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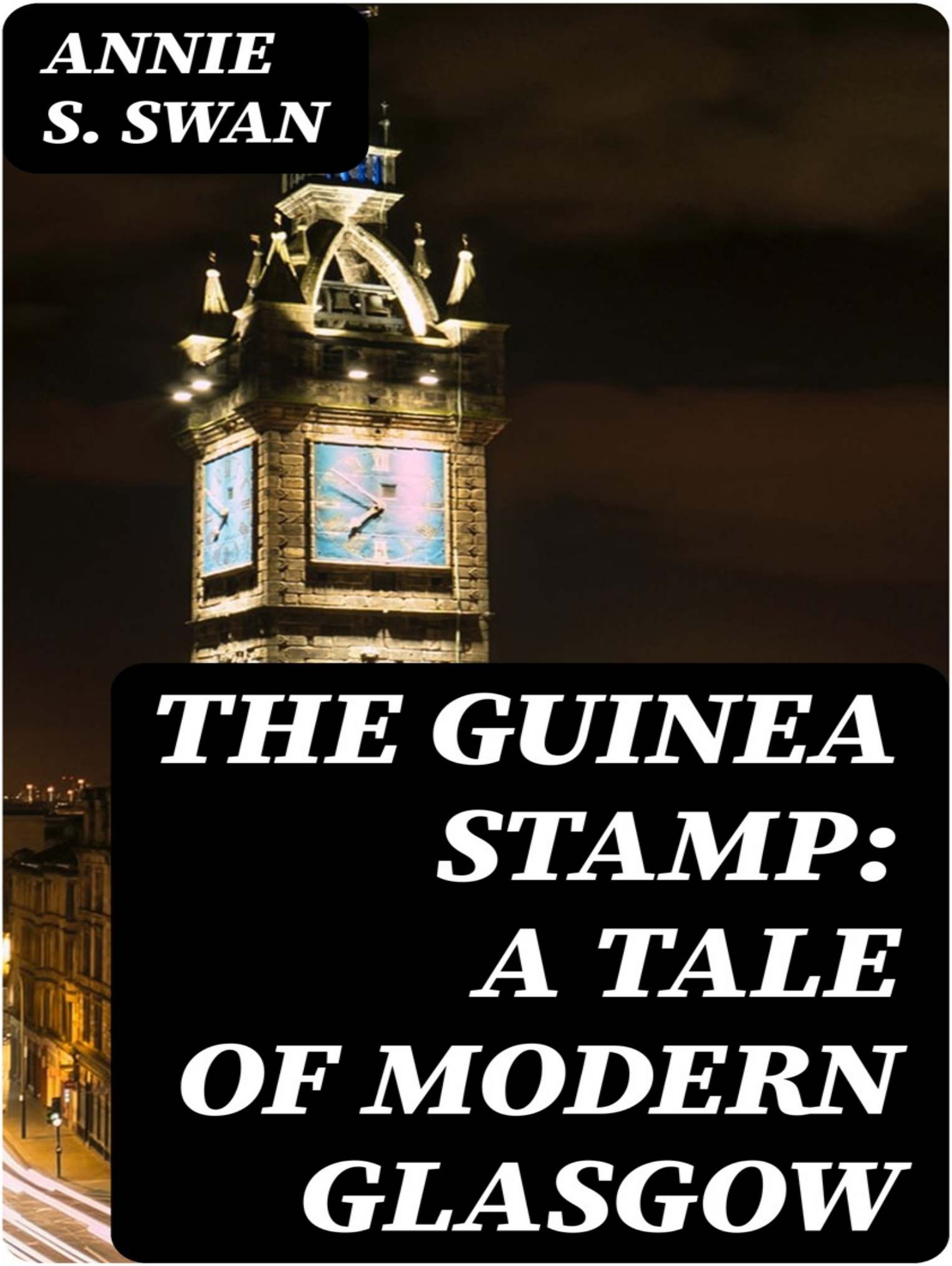

THE GUINEA STAMP: A TALE OF MODERN GLASGOW

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The Guinea Stamp: A Tale of Modern Glasgow

EAN 8596547345893

DigiCat, 2022
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THE GUINEA STAMP

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CHAPTER I.

