

tended husband and her sister-in-law with a view of elucidating the strange momentary scene in which her mother and herself had surprised them in the stable. If that scene meant anything, it meant, at least, that they had met before. That there had been no time for explanation Sally could see, for their manner was still one of suppressed amazement at each other's presence there. Darton's eyes, too, fell continually on the dress worn by Helena, as if this were an added riddle to his perplexity; though to Sally it was the one feature in the case which was no mystery. Sally could see that whatever Helena might know of Darton, she knew nothing of how the dress entered into his embarrassment. And at moments the young girl would have persuaded herself that Darton's looks at her sister-in-law were entirely the fruit of the clothes query. But surely at other times a more extensive range of speculation and sentiment was expressed by her lover's eye than that which the changed dress would account for.

Japheth Johns at last withdrew for the night, going off to the Sheaf of Arrows, whither Darton promised to follow him in a few minutes.

Half an hour passed, and then Mr. Darton also rose to leave, Sally and her sister-in-law simultaneously wishing him good-night as they retired up stairs to their rooms. But on his arriving at the front door with Mrs. Hall a sharp shower of rain began to come down, when the widow suggested that he should return to the fireside till the storm ceased.

Darton accepted her proposal, but insisted that, as it was getting late, and she was obviously tired, she should not sit up on his account, since he could let himself out of the house, and would quite enjoy smoking a pipe by the hearth alone. Mrs. Hall assented, and Darton was left by himself. He spread his knees to the brands, lit up his tobacco as he had said, and sat gazing into the fire and at the notches of the chimney-crook which hung above.

He soon began to daze. How long he remained in this half-unconscious state he did not know. He suddenly opened his eyes. Turning his head, he saw Philip Hall's wife standing at the entrance of the room with a bed candle in one hand, a small brass tea kettle in the other, and his dress, as it certainly seemed, still upon her.

"Helena!" said Darton, starting up.

Her countenance expressed dismay, and her first words were an apology. "I—did not know you were here, Mr. Darton," she said, while a blush flashed to her cheek. "I thought every one had retired—I was coming to make a little water boil; my husband seems to be worse. But perhaps the kitchen fire can be lighted up again."

"Don't go on my account. By all means put it on here as you intended," said Darton. "Allow me to help you." He went forward to take the kettle from her hand, but she did not allow him, and placed it on the fire herself.

They stood some way apart, one on each side of the fireplace, waiting till the water should boil, the candle on the mantel between them, and Helena with her eyes on the kettle. Darton's eyes traveled from the kettle to Helena's face, then back to the kettle, then to the face for rather a longer time. "So I am not to know anything of the mystery that has distracted me all the evening?" he said. "How is it that a woman, who refused me because (as I supposed) my position was not good enough for her taste, is found to be the wife of a man who certainly seems to be worse off than I?"

"He had the prior claim," said she.

"What! you knew him at that time?"

"Yes, yes. Please say no more," she implored. "Whatever my errors I have paid for them during the last five years."

"Well, you might have been my wife if you had chosen," he said. "But that's all past and gone. However, if you are in any trouble or poverty, I shall be glad to be of service, and as your relative by marriage I shall have a right to be. Does your uncle know of your distress?"

"My uncle is dead. He left me without a farthing. And now we have two children to maintain."

"What, left you nothing. How could he be so cruel as that?"

"I disgraced myself in his eyes."

"Now," said Darton earnestly, "let me take care of the children, at least while you are so unsettled. You belong to another, so I cannot take care of you."

"Yes, you can," said a voice, and suddenly a third figure stood beside them. It was Sally. "You can, since you seem to wish to," she repeated. "She no longer belongs to another. My poor brother is dead!"

Her face was red, her eyes sparkled, and all the woman came to the front. "I have heard it!" she went on to him passionately. "You can protect her now as well as the children!" She turned then to her agitated sister-in-law. "I heard something," said Sally (in a gentle murmur, differing much from her previous passionate words), "and I went into his room. It must have been the moment you left. He went off so quickly, and weakly, and it was so unexpected, that I couldn't leave even to call you."

The two young women hastened up stairs, and Darton was again left alone.

After standing there a short time he went to the front door and looked out, till, softly closing it behind him, he advanced and stood under the large sycamore tree. The stars were flickering coldly, and the dampness which had just descended upon the earth in rain now sent up a chill from it. Darton was in a strange position, and he felt it. The unexpected appearance, in deep poverty, of Helena, a young lady, daughter of a deceased naval officer, who had been brought up by her uncle, a solicitor, and had refused Darton in marriage years ago; the passionate, almost angry, demeanor of Sally at discovering them; the abrupt announcement that Helena was a widow; all this coming together was a conjuncture difficult to cope with in a moment, and made him question whether he ought to leave the house or offer assistance. But for Sally's manner he would unhesitatingly have done the latter.

He was still standing under the tree when the door in front of him opened and Mrs. Hall came out.

"What can I do in this trouble, Mrs. Hall?" he said.

"Oh, nothing, thank you, nothing," she said in a tearful voice. She told him in a few words the particulars of her son's arrival, broken in health—indeed, at death's very door, though they did not suspect it—and suggested, as the result of a conversation between her and her daughter, that the wedding should be postponed.

"Yes, of course," said Darton. "I think now to go straight to the inn and tell Johns what has happened." It was not till after he had shaken hands with her that he turned hesitatingly and added: "Will you tell the mother of his children that, as they are now left fatherless, I shall be glad to take the eldest of them, if it would be any convenience to her and to you?"

Mrs. Hall promised that her son's widow should be told of the offer, and they parted. He retired down the rooty slope and disappeared in the direction of the Sheaf of Arrows. Meanwhile Mrs. Hall had entered the house. Sally was down stairs in the sitting-room alone, and her