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ELIZABETH GASKELL

RUTH

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PART I

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 dally 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 patients' 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 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 flagstones. 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 m, 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 in 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 pendent 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 antechamber 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 a while. 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 wakened 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 I 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, then 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

BUTH 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 some 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 inspiriting 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 hall-room, where the musicians were already tuning their instruments, and where one or two charwomen (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 zig-zag 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 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 dressmaking, if her workwomen 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 quickly.

"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 fitted 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 ear the work-room 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