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FATHERLESS.

t was an artist's studio, a poor, shabby little place, with a latticed window facing the north. There was nothing in the furnishing or arrangement of the room to suggest successful work, or even artistic taste. A few tarnished gold frames leaned against the gaudily-papered wall, and the only picture stood on the dilapidated easel in the middle of the floor, a small canvas of a woman's head, a gentle Madonna face, with large supplicating eyes, and a sensitive, sad mouth, which seemed to mourn over the desolation of the place. The palette and a few worn brushes were scattered on the floor, where the artist had laid them down for ever. There was one living creature in the room, a young girl, not more than sixteen, sitting on a stool by the open window, looking out listlessly on the stretch of dreary fenland, shrouded in the cold and heavy mist. It was a day on which the scenery of the fen country looked desolate, cheerless, and chill. These green meadows and flat stretches have need of the sunshine to warm them always. Sitting there in the soft grey light, Gladys Graham looked more of a woman than a child, though her gown did not reach her ankles, and her hair hung in a thick golden plait down her back. Her face was very careworn and very sad, her eyes red and dim with

long weeping. There was not on the face of the earth a more desolate creature than the gentle, slender girl, the orphan of a day. At an age when life should be a joyous and lovely thing to the maiden child, Gladys Graham found herself face to face with its grimmest reality, certain of only one thing, that somewhere and somehow she must earn her bread. She was thinking of it at that moment, with her white brows perplexedly knitted, her mouth made stern by doubt and apprehension and despair; conning in her mind her few meagre accomplishments, asking herself how much they were likely to bring in the world's great mart. She could read and write and add a simple sum, finger the keys of the piano and the violin strings with a musicianly touch, draw a little, and dream a great deal. That was the sum total of her acquirements, and she knew very well that the value of such things was *nil*. What, then, must become of her? The question had become a problem, and she was very far away yet from its solution.

The house was a plain and primitive cottage in the narrow street of a little Lincolnshire village—a village which was a relic of the old days, before the drainage system was introduced, transforming the fens into a fertile garden, which seems to bloom and blossom summer and winter through. Its old houses reminded one of a Dutch picture, which the quaint bridges across the waterways served to enhance. There are many such in the fen country, dear to the artist's soul.

John Graham was not alone in his love for the wide reaches, level as the sea, across which every village spire could be seen for many a mile. Not very far away, in clear

weather, the great tower of Boston, not ungraceful, stood out in awe-inspiring grandeur against the sky, and was pointed out with pride and pleasure by all who loved the fens and rejoiced in the revived prosperity of their ancient capital. For ten years John Graham had been painting pictures of these level and monotonous plains, and of the bits to be found at every village corner, but somehow, whether people had tired of them, or hesitated to give their money for an unknown artist's work, the fortune he had dreamed of never came. The most of the pictures found their way to the second-hand dealers, and were there sold often for the merest trifle. He had somehow missed his mark,—had proved himself a failure,—and the world has not much patience or sympathy with failures. A great calamity, such as a colossal bankruptcy, which proves the bankrupt to be more rogue than fool, arouses in it a touch of admiration, and even a curious kind of respect; but with the man out at elbows, who has striven vainly against fearful odds, though he may have kept his integrity throughout, it will have nothing to do; he will not be forgiven for having failed.

And now, when he lay dead, the victim of an ague contracted in his endeavour to catch a winter effect in a marshy hollow, there was nobody to mourn him but his motherless child. It was very pitiful, and surely in the wide world there must have been found some compassionate heart who would have taken the child by the hand and ministered unto her for Christ's sake. If any such there were, Gladys had never heard of them, and did not believe they lived. She was very old in knowledge of the world, that bitterest of all knowledge, which poverty had taught. She

had even known what it was, that gentle child, to be hungry and have nothing to eat—a misery enhanced by the proud, sensitive spirit which was the only heritage John Graham had left the daughter for whom, most cheerfully, he would have laid down his life. The village people had been kind after their homely way; but they, working hard all day with their hands, and eating at eventide the substantial bread of their honest toil, were possessed of a great contempt for the worn and haggard man who tramped their meadow-ways with his sketch-books under his arm, his daughter always with him, preserving still the look and manners of the gently born, though they wore the shabbiest of shabby garments, and could scarcely pay for the simple food they ate. It was a great mystery to them, and they regarded the spectacle with the impatience of those who did not understand.

