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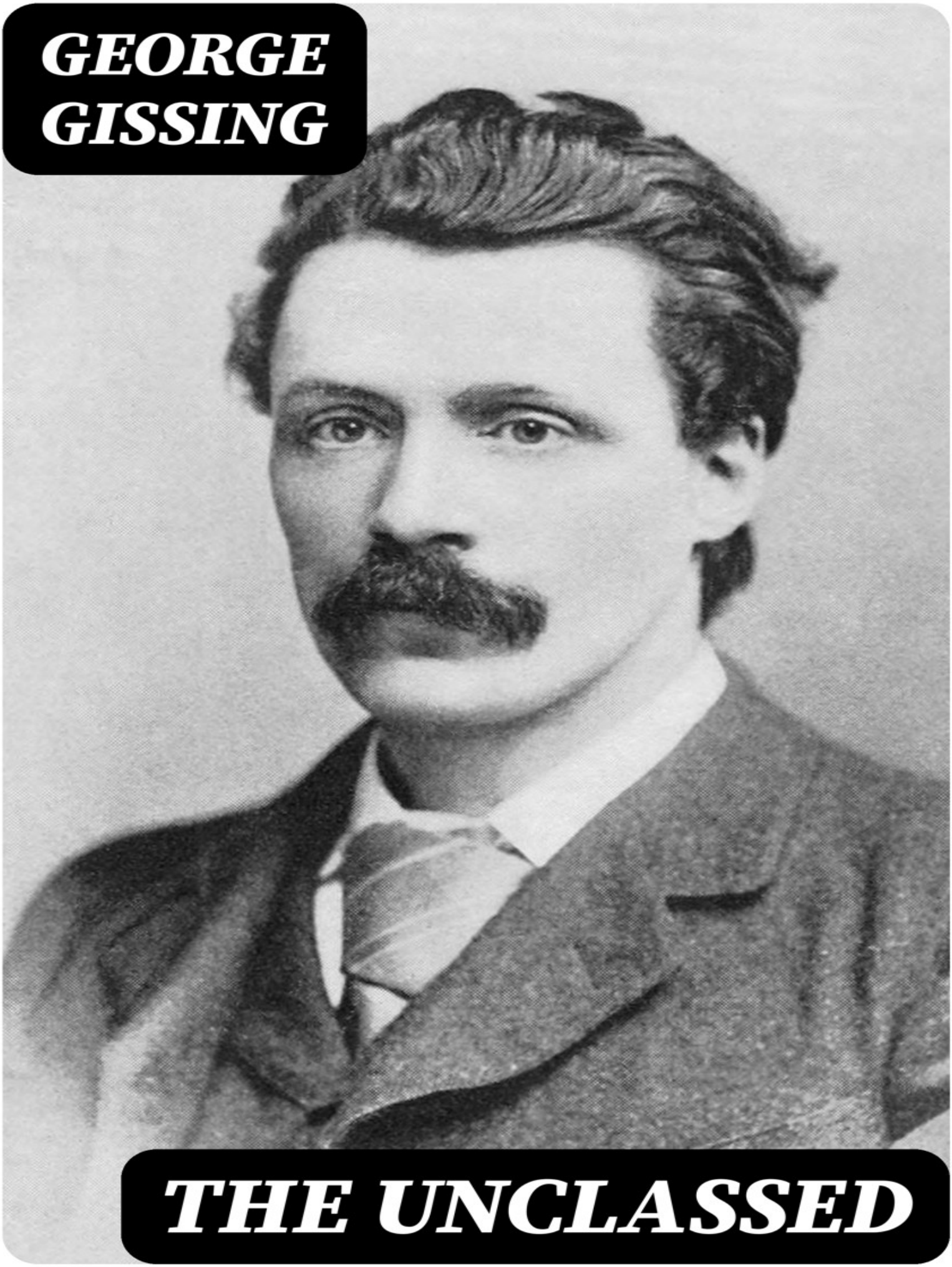

