

were seated two women—mother and daughter—Mrs. Hall and Sarah, or Sally; for this was a part of the world where the latter modification had not as yet been effaced as a vulgarity by the march of intellect. The owner of the name was the young woman by whose means Mr. Darton purposed to put an end to his bachelor condition on the approaching day.

Behind them, in the centre of the room, the table was spread for supper, certain whiffs of air laden with fat vapors, which ever and anon entered from the kitchen, denoting its preparation there.

"The new gown he was going to send you stays about on the way like himself," Sally's mother was saying.

"Yes, not finished, I dare say," cried Sally independently. "Lord, I shouldn't be amazed if it didn't come at all! Young men make such kind promises when they are near you, and forget 'em when they go away. But he doesn't intend it as a wedding dress—he gives it to me merely as a dress to wear when I like—a traveling dress is what it would be called in great circles. Come early or come late, it don't much matter, as I have a dress of my own to fall back upon. It is nearly eight."

"Eight o'clock, and neither dress nor man," said Mrs. Hall.

"Mother, if you think to tantalize me by talking like that you are much mistaken. Let him be as late as he will—or stay away altogether—I don't care," said Sally. But a tender, minute quaver in the negation showed that there was something forced in that statement.

Mrs. Hall perceived it, and drily observed that she was not so sure about Sally not caring. "But perhaps you don't care so much as I do, after all," she said. "For I see what you don't, that it is a good and flourishing match for ye; a very honorable offer in Mr. Darton. And I think I see a kind husband in him. So pray God 'twill go smooth and wind up well."

Sally would not listen to misgivings. Of course it would go smoothly, she asserted. "How you are up and down, mother!" she went on. "At this moment, whatever hinders him, we are not so anxious to see him as he is to be here, and his thought runs on before him and settles down upon us like the star in the east. Hark!" she exclaimed, with a breath of relief, her eyes sparkling. "I heard something. Yes, here they are!"

The next moment her mother's slower ear also distinguished the familiar reverberation occasioned by footsteps clambering up the roots of the sycamore.

"Yes, it sounds like them at last," she said. "Well, it is not so very late after all, considering the distance."

The footfall ceased, and they rose, expecting a knock. The door of the room was gently opened, and there appeared, not the pair of travelers with whom we have already made acquaintance, but a pale-faced man in the garb of extreme poverty—almost in rags.

"Oh, it's a tramp, gracious me!" said Sally, starting back.

His cheeks and eye-orbits were deep concaves, rather, it might be, from natural weakness of constitution than irregular living, though there were indications that he had led no careful life. He gazed at the two women fixedly for a moment; then with an abashed, humiliated demeanor, dropped his glance to the floor and sank into a chair without uttering a word.

Sally was in advance of her mother, who had remained standing by the fire. She now tried to discern the visitor across the candles.

"Why, mother," said Sally faintly, turning back to Mrs. Hall, "it is Phil, from Australia!"

Mrs. Hall started, and grew pale, and a fit of coughing seized the man with the ragged clothes. "To come home like this!" she said. "Oh, Philip, are you ill?"

"No, no, mother," replied he impatiently, as soon as he could speak.

"But, for God's sake, how do you come here—and just now, too?"

"Well, I am here," said the man. "How it is I hardly know. I've come home, mother, because I was driven to it. Things were against me out there, and went from bad to worse."

"Then why didn't you let us know? You've not writ a line for the last two or three years."

The son admitted sadly that he had not. He said that he had hoped and thought he might fetch up again, and be able to send good news. Then he had been obliged to abandon that hope, and had finally come home from sheer necessity—previous to making a new start. "Yes, things are very bad with me," he repeated, perceiving their commiserating glances at his clothes.

They brought him nearer the fire, took his hat from his thin hand, which was so small and smooth as to show that his attempts to fetch up again had not been in a manual direction. His mother resumed her inquiries, and dubiously asked if he had chosen to come that particular night for any special reason.

For no reason, he told her. His arrival had been quite at random. Then Philip Hall looked round the room and saw for the first time that the table was laid somewhat luxuriously, and for a larger number than themselves, and that an air of festivity pervaded their dress. He asked quickly what was going on.

"Sally is going to be married in a day or two," replied the mother; and she explained how Mr. Darton, Sally's intended husband, was coming there that night with the bridesman, Mr. Johns, and other details. "We thought it must be their step when we heard you," said Mrs. Hall.

The seedy wanderer looked again on the floor. "I see—I see," he murmured. "Why, indeed, should I have come to-night! Such folk as I are not wanted here at these times, naturally. And I have no business here, spoiling other people's happiness."

"Phil," said his mother, with a tear in her eye, "you are welcome to this home as long as it is mine. We will make the best of a bad job; and I hope you are not seriously ill? I think you had better go to bed at once."

"Well, I shall be out of the way there," said the son wearily. "Having ruined myself, don't let me ruin you by being seen in these togs, for heaven's sake. I would rather go and jump into the river than be seen here. But have you anything I can drink? I am confoundedly thirsty with my long tramp."

"Yes, yes; we will bring something up stairs to you," said Sally, with grief in her face.

"Ay, that will do nicely. But, Sally and mother—" He stopped, and they waited. "Mother, I have not told you all," he resumed slowly, still looking on the floor between his knees. "Sad as what you see of me is, there's worse behind. I am not the only one in this mess. Would to heaven I were! But—I have a wife as destitute as I."

"A wife?" said his mother.

"Unhappily."

"A wife! Yes, that is the way with sons!"

"And besides—" said he.

"Besides! Oh, Philip, surely—"

"I have two little children."

"Wife and children!" whispered Mrs. Hall to herself.

"Poor little things!" said Sally involuntarily.

His mother turned again to him. "I suppose these helpless beings are left in Australia?"

"No. They are in England."

"Well, I can only hope you've left them in a respectable place."