in check all external violence of grief; but, day by day, dating from his wife's death, his mental powers decreased. He was still a hale-looking elderly man, and his bodily health appeared as good as ever; but he sat for hours in his easy-chair, looking into the fire, not moving, nor speaking, unless when it was absolutely necessary to answer repeated

questions. If Ruth, with coaxings and draggings, induced him to come out with her, he went with measured steps around his fields, his head bent to the ground with the same abstracted, unseeing look; never smiling—never changing the expression of his face, not even to one of deeper sadness, when anything occurred which might be supposed to remind him of his dead wife. But in this abstraction from all outward things, his worldly affairs went ever lower down. He paid money away, or received it, as if it had been so much water; the gold mines of Potosi could not have touched the deep grief of his soul; but God in His mercy knew the sure balm, and sent the Beautiful Messenger to take the weary one home.

After his death, the creditors were the chief people who appeared to take any interest in the affairs; and it seemed strange to Ruth to see people, whom she scarcely knew, examining and touching all that she had been accustomed to consider as precious and sacred. Her father had made his will at her birth. With the pride of newly and late-acquired paternity, he had considered the office of guardian to his little darling as one which would have been an additional honour to the lord-lieutenant of the county; but as he had not the pleasure of his lordship's acquaintance, he selected the person of most consequence amongst those whom he did know; not any very ambitious appointment, in those days of comparative prosperity; but certainly the flourishing maltster of Skelton was a little surprised, when, fifteen years later, he learnt that he was executor to a will bequeathing many vanished hundreds of pounds, and guardian to a young girl whom he could not remember ever to have seen.

He was a sensible, hard-headed man of the world; having a very fair proportion of conscience as consciences go; indeed, perhaps more than many people; for he had some ideas of duty extending to the circle beyond his own family; and did not, as some would have done, decline acting altogether, but speedily summoned the creditors, examined into the accounts, sold up the farming-stock, and discharged all the debts; paid about £80 into the Skelton bank for a week, while he inquired for a situation or apprenticeship of some kind for poor heart-broken Ruth; heard of Mrs Mason's; arranged all with her in two short conversations; drove over for Ruth in his gig; waited while she and the old servant packed up her clothes; and grew very impatient while she ran, with her eyes streaming with tears, round the garden, tearing off in a passion of love whole boughs of favourite China and damask roses, late flowering against the casement-window of what had been her mother's room. When she took her seat in the gig, she was little able, even if she had been inclined, to profit by her guardian's lectures on economy and self-reliance; but she was quiet and silent, looking forward with longing to the night-time, when, in her bedroom, she might give way to all her passionate sorrow at being wrenched from the home where she had

lived with her parents, in that utter absence of any anticipation of change, which is either the blessing or the curse of childhood. But at night there were four other girls in her room, and she could not cry before them. She watched and waited till, one by one, they dropped off to sleep, and then she buried her face in the pillow, and shook with sobbing grief; and then she paused to conjure up, with fond luxuriance, every recollection of the happy days, so little valued in their uneventful peace while they lasted, so passionately regretted when once gone for ever; to remember every look and word of the dear mother, and to moan afresh over the change caused by her death;—the first clouding in of Ruth's day of life. It was Jenny's sympathy on this first night, when awakened by Ruth's irrepressible agony, that had made the bond between them. But Ruth's loving disposition, continually sending forth fibres in search of nutriment, found no other object for regard among those of her daily life to compensate for the want of natural ties.

But, almost insensibly, Jenny's place in Ruth's heart was filled up; there was some one who listened with tender interest to all her little revelations; who questioned her about her early days of happiness, and, in return, spoke of his own childhood—not so golden in reality as Ruth's, but more dazzling, when recounted with stories of the beautiful cream-coloured Arabian pony, and the old picture-gallery in the house, and avenues, and terraces, and fountains in the garden, for Ruth to paint, with all the vividness of imagination, as scenery and background for the figure which was growing by slow degrees most prominent in her thoughts.

It must not be supposed that this was effected all at once, though the intermediate stages have been passed over. On Sunday, Mr Bellingham only spoke to her to receive the information about the panel; nor did he come to St Nicholas' the next, nor yet the following Sunday. But the third he walked by her side a little way, and, seeing her annoyance, he left her; and then she wished for him back again, and found the day very dreary, and wondered why a strange undefined feeling had made her imagine she was doing wrong in walking alongside of one so kind and good as Mr Bellingham; it had been very foolish of her to be self-conscious all the time, and if ever he spoke to her again she would not think of what people might say, but enjoy the pleasure which his kind words and evident interest in her might give. Then she thought it was very likely he never would notice her again, for she knew she had been very rude with her short answers; it was very provoking that she had behaved so rudely. She should be sixteen in another month, and she was still childish and awkward. Thus she lectured herself, after parting with Mr Bellingham; and the consequence was, that on the following Sunday she was ten times as blushing and conscious, and (Mr Bellingham thought) ten times more beautiful than ever. He suggested, that instead of going straight home through High-street, she should take the round