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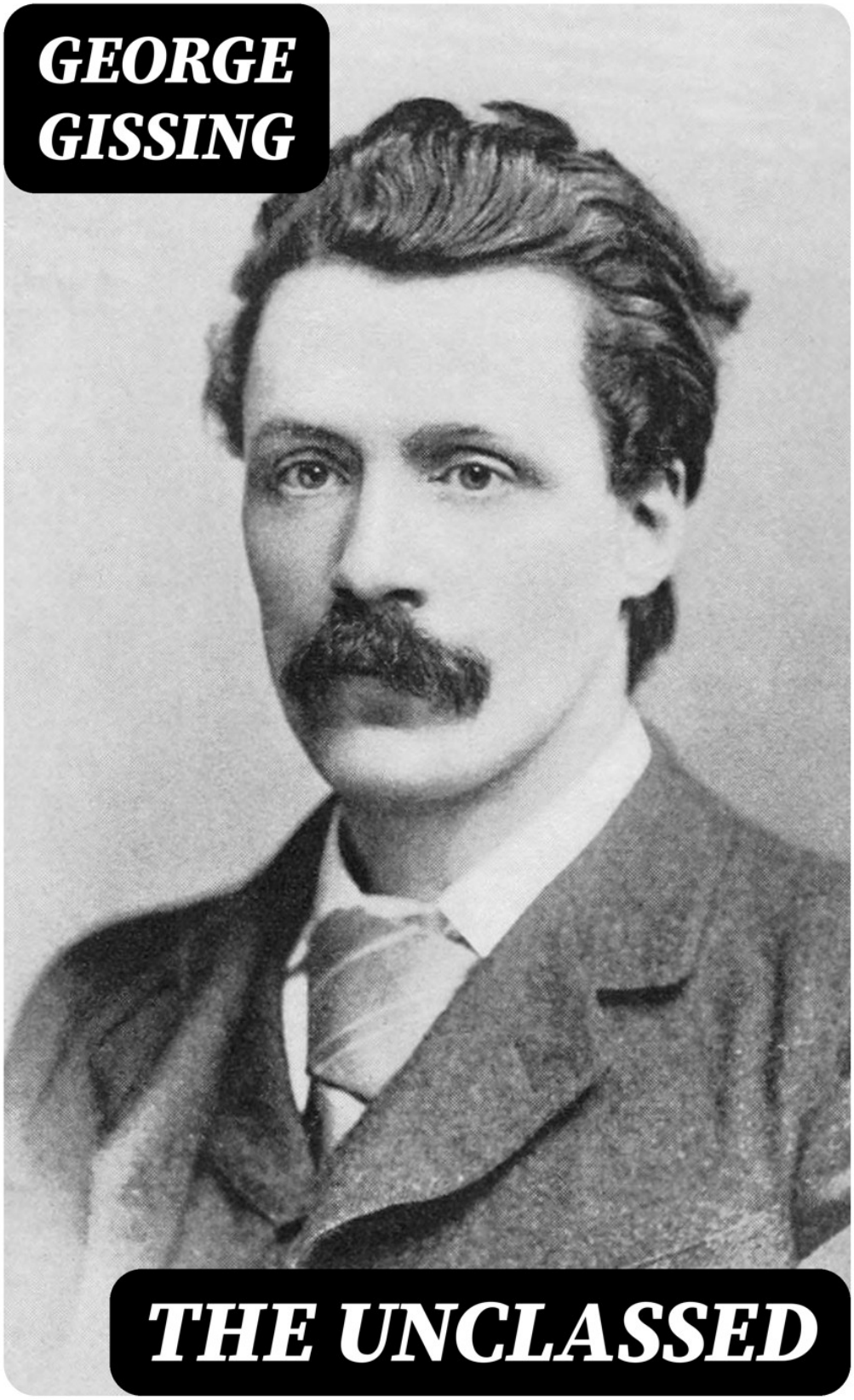

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George Gissing

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CHAPTER I

SCHOOL

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There was strange disorder in Miss Rutherford's schoolroom, wont to be the abode of decorum. True, it was the gathering-time after the dinner-hour, and Miss Rutherford herself was as yet out of sight; but things seemed to be going forward of a somewhat more serious kind than a game of romps among the children. There were screams and sobbings, hysterical cries for help; some of the little girls were crowding round an object in one corner of the room, others appeared to be getting as far away from it as possible, hiding their pale faces in their hands, or looking at one another with terrified eyes. At length one more thoughtful than the rest sped away out of the room, and stood at the bottom of the stairs, calling out her teacher's name as loud as she could. A moment, and Miss Rutherford came hastening down, with alarmed aspect, begging to be told what was the matter. But the summoner had turned and fled at the first sight of the lady's garments. Miss Rutherford darted into the schoolroom, and at once there was quietness, save for half-choked sobs here and there, and a more ominous kind of moaning from the crowded corner.

"Gracious goodness, children, what is it? Who's that lying on the floor? Harriet Smales! What *ever* has happened?"

The cluster of children had fallen aside, exposing a strange picture. On the ground lay a girl of twelve, her face

deadly pale, save in the places where it was dabbled with fresh blood, which still streamed from a gash on the right side of her forehead. Her eyes were half opened; she was just recovering consciousness; a moan came from her at intervals. She had for support the lap and arms of a little girl, perhaps two years younger than herself. Heedless of the flowing blood, this child was pressing her pale cheek against that of the wounded one, whose name she kept murmuring in pitiful accents, mixed with endearing epithets. So unconscious was she of all around, that the falling back of the other children did not cause her to raise her eyes; neither was she aware of Miss Rutherford's first exclamations, nor yet of the question which was next addressed to her by the horrified schoolmistress.