It was the month of November, and very early that grey day the chilly darkness fell. When she could no longer see across the narrow street, Gladys let her head fall on her hands, and so sat very still. She had eaten nothing for many hours, and though feeling faint and weak, it did not occur to her to seek something to strengthen her. She had something more important than such trifling matters to engross her thoughts. She was so sitting, hopeless, melancholy, half-dazed, when she heard the voice of an arrival down-stairs, and the unaccustomed tones of a man's voice mingling with the shriller notes of Miss Peck, their little landlady. It was not the curate's voice, with which Gladys had grown quite familiar during her father's illness. He had been very kind; and in his desperation, when his end approached, Graham had implored him to look after Gladys.

It was a curious charge to lay upon a young man's shoulders, but Clement Courtney had accepted it cheerfully, and had even written to his widowed mother, who lived alone in a Dorsetshire village, asking her advice about the girl. Gladys was disturbed in her solitude by Miss Peck, who came to the door in rather an excited and officious manner. She was a little, wiry spinster, past middle life, eccentric, but kind-hearted. She had bestowed a great deal of gratuitous and genuine kindness on her lodgers, though knowing very well that she would not likely get any return but gratitude for it; but times were hard with her likewise, and she could not help thinking regretfully at times of the money, only her due, which she would not likely touch now that the poor artist was gone. She had a little lamp in her hand, and she held it up so that the light fell full on the child's pale face.

'Miss Gladys, my dear, it is a gentleman for you. He says he is your uncle,' she said, and her thin voice quite trembled with her great excitement.

'My uncle?' repeated Gladys wistfully. 'Oh yes; it will be Uncle Abel from Scotland. Mr. Courtney said he had written to him.'

She rose from her stool and turned to follow Miss Peck down-stairs.

'In the sitting-room, my dear, he waits for you,' said Miss Peck, and a look of extreme pity softened her pinched features into tenderness. 'I hope—I hope, my dear, he will be good to you.' She did not add what she thought, that the chances were against it; and, still holding the lamp aloft, she guided Gladys down-stairs. There was no hesitation, but

neither was there elation or pleasant anticipation in the girl's manner as she entered the room. She had ceased to expect anything good or bright to come to her any more, and perhaps it was as well just then that her outlook in life was so gloomy; it lessened the certainty of disappointment. A little lamp also burned on the round table in the middle of the narrow sitting-room, and the fire feebly blinked behind Miss Peck's carefully-polished bars, as if impressed by the subdued atmosphere without and within. Close by the table stood a very little man, enveloped in a long loosely-fitting overcoat, his hat in one hand and a large damp umbrella in the other. He had an abnormally large head, and a soft, flabby, uninteresting face, which, however, was redeemed from vacancy by the gleam and glitter of his remarkably keen and piercing black eyes. His hair was grey, and a straggling beard, grey also, adorned his heavy chin. Gladys was conscious of a strong sense of repulsion as she looked at him, but she tried not to show it, and feebly smiled as she extended her hand.

'Are you Uncle Abel, papa's brother?' she asked—a perfectly unnecessary question, of course, but it fell from her involuntarily, the contrast was so great; almost she could have called him an impostor on the spot.

'Yes,' said Uncle Abel in a harsh undertone; 'and you, I suppose, are my niece?'

'Yes. Can I take your overcoat or your umbrella?' asked Gladys; 'and would you like some tea? I can ask Miss Peck to get it. I have not had any myself—now I come to think of it.'

'I'll take off my coat. Yes, you can take it away, but don't order tea yet. We had better talk first—talking always makes

one hungry; then we can have tea, and we won't require any supper. These are the economics poor people have to study. I guess you are no stranger to them?'

Gladys again faintly smiled. She was not in the least surprised. Poverty had long been her companion, she expected nothing but to have it for her companion still. She took her uncle's hat and overcoat, hung them in the little hall, and returned to the room, closing the door.

'Perhaps you are cold, uncle?' she said, and, grasping the poker, was about to stir up the fire, when he hastily took it from her, with an expression of positive pain on his face.

'Don't; it is quite warm. We can't afford to be extravagant; and I daresay,' he added, with a backward jerk of his thumb towards the door, 'like the rest of her tribe, she'll know how to charge. Sit down there, and let us talk.'

Gladys sat down, feeling a trifle hurt and abashed. They had always been very poor, she and her father, but they had never obtruded it on their own notice, but had tried cheerfully always to accept what they had with a thankful heart. But Love dwelt with them always, and she can make divine her humblest fare.

Mr. Abel Graham fumbled in the inner pocket of his very shabby coat, and at last brought out a square envelope, from which he took the curate's letter.

'I have come,' he said quite slowly, 'in answer to this. I suppose you knew it had been written?'

'If it is Mr. Courtney's letter, yes,' answered Gladys, unconsciously adopting her uncle's business-like tone and manner. 'Of course he told me he had written.'

'And you expected me to come, of course?'

'I don't think I thought about it much,' Gladys answered, with frankness. 'It is very good of you to come so soon.'

'I came because it was my duty. Not many people do their duty in this world, but though I'm a very poor man, I won't shirk it—no, I won't shirk it.' He rubbed his hands together slowly, and nodded across the hearth to his niece. Instead of being pleased, as she ought to have been, with this announcement, she gave a quick little shiver. 'My brother John—your father, I mean—and I have not met for a good number of years, not since we had the misfortune to disagree about a trifle,' continued the old man, keeping his eyes fixed on the girl's face till she found herself made nervous by them. 'Time has proved that I was right, quite right; but my brother John was always, if you will excuse me saying it, rather pigheaded, and'—

'Don't let us speak about him if you do not feel kindly to him!' cried the girl, her great eyes flashing, her slender frame trembling with indignation. 'I will not listen, I will go away and leave you, Uncle Abel, if you speak harshly of papa.'

'So'—Abel Graham slapped his knee as he uttered this meditative monosyllable, and continued to regard his niece with keener scrutiny, if that were possible, than before. 'It is John's temper—a very firebrand. My dear, you are very young, and you should not be above taking advice. Let me advise you to control that fiery passion. Temper doesn't pay—it is one of the things which nothing can ever make pay in this world. Well, will you be so kind as to give me a little insight into the state of your affairs? A poor enough state they appear to be in, if this parson writes truly—only

parsons are accustomed to draw the long bow, for the purpose of ferreting money out of people's pockets. Well, my dear, have you nothing to tell me?'

Gladys continued to look at him with dislike and distrust she made no attempt to disguise. If only he would not call her 'my dear.' She resented the familiarity. He had no right to presume on such a short acquaintance.

'I have nothing to tell you, I think,' she said very coldly, 'except that papa is dead, and I have to earn my own living.'

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WHAT TO DO WITH HER.

our own living? I am glad to hear you put it so sensibly. I must say I hardly expected it,' said the old man, with engaging frankness. 'Well, but tell me first what your name is. I don't know what to call you.'

'Gladys,' she answered; and her uncle received the information in evident disapproval.

'Gladys! Now, what on earth is the meaning of such a name? Your father and mother ought to be ashamed of themselves! Why can't people name their children so that people won't stare when they hear it? Jane, Susan, Margaret, Christina,—I'm sure there are hundreds of decent names they might have given you. I think a law should be passed that no child shall be named until he is old enough to choose for himself. Mine is bad enough,—they might as well have christened me Cain when they were at it,—but Gladys, it beats all!'

'I have another name, Uncle Abel. I was baptized Gladys Mary.'

'Ah, that's better. Well, I'll call you Mary; it's not so heathenish. And tell me what you have thought of doing for yourself?'

'I have thought of it a great deal, but I have not been able to come to any decision,' answered Gladys. 'Both papa and Mr. Courtney thought I had better wait until you came.'

'Your father expected me to come, then?'

'Yes, to the last he hoped you would. He had something to say to you, he said. And the last morning, when his mind began to wander, he talked of you a great deal.'

These details Gladys gave in a dry, even voice, which betrayed a keen effort. She spoke almost as if she had set herself a task.

'I came as soon as I could. The parson wrote urgently, but I know how parsons draw the long bow, so I didn't hurry. Business must be attended to, whatever happens. You don't know what it was your father wished to say? He never asked you to write it, or anything?'

'No, but in his wandering he talked of money a great deal, and he seemed to think,' she added, with a slight hesitation, 'that you had taken some from him. Of course it was only his fancy. Sick people often think such things.'

'He could not possibly in his senses have thought so, for I never had any money, or he either. We could not rob each other when there was nothing to rob,' said the old man, but he avoided slightly his niece's clear gaze. 'Well, Mary, I am willing to do what I can for you, as you are my brother's only child, so you had better prepare to return to Scotland with me.'

Gladys tried to veil her shrinking from the prospect, but her sweet face grew even graver as she listened.

'I am a very poor man,' he repeated, with an emphasis which left no doubt that he wished it to be impressed firmly

on her mind,—'very poor; but I trust I know my duty. I don't suppose, now, that you have been taught to work with your hands—in the house, I mean—the woman's kingdom?'

This sentimental phrase fell rather oddly from the old man's lips. He looked the very last man to entertain any high and chivalrous ideal of womanhood. Gladys could not forbear a smile as she answered,—

'I am afraid I am rather ignorant, Uncle Abel. I have never had occasion to do it.'

'Never had occasion; hear her!' repeated the old man, quite as if addressing an audience. 'She has never had any occasion. She has been born and cradled in the lap of luxury, and I was a born fool to ask the question.'

The desolate child felt the keenness of the sarcasm, and her eyes filled with hot tears. 'You don't understand, Uncle Abel, you never can understand, and there is no use trying to make you,' she said curiously. 'I think I had better call Miss Peck to get tea for us.'

'Not yet; we must settle everything, then we needn't talk any more. I am your only relation in the world, and as I have been summoned, perhaps unnecessarily, on this occasion, I must, and will, do my duty. I have not taken the long and expensive journey from Scotland for nothing, remember that. So sit down, Mary, and tell me exactly how matters stand. How much money have you?'

The colour mounted high to the girl's white brow, and her proud mouth quivered. Never had she so felt the degradation of her poverty! Now it seemed more than she could bear. But she looked straight into her uncle's unlovely

countenance, and made answer, with a calmness which surprised herself,—

'There is no money, none at all—not even enough to pay all that must be paid.'

Abel Graham almost gasped.

'All that must be paid! And, in Heaven's name, how much is that? Try to be practical and clear-headed, and remember I am a poor man, though willing to do my duty.'

'Mr. Courtney and I talked of it this morning, when we arranged that the funeral should be to-morrow,' Gladys answered in a calm, straight, even voice, 'and we thought that there might be five pounds to pay when all was over. Papa has some pictures at the dealers'—two in Boston, and three, I think, in London. Perhaps there might be enough from these to pay.'

'You have the addresses of these dealers, I hope?' said the old man, with undisguised eagerness.

'Yes, I have the addresses.'

'Well, I shall apply to them, and put on the screw, if possible. Will you tell me, if you please, how long you have lived in this place?'

'Oh, not long,—in this village, I mean,—only since summer. We have been all over the fens, I think; but we have liked this place most of all.'

'Heathens, wandering Jews, vagabonds on the face of the earth,' said the old man to himself. 'So you have arranged that it will be to-morrow—you and the parson? I hope he understands that he can get nothing for his pains?'

'I don't know what you are talking about,' said Gladys, and her mouth grew very stern—her whole face during the

last hour seemed to have taken on the stamp and seal of age.

'And what hour have you arranged it for?'

'Eleven, I think—yes, eleven,' answered Gladys, and gave a quick, sobbing breath, which the old man elected not to notice.

'Eleven?' He said it over slowly, and took a penny time-table from his pocket, and studied it thoughtfully. 'We can get away from Boston at one. It's the worst kind of place this to get at, and I don't know why on earth your father should have chosen it'—'to die in,' he had almost added; but he restrained these words. 'We can't get to Glasgow before midnight, I think. I hope you won't object to travelling in the night-time? I must do it. I can't be away any longer from business; it must be attended to. I hope you can be ready?'

'I don't mind it at all,' answered Gladys in a still, quiet voice. Her heart cried out against her unhappy destiny; but one so desolate, so helpless and forlorn, may not choose. 'Yes, I shall be ready.'

'Well, see that you are. Punctuality is a virtue—one not commonly found, I am told, in your sex. You will remember, then, Mary, that I am a very poor man, struggling to get the necessaries of life. You have no false and extravagant ideas of life, I hope? Your father, surely, has taught you that it is a desperate struggle, in which men trample each other remorselessly under foot. Heaven knows he has had experience of it, so far as I can hear and see.'

'He never told me anything, Uncle Abel. We were happy always, he and I together, because we loved each other. But

I know that life is always hard, and that the good suffer most,' said Gladys simply.

A strange and unwonted thrill touched the selfish heart of the old man at these words, as they fell gravely from the young lips, formed in their perfect sweetness for the happy curves of joy and hope.

'Well, well, if these are your views, you are less likely to be disappointed,' he said, in gruff haste. 'Well, to go on. I am a poor man, and I have a poor little home; I hope, when you come to share it, you will be a help, and not altogether a burden on it?'

'I shall try. I can learn to work. I must learn now,' Gladys answered, with exemplary meekness.

'There is an old woman who comes to do my little turn of a morning. There is no reason why now I should not dispense with her services. She is dear at the money, anyhow. I have often grudged it.'

'I wonder to hear that you are so poor,' said Gladys, looking straight into his face with her young, fearless eyes. 'Papa told me once that you were quite rich, and that you had a splendid business.'

Abel Graham looked distinctly annoyed at this unexpected statement regarding his worldly affairs.

'Your father, Mary, was as ignorant of the practical affairs of life as an unborn babe. He never showed his ignorance more than when he told you that fabrication—a pure fabrication of his fancy. I have a little trade in the oil and tallow line. No, not a shop, only a little warehouse in a back street in Glasgow. When you see it you will wonder how it

has ever kept body and soul together. A splendid business! Ha! ha! That is good!'

'And do you live near it, Uncle Abel?'

'I live at it—in it, in fact; my house is in the warehouse. It's not a very genteel locality, nor a fine house, it is good enough for me; but I warn you not to expect anything great, and I can't alter my way of life for you.'

'I hope I should never expect it,' answered Gladys quietly. 'And you live there quite alone?'

'Not quite. There is Walter Hepburn.'

'Who is Walter Hepburn?' asked Gladys, and the Scotch name fell most musically from her lips for the first time, the name which was one day to be the dearest to her on earth.

'He's the office boy—an imp of the devil he is; but he is sharp and clever as a needle; and then he is cheap.'

'Are cheap things always good, Uncle Abel?' Gladys asked. 'I have heard papa say that cheap things are so often nasty, and he has spoken to me more than once of the sin of cheapness. Even genius must be bought and sold cheaply. Oh, he felt it all so bitterly.'

'Mary Graham, your foolish father was his own worst enemy, and I doubt he will prove yours too, if that is all he has taught you. You had better get tea at once.'

Thus rebuked, Gladys retired to the kitchen, and, to the no small concern of the little landlady, she sat down on the low window-seat, folded her hands on the table, and began helplessly to weep.

'My dear, my dear, don't cry! He hasn't been good to you, I know he hasn't. But never mind; better times will soon

dawn for you, and he will not stay. I hope he will go away this very night,' she said very sympathetically.

'No, he will stay till to-morrow, then I must go with him. He has offered me a home, and I must go. There is nothing else I can do just now,' said Gladys. 'I can't believe, Miss Peck, that he is papa's brother. It is impossible.'

'Dear Miss Gladys, there is often the greatest difference in families. I have seen it myself,' said Miss Peck meditatively. 'But now you must have something to eat, and I suppose he must be hungry too'—

'If you would get tea, please, we should be much obliged; and oh, Miss Peck, do you think you could give him a bed?'

'There is nothing but the little attic, but I daresay it will do him very well. He doesn't look as if he were accustomed to anything much better,' said Miss Peck, with frank candour. So it was arranged, and Gladys, