

gles began—the struggle of the half-educated gentlewoman to earn a living. The unhappy woman had some vague idea of resorting to needlework, that last resource of the destitute lady. But, although from time to time a few of her former fashionable friends gave her some sewing, it helped her very little. Then she courageously set about looking for a situation as governess. And soon, between advertisements and fees to agencies, her little stock of money grew still smaller. That was all that resulted from the work-hunt so valiantly begun. No one wanted the broken-down lady, who could not show even a solitary diploma for any one of the arts and sciences she professed to be competent to teach. Domestic service was as little thought of, even had her strength been equal to it. A servant would have had as good a chance of being engaged as a governess as poor fragile Mrs. Copping had of finding any mistress willing to take her as housemaid.

The delicately-nurtured lady realised, then, how vain were the boasts, too often made by women of independent means to their less fortunate sisters, of the great things they would do if they ever found themselves obliged to earn their living—boasts she herself now remembered with a pang to have made in happier days. And her very soul grew sick within her as it brought home to her, with terrible significance, that she had not the means of giving to her only child the education without which a woman, if she is ever thrown upon her own resources, is even more heavily handicapped in the battle of life than a man.

A kind of spiritual despair, too, seized her. Religion, of late years, had been no more to her than a family inheritance, represented by a velvet-cushioned pew in church, and a well-bred distrust of the Pope and of all things savoring of Popery. But even the family pew was hers no longer now, and she did not find that aversion to the Pope, and to all that appertained to Popery, brought her any heavenly help or consolation in her sorrows. Humphrey Owen had sometimes spoken to her, in his days of struggle, of the strength and solace he drew from the practices of his religion. Vaguely she wondered what he meant; for he spoke too earnestly, she felt sure, for his words to have been a mere idle boast. She would examine the claims of such a faith, she said.

Little by little the proud spirit broke, and the weary heart seemed to struggle. The desperate hunt for employment which, as witnessed among women of Esther Copping's class, Walter Besant has compared, not inaptly, to 'the savage's hunt for food,' was relaxed, postponed, and finally altogether abandoned. Her health, enfeebled by a life of self-indulgence, had at last given way.

Within a year after the suicide of John Copping, this widow lay dying in a meanly-furnished room, where she had once reigned as fortune's favored queen. Her wasted hands fondled the beautiful girl who clung to her in tears, though she knew not yet that the Angel of Death was hovering nigh. Not so, however, Mrs. Towers, the landlady. She rightly judged her lodger's illness to be more serious than either the girl or the invalid herself as yet suspected.

Worthy Mrs. Towers was not a bad-hearted woman, and she felt really sorry for her sick lodger. Still, it must be admitted that personal interest was uppermost in her mind when she decided to fetch a doctor. If anything was to happen to 'the poor thing upstairs,' it would be best that it should happen in the hospital. Lodgers, 'leastways them as paid punctual,' were so easily scared. A death in the 'ouse' might mean bankruptcy to Mrs. Towers. And what doctor should she fetch, to be sure, but good Doctor Owen, 'who had attended her own self, and all for nothing—God bless him!—when she had the rheumatics so bad last winter!'

Acting on her own responsibility, therefore, she set out one chill October evening to fetch the doctor for the sick lady—for, with the sharpness of her class, she knew the dying woman to be a lady in spite of her poverty. Had Mrs. Copping been of her own faith, she would have liked to bring the priest, too; but she knew that the invalid was not a Catholic, whatever else she might be. Indeed, good Mrs. Towers privately doubted if the poor lady was 'anything at all.'

Doctor Owen was at home when Mrs. Towers called at his mansion in Park Lane. He was a wealthy man now. 'The once struggling physician numbered among his clients members of the wealthiest and most influential families in London, while his name was a household word among the poor. He listened with kindly sympathy to his visitor's account of her lodger's illness; and his interest increased when the invalid's personality was described and dwelt upon by the gossiping landlady. Even she could not fail to see that he was influenced by something more than mere pro-

fessional interest as she proceeded with her tale, and he dropped a question here and there. But at the end of the interview, all he said was:

'Take me to her—take me to Mrs. Copping!'

A solitary candle spluttered in a dilapidated candlestick, and its wavering flame cast a ghastly, flickering light upon the pale face of the sufferer. The wind howled without, and moaned drearily in the fireless chimney, while the rain splashed against the ill-fitting window that shook and rattled with every other gust.

There was a knock at the door. In answer to the sick woman's feebly-murmured 'Come in!' or, rather, in expectation of it, for the sounds never reached her—Mrs. Towers entered with a cheery: 'The doctor's come to see you, mum; good Doctor Owen—'

But even the bustling landlady retreated hurriedly, and 'all in a hurry,' as she afterwards said, before the cry that came from the sick-bed as Humphrey Owen approached it. That cry was followed by a long silence. What passed between those two who had been plighted lovers? Were they lovers once again now? Or had her love never been worthy of the name—the name of the angel who struggled vainly with the demon within her breast on that fatal night when the devotion of Humphrey Owen was set at naught for filthy lucre's sake? And he now looked down upon her faded beauty—he had come to value her affection at the worth she herself had set upon it then? Only in each other's eyes, as they met, could the answer be read.

The girl—scarcely more than a child as yet—the new Esther, watched the strange scene wide-eyed. Her eyes, so like those of the dying Esther's, but softer far, gazed wonderingly up at the bearded stranger. That innocent gaze, and the memories it brought with it, together with the anxious, questioning look on the poor mother's face, smote Humphrey Owen to the heart. He took the child's hand in his and held it kindly, almost caressingly. The girl smiled confidently through her tears.

Then the poor mother looked long and earnestly in that strong, manly face; and, seeing there no shadow of reproach or paltry triumph, but only genuine though silent sympathy and compassion, tried to shape into articulate words the wish that was aching at her failing heart. But she was a woman, and this man to whose generosity she wanted to appeal was her rejected lover. Her humiliation was indeed complete. And in that dying hour she realised, as all do sooner or later, that God is not mocked, and that His mills grind fine. But maternal love—the only love in which selfishness had no share—conquered her pride, and drew the faltering plea from her bursting heart at last.

A week later Esther Copping died in the arms of her weeping daughter, and of the good nun sent by Dr. Owen to nurse her. It was the evening of the day on which she had been received into the Church. She knew at last what Humphrey Owen meant in the old days when he spoke of the consolations religion can give even in the darkest hours. She left the scene of her earthly sorrows fortified by the comforting aid the one true Church alone can offer to the dying, and made happy by the assurance that her beloved child would be instructed in the sublime mysteries of that once despised faith.

In answer to the dying prayer of the woman he had once so fondly loved, and in obedience to the generous impulse of his own noble heart, Humphrey Owen acted as guardian to her orphan child. He placed the little Esther at a convent boarding school, where in due time she made her First Communion. And it is Humphrey Owen who stands beside her now in the golden summer sunshine—she in the first flush of fair young womanhood, he in the prime of manhood still. They have just twined sweet-scented roses round the white marble cross that marks the grave of Esther's mother, and their eyes are dim and full of mournful memories as they read the 'Requiescat in pace' sculptured on the snowy tomb.

But when at length they move away, passing hand in hand out into the bright and busy world that is waiting for them, the momentary shadow fades as silently as it came. He is her guardian still, and in a higher sense than while her girlhood lasted. Not many weeks have flown since, at the foot of the altar, she gave him the right to protect and cherish her even till death do them part. And, remembering those mutual vows now, her face is full of calm content; for she knows that the love of Humphrey Owen is hers forever more, and that it is a treasure that gold could not have bought.—'Ave Maria.'

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