"How did it happen? Some of you run at once for a doctor —Dr. Williams in Grove Road—Oh, quick!—Ida Starr, how *did* it happen?"

Ida did not move, but seemed to tighten her embrace. The other pupils all looked fearfully hither and thither, but none ventured to speak.

"Ida!" repeated Miss Rutherford, dropping on her knees by the two, and beginning to wipe away some of the blood with her handkerchief. "Speak, child! Has some one gone for the doctor? How was it done?"

The face at length turned upon the questioner was almost as ghastly and red-stained as that it had been pressed against. But it had become self-controlled; the dark eyes looked straight forward with an expression marvellously full of meaning in one so young; the lips did not tremble as they spoke.

"I did it, Miss Rutherford. I have killed Harriet. I, and nobody else."

"You? How, child?"

"I killed her with the slate, Miss Rutherford; this slate, look."

She pointed to a slate without a frame which lay on the floor. There were sums worked on the uppermost side, and the pencil-marks were half obliterated. For a moment the schoolmistress's amazement held her motionless, but fresh and louder moans recalled her to the immediate necessities of the case. She pushed Ida Starr aside, and, with the help of a servant-girl who had by this time appeared in the room, raised the sufferer into a chair, and began to apply what remedies suggested themselves. The surgeon, whom several of the children had hastened to seek, only lived a few yards away, and his assistant was speedily present. Harriet Smales had quite recovered consciousness, and was very soon able to give her own account of the incident. After listening to her, Miss Rutherford turned to the schoolchildren, who were now seated in the usual order on benches, and spoke to them with some degree of calm.

"I am going to take Harriet home. Lucy Wood, you will please to see that order is preserved in my absence; I shall only be away twenty minutes, at the most. Ida Starr, you will go up into my sitting-room, and remain there till I come to you. All take out your copy-books; I shall examine the lines written whilst I am away."

The servant, who had been despatched for a cab, appeared at the door. Harriet Smales was led out. Before leaving the house, Miss Rutherford whispered to the servant

an order to occupy herself in the sitting-room, so as to keep Ida Starr in sight.

Miss Rutherford, strict disciplinarian when her nerves were not unstrung, was as good as her promise with regard to the copy-books. She had returned within the twenty minutes, and the first thing she did was to walk along all the benches, making a comment here, a correction there, in another place giving a word of praise. Then she took her place at the raised desk whence she was wont to survey the little room.

There were present thirteen pupils, the oldest of them turned fifteen, the youngest scarcely six. They appeared to be the daughters of respectable people, probably of tradesmen in the neighbourhood. This school was in Lisson Grove, in the north-west of London; a spot not to be pictured from its name by those ignorant of the locality; in point of fact a dingy street, with a mixture of shops and private houses. On the front door was a plate displaying Miss Rutherford's name,—nothing more. That lady herself was middle-aged, grave at all times, kindly, and, be it added, fairly competent as things go in the world of school. The room was rather bare, but the good fire necessitated by the winter season was not wanting, and the plain boarding of the floor showed itself no stranger to scrubbings. A clock hanging on the wall ticked very loudly in the perfect stillness as the schoolmistress took her seat.

She appeared to examine a book for a few moments, then raised her head, looked at the faces before her with a troubled expression, and began to speak.

"I wish to know who can give me any account of the way in which Harriet Smales received her hurt. Stop! Hands only, please. And only those raise their hands who actually saw the blow struck, and overheard *all* that led to it. You understand, now? One, two, three—seven altogether, that is quite enough. Those seven will wait in the room at four o'clock till the others have all gone. Now I will give the first class their sums."

The afternoon passed Very slowly to teacher and pupils alike. When the clock struck four, work was put away with more than the usual noise and hurry. Miss Rutherford seemed for a time to be on the point of making some new address to the school before the children departed, but eventually she decided to keep silence, and the dismissal was got over as quickly as possible. The seven witnesses remained, solemnly seated at their desks, all anxious-looking.

"Lucy Wood," Miss Rutherford began, when the door was closed and quiet, "you are the eldest. Please tell me all you can of this sad affair."

There was one of the seven faces far more discomposed than the rest, a sweet and spiritual little countenance; it was tear-stained, red-eyed; the eager look, the trembling lips spoke some intimate cause of sympathy. Before the girl addressed had time to begin her answer, this other, one would have said in spite of herself, intervened with an almost agonised question.

"Oh, Miss Rutherford, is Harriet really dead?"

"Hush, hush!" said the lady, with a shocked look. "No, my dear, she is only badly hurt."

"And she really won't die?" pleaded the child, with an instant brightening of look.

"Certainly not, certainly not. Now be quiet, Maud, and let Lucy begin."

Lucy, a sensible and matter-of-fact girl, made a straightforward narration, the facts of which were concurred in by her companions. Harriet Smales, it seemed, had been exercising upon Ida for some days her utmost powers of irritation, teasing her, as Lucy put it, "beyond all bearing." The cause of this was not unknown in the school, and Miss Rutherford remembered the incident from which the malice dated. Harriet had copied a sum in class from Ida's slate—she was always copying from somebody—and the teacher, who had somehow detected her, asked Ida plainly whether such was not the case. Ida made no reply, would not speak, which of course was taken as confirmatory evidence, and the culprit had accordingly received an imposition. Her spleen, thus aroused, Harriet vented upon the other girl, who, she maintained, ought to have stoutly denied the possibility of the alleged deceit, and so have saved her. She gave poor Ida no rest, and her persecution had culminated this afternoon; she began to "call Ida's mother names," the result of which was that the assailed one suddenly snatched up her slate, and, in an uncontrollable fit of passion, struck her tormentor a blow with it upon the forehead.

"What did she call Ida's mother?" inquired Miss Rutherford, all at once changing her look curiously.

"She called her a bad woman."

"Was that all?"

"No, please, Miss Rutherford," put in Maud eagerly. "She said she got her living in the streets. And it isn't true. Ida's mother's a lady, and doesn't sell things in the streets!"

The teacher looked down and was silent.

"I don't think I need ask any more questions," she said presently. "Run away home all of you. What is it, my dear?"

Maud, she was about eleven, and small for her age, had remained behind, and was looking anxiously up into Miss Rutherford's face.

"May I wait for Ida, please," she asked, "and—and walk home with her? We go the same way."

"Not to-night, dear; no, not to-night. Ida Starr is in disgrace. She will not go home just yet. Run away, now, there's a good girl."

Sadly, sadly was the command obeyed, and very slowly did Maud Enderby walk along the streets homeward, ever turning back to see whether perchance Ida might not be behind her.

Miss Rutherford ascended to her sitting-room. The culprit was standing in a corner with her face to the wall.

"Why do you stand so?" asked the teacher gravely, but not very severely.

"I thought you'd want me to, Miss Rutherford."

"Come here to me, child."

Ida had clearly been crying for a long time, and there was still blood on her face. She seemed to have made up her mind that the punishment awaiting her must be dreadful, and she resolved to bear it humbly. She came up, still holding her hands behind her, and stood with downcast eyes. The hair which hung down over her shoulders was

dark brown, her eye-brows strongly marked, the eyes themselves rather deep-set. She wore a pretty plum-coloured dress, with a dainty little apron in front; her whole appearance bespeaking a certain taste and love of elegance in the person who had the care of her.

"You will be glad to hear," said Miss Rutherford, "that Harriet's hurt is not as serious as we feared at first. But she will have to stay at home for some days."

There was no motion, or reply.

"Do you know that I am quite afraid of you, Ida? I had no idea that you were so passionate. Had you no thought what harm you might do when you struck that terrible blow?"

But Ida could not converse; no word was to be got from her.

"You must go home now," went on the schoolmistress after a pause, "and not come back till I send for you. Tell your mother just what you have done, and say that I will write to her about you. You understand what I say, my child?"

The punishment had come upon her. Nothing worse than this had Ida imagined; nay, nothing so bad. She drew in her breath, her fingers wreathed themselves violently together behind her back. She half raised her face, but could not resolve to meet her teacher's eyes. On the permission to go being repeated, she left the room in silence, descended the stairs with the slow steps of an old person, dressed herself mechanically, and went out into the street. Miss Rutherford stood for some time in profound and troubled thought, then sighed as she returned to her usual engagements.

The following day was Saturday, and therefore a half-holiday. After dinner, Miss Rutherford prepared herself for walking, and left home. A quarter of an hour brought her to a little out-of-the-way thoroughfare called Boston Street, close to the west side of Regent's Park, and here she entered a chemist's shop, over which stood the name Smales. A middle-aged man of very haggard and feeble appearance stood behind the counter, and his manner to the lady as she addressed him was painfully subservient. He spoke very little above a whisper, and as though suffering from a severe sore throat, but it was his natural voice.

"She's better, I thank you, madam; much better, I hope and believe; yes, much better."

He repeated his words nervously, rubbing his hands together feverishly the while, and making his eye-brows go up and down in a curious way.

"Might I see her for a few moments?"

"She would be happy, madam, very happy: oh yes, I am sure, very happy if—if you would have the kindness to come round, yes, round here, madam, and—and to excuse our poor sitting-room. Thank you, thank you. Harriet, my dear, Miss Rutherford has had the great, the very great, goodness to visit you—to visit you personally—yes. I will leave you, if—if you please—h'm, yes."

He shuffled away in the same distressingly nervous manner, and closed the door behind him. The schoolmistress found herself in a dark little parlour, which smelt even more of drugs than the shop itself. The window looked out into a dirty back-yard, and was almost concealed with heavy red curtains. As the eyes got accustomed to the

dimness, one observed that the floor was covered with very old oil-cloth, and that the articles of furniture were few, only the most indispensable, and all very shabby. Everything seemed to be dusty and musty. The only approach to an ornament was a framed diploma hanging over the mantelpiece, certifying that John Alfred Smales was a duly qualified pharmaceutical chemist. A low fire burned in the grate, and before it, in a chair which would probably have claimed the title of easy, sat the girl Harriet Smales, her head in bandages.

She received Miss Rutherford rather sulkily, and as she moved, groaned in a way which did not seem the genuine utterance of pain. After a few sympathetic remarks, the teacher began to touch upon the real object of her visit.

"I have no intention of blaming you, Harriet; I should not speak of this at all, if it were not necessary. But I must ask you plainly what reason you had for speaking of Ida Starr's mother as they say you did. Why did you say she was a bad woman?"

"It's only what she is," returned Harriet sullenly, and with much inward venom.

"What do you mean by that? Who has told you anything about her?"

Only after some little questioning the fact was elicited that Harriet owed her ideas on the subject to a servant girl in the house, whose name was Sarah.

"What does Sarah say, then?" asked Miss Rutherford.

"She says she isn't respectable, and that she goes about with men, and she's only a common street-woman," answered the girl, speaking evidently with a very clear

understanding of what these accusations meant. The schoolmistress looked away with a rather shocked expression, and thought a little before speaking again.

"Well, that's all I wanted to ask you, Harriet," she said. "I won't blame you, but I trust you will do as I wish, and never say such things about any one again, whoever may tell you. It is our duty never to speak ill of others, you know; least of all when we know that to do so will be the cause of much pain and trouble. I hope you will very soon be able to come back again to us. And now I will say good-bye."

In the shop Miss Rutherford renewed to the chemist her sincere regret for what had taken place.

"Of course I cannot risk the recurrence of such a thing," she said. "The child who did it will not return to me, Mr. Smales."

Mr. Smales uttered incoherent excuses, apologies, and thanks, and shufflingly escorted the lady to his shop-door.

Miss Rutherford went home in trouble. She did not doubt the truth of what Harriet Smales had told her, for she herself had already entertained uneasy suspicions, dating indeed from the one interview she had had with Mrs. Starr, when Ida was first brought to the school, and deriving confirmation from a chance meeting in the street only a few days ago. It was only too plain what she must do, and the necessity grieved her. Ida had not shown any especial brilliancy at her books, but the child's character was a remarkable one, and displayed a strength which might eventually operate either for good or for evil. With careful training, it seemed at present very probable that the good would predominate. But the task was not such as the

schoolmistress felt able to undertake, bearing in mind the necessity of an irreproachable character for her school if it were to be kept together at all. The disagreeable secret had begun to spread; all the children would relate the events of yesterday in their own homes; to pass the thing over was impossible. She sincerely regretted the step she must take, and to which she would not have felt herself driven by any ill-placed prudery of her own. On Monday morning it must be stated to the girls that Ida Starr had left.

In the meantime, it only remained to write to Mrs. Starr, and make known this determination. Miss Rutherford thought for a little while of going to see Ida's mother, but felt that this would be both painful and useless. It was difficult even to write, desirous as she was of somehow mitigating the harshness of this sentence of expulsion. After half-an-hour spent in efforts to pen a suitable note, she gave up the attempt to write as she would have wished, and announced the necessity she was under in the fewest possible words.

CHAPTER II

MOTHER AND CHILD

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Ida Starr, dismissed by the schoolmistress, ran quickly homewards. She was unusually late, and her mother would be anxious. Still, when she came within sight of the door, she stopped and stood panting. How should she tell of her disgrace? It was not fear that made her shrink from repeating Miss Rutherford's message; nor yet shame, though she would gladly have hidden herself away somewhere in the dark from every eye; her overwhelming concern was for the pain she knew she was going to cause one who had always cherished her with faultless tenderness,—tenderness which it had become her nature to repay with a child's unreflecting devotion.

Her home was in Milton Street. On the front-door was a brass-plate which bore the inscription: "Mrs. Ledward, Dressmaker;" in the window of the ground-floor was a large card announcing that "Apartments" were vacant. The only light was one which appeared in the top storey, and there Ida knew that her mother was waiting for her, with tea ready on the table as usual. Mrs. Starr was seldom at home during the child's dinner-hour, and Ida had not seen her at all to-day. For it was only occasionally that she shared her mother's bedroom; it was the rule for her to sleep with Mrs. Ledward, the landlady, who was a widow and without children. The arrangement had held ever since Ida could remember; when she had become old enough to ask for an

explanation of this, among other singularities in their mode of life, she was told that her mother slept badly, and must have the bed to herself.

But the night had come on, and every moment of delay doubtless increased the anxiety she was causing. Ida went up to the door, stood on tiptoe to reach the knocker, and gave her usual two distinct raps. Mrs. Ledward opened the door to her in person; a large woman, with pressed lips and eyes that squinted very badly; attired, however, neatly, and looking as good-natured as a woman who was at once landlady and dressmaker could be expected to look.

"How 's 't you're so late?" she asked, without looking at the child; her eyes, as far as one could guess, fixed upon the houses opposite, her hands in the little pocket on each side of her apron. "Your mother's poorly."

"Oh, then I shall sleep with her to-night?" exclaimed Ida, forgetting her trouble for the moment in this happy foresight.

"Dessay," returned Mrs. Ledward laconically.

Ida left her still standing in the doorway, and ran stairs. The chamber she went into—after knocking and receiving permission to enter, according to the rule which had been impressed upon her—was a tolerably-furnished bedroom, which, with its bright fire, tasteful little lamp, white coverlets and general air of fresh orderliness, made a comfortable appearance. The air was scented, too, with some pleasant odour of a not too pungent kind. But the table lacked one customary feature; no tea was laid as it was wont to be at this hour. The child gazed round in surprise. Her mother was

in bed, lying back on raised pillows, and with a restless, half-pettish look on her face.

"Where have you been?" she asked querulously, her voice husky and feeble, as if from a severe cold. "Why are you so late?"

Ida did not answer at once, but went straight to the bed and offered the accustomed kiss. Her mother waved her off.

"No, no; don't kiss me. Can't you see what a sore throat I've got? You might catch it. And I haven't got you any tea," she went on, her face growing to a calmer expression as she gazed at the child "Ain't I a naughty mother? But it serves you half right for being late. Come and kiss me; I don't think it's catching. No, perhaps you'd better not."

But Ida started forward at the granted leave, and kissed her warmly.

"There now," went on the hoarse voice complainingly, "I shouldn't wonder if you catch it, and we shall both be laid up at once. Oh, Ida, I do feel that poorly, I do! It's the draught under the door; what else can it be? I do, I do feel that poorly!"

She began to cry miserably. Ida forgot all about the tale she had to tell; her own eyes overflowed in sympathy. She put her arm under her mother's neck, and pressed cheek to cheek tenderly.

"Oh, how hot you are, mother! Shall I get you a cup of tea, dear? Wouldn't it make your throat better?"

"Perhaps it would; I don't know. Don't go away, not just yet. You'll have to be a mother to me to-night, Ida. I almost feel I could go to sleep, if you held me like that."

She closed her eyes, but only for a moment, then started up anxiously.

"What am I thinking about! Of course you want your tea."

"No, no; indeed I don't, mother."

"Nonsense; of course you do. See, the kettle is on the hob, and I think it's full. Go away; you make me hotter. Let me see you get your tea, and then perhaps it'll make me feel I could drink a cup. There, you've put your hair all out of order; let me smooth it. Don't trouble to lay the cloth; just use the tray; it's in the cupboard."

Ida obeyed, and set about the preparations. Compare her face with that which rested sideways upon the pillows, and the resemblance was as strong as could exist between two people of such different ages: the same rich-brown hair, the same strongly-pencilled eye-brows; the deep-set and very dark eyes, the fine lips, the somewhat prominent jaw-bones, alike in both. The mother was twenty-eight, the daughter ten, yet the face on the pillow was the more childish at present. In the mother's eyes was a helpless look, a gaze of unintelligent misery, such as one could not conceive on Ida's countenance; her lips, too, were weakly parted, and seemed trembling to a sob, whilst sorrow only made the child close hers the firmer. In the one case a pallor not merely of present illness, but that wasting whiteness which is only seen on faces accustomed to borrow artificial hues; in the other, a healthy pearl-tint, the gleamings and gradations of a perfect complexion. The one a child long lost on weary, woeful ways, knowing, yet untaught by, the misery of desolation; the other a child still standing upon the misty threshold of unknown lands, looking around for

guidance, yet already half feeling that the sole guide and comforter was within.

It was strange that talk which followed between mother and daughter. Lotty Starr (that was the name of the elder child, and it became her much better than any more matronly appellation), would not remain silent, in spite of the efforts it cost her to speak, and her conversation ran on the most trivial topics. Except at occasional moments, she spoke to Ida as to one of her own age, with curious neglect of the relationship between them; at times she gave herself up to the luxury of feeling like an infant dependent on another's care; and cried just for the pleasure of being petted and consoled. Ida had made up her mind to leave her disclosure till the next morning; impossible to grieve her mother with such shocking news when she was so poorly. Yet the little girl with difficulty kept a cheerful countenance; as often as a moment's silence left her to her own reflections she was reminded of the heaviness of heart which made speaking an effort. To bear up under the secret thought of her crime and its consequences required in Ida Starr a courage different alike in quality and degree from that of which children are ordinarily capable. One compensation alone helped her; it was still early in the evening, and she knew there were before her long hours to be spent by her mother's side.

"Do you like me to be with you, mother?" she asked, when a timid question had at length elicited assurance of this joy. "Does it make you feel better?"

"Yes, yes. But it's my throat, and you can't make that better; I only wish you could. But you are a comfort to me,

for all that; I don't know what I should do without you. Oh, I sha'n't be able to speak a word soon, I sha'n't!"

"Don't, don't talk, dear. I'll talk instead, and you listen. Don't you think, mother dear, I could—could always sleep with you? I wouldn't disturb you; indeed, indeed I wouldn't! You don't know how quiet I lie. If I'm wakeful ever I seem to have such a lot to think about, and I lie so still and quiet, you can't think. I never wake Mrs. Led ward, indeed. Do let me, mother; just try me!"

Lotty broke out into passionate weeping, wrung her hands, and hid her face in the pillow. Ida was terrified, and exerted every effort to console this strange grief. The outburst only endured a minute or two, however; then a mood of vexed impatience grew out of the anguish and despair, and Lotty pushed away the child fretfully.

"I've often told you, you can't, you mustn't bother me. There, there; you don't mean any harm, but you put me out, bothering me, Ida. Tell me, what do you think about when you lay awake? Don't you think you'd give anything to get off to sleep again? I know I do; I can't bear to think; it makes my head ache so."

"Oh, I like it. Sometimes I think over what I've been reading, in the animal book, and the geography-book; and—and then I begin my wishing-thoughts. And oh, I've such lots of wishing-thoughts, you couldn't believe!"

"And what are the wishing-thoughts about?" inquired the mother, in a matter-of-fact way.

"I often wish I was grown up. I feel tired of being a child; I want to be a woman. Then I should know so much more, and I should be able to understand all the things you tell me

I can't now. I don't care for playing at games and going to school."

"You'll be a woman soon enough, Ida," said Lotty, with a quiet sadness unusual in her. "But go on; what else?"

"And then I often wish I was a boy. It must be so much nicer to be a boy. They're stronger than girls, and they know more. Don't you wish I was a boy, mother?"

"Yes, I do, I often do!" exclaimed Lotty. "Boys aren't such a trouble, and they can go out and shift for themselves."

"Oh, but I won't be a trouble to you," exclaimed Ida. "When I'm old enough to leave school—"

She interrupted herself, for the moment she had actually forgotten the misfortune which had come upon her. But her mother did not observe the falling of her countenance, nor yet the incomplete sentence.

"Ida, have I been a bad mother to you?" Lotty sobbed out presently. "If I was to die, would you be sorry?"

"Mother!"

"I've done my best, indeed I've done my best for yon! How many mothers like me would have brought you up as I've done? How many, I'd like to know? And some day you'll hate me; oh yes, you will! Some day you'll wish to forget all about me, and you'll never come to see where I'm buried, and you'll get rid of everything that could remind you of me. How I wish I'd never been born!"

Ida had often to comfort her mother in the latter's fits of low spirits, but had never heard such sad words as these before. The poor child could say nothing in reply; the terrible thought that she herself was bringing new woes to be

endured almost broke her heart. She clung about her mother's neck and wept passionately.

Lotty shortly after took a draught from a bottle which the child reached out of a drawer for her, and lay pretty still till drowsiness came on. Ida undressed and crept to her side. They had a troubled night, and, when the daylight came again, Lotty was no better. Ida rose in anguish of spirit, torturing herself to find a way of telling what must be told. Yet she had another respite; her mother said that, as it was Saturday, she might as well stay away from school and be a little nurse. And the dull day wore through; the confession being still postponed.

But by the last post at night came Miss Rutherford's letter. Ida was still sitting up, and Lotty had fallen into a doze, when the landlady brought the letter upstairs. The child took it in, answered an inquiry about her mother in a whisper, and returned to the bedside. She knew the handwriting on the envelope. The dreaded moment had come.

She must have stood more than a quarter of an hour, motionless, gazing on her mother's face, conscious of nothing but an agonised expectation of seeing the sleeper's eyes open. They did open at length, and quickly saw the letter.

"It's from Miss Rutherford, mother," said Ida, her own voice sounding very strange to herself.

"Oh, is it?" said Lotty, in the hoarse whisper which was all she could command "I suppose she wants to know why you didn't go. Read it to me."

Ida read, and, in reading, suffered as she never did again throughout her life.

"DEAR MRS. STARR,—I am very sorry to have to say that Ida must not return to school. I had better leave the explanation to herself; she is truthful, and will tell you what has compelled me to take this step. I grieve to lose her, but have really no choice.—I am, yours truly,

H. RUTHERFORD."

No tears rose; her voice was as firm as though she had been reading in class; but she was pale and cold as death.

Lotty rose in bed and stared wildly.

"What have you done, child?—what ever have you done? Is—is it anything—about *me*."

"I hit Harriet Smales with a slate, and covered her all over with blood, and I thought I'd killed her."

She could not meet her mother's eyes; stood with head hung down, and her hands clasped behind her.

"What made you do it?" asked Lotty in amazement.

"I couldn't help it, mother; she—she said you were a bad woman."

Ida had raised her eyes with a look of love and proud confidence. Lotty shrank before her, clutched convulsively at the bed-clothes, then half raised herself and dashed her head with fearful violence against the wall by which the bed stood. She fell back, half stunned, and lay on the pillows, whilst the child, with outstretched hands, gazed horror-struck. But in a moment Ida had her arms around the distraught woman, pressing the dazed head against her

breast. Lotty began to utter incoherent self-reproaches, unintelligible to her little comforter; her voice had become the merest whisper; she seemed to have quite exhausted herself. Just now there came a knock at the door, and Ida was relieved to see Mrs. Ledward, whose help she begged. In a few minutes Lotty had come to herself again, and whispered that she wished to speak to the landlady alone. The latter persuaded Ida to go downstairs for a while, and the child, whose tears had begun to flow, left the room, sobbing in anguish.

"Ain't you better then?" asked the woman, with an apparent effort to speak in a sympathetic tone which did not come easily to her.

"I'm very bad," whispered the other, drawing her breath as if in pain.

"Ay, you've got a bad cold, that's what it is. I'll make you some gruel presently, and put some rum in it. You don't take care of yourself: I told you how it 'ud be when you came in with those wringin' things on, on Thursday night."

"They've found out about me at the school," gasped Lotty, with a despairing look, "and Ida's got sent away."

"She has? Well, never mind, you can find another, I suppose. I can't see myself what she wants with so much schoolin', but I suppose you know best about your own affairs."

"Oh, I feel that bad! If I get over this, I'll give it up—God help me, I will! I'll get my living honest, if there's any way. I never felt so bad as I do now."

"Pooh!" exclaimed the woman. "Wait a bit till you get rid of your sore throat, and you'll think different. Poorly people

gets all sorts o' fancies. Keep a bit quiet now, and don't put yourself out so."

"What are we to do? I've only got a few shillings—"

"Well, you'll have money again some time, I suppose. You don't suppose I'll turn you out in the streets? Write to Fred on Monday, and he'll send you something."

They talked till Lotty exhausted herself again, then Ida was allowed to re-enter the room. Mrs. Ledward kept coming and going till her own bed-time, giving what help and comfort she could in her hard, half-indifferent way. Another night passed, and in the morning Lotty seemed a little better. Her throat was not so painful, but she breathed with difficulty, and had a cough. Ida sat holding her mother's hand. It was a sunny morning, and the bells of neighbouring churches began to ring out clearly on the frosty air.

"Ida," said the sick woman, raising herself suddenly, "get me some note-paper and an envelope out of the box; and go and borrow pen and ink, there's a good child."

The materials were procured, and, with a great effort, Lotty managed to arrange herself so as to be able to write. She covered four pages with a sad scrawl, closed the envelope, and was about to direct it, but paused.

"The bells have stopped," she said, listening. "It's half-past eleven. Put on your things, Ida."

The child obeyed, wondering.

"Give me my purse out of the drawer. See, there's a shilling. Now, say this after me: Mr. Abra'm Woodstock, Number—, St. John Street Road."

Ida repeated the address.

"Now, listen, Ida. You put this letter in your pocket; you go down into the Mary'bone road; you ask for a 'bus to the Angel. When you get to the Angel, you ask your way to Number—, St. John Street Road; it isn't far off. Knock at the door, and ask if Mr. Abra'm Woodstock is in. If he is, say you want to see him, and then give him this letter,—into his own hands, and nobody else's. If he isn't in, ask when he will be, and, if it won't be long, wait."

Ida promised, and then, after a long gaze, her mother dropped back again on the pillow, and turned her face away. A cough shook her for a few moments. Ida waited.

"Well, ain't you gone?" asked Lotty faintly.

"Kiss me, mother."

They held each other in a passionate embrace, and then the child went away.

She reached Islington without difficulty, and among the bustling and loitering crowd which obstructs the corner at the Angel, found some one to direct her to the street she sought. She had to walk some distance down St. John Street Road, in the direction of the City, before discovering the house she desired to find. When she reached it, it proved to be a very dingy tenement, the ground-floor apparently used as offices; a much-worn plate on the door exhibited the name of the gentleman to whom her visit was, with his professional description added. Mr. Woodstock was an accountant.

She rang the bell, and a girl appeared. Yes, Mr. Woodstock was at home. Ida was told to enter the passage, and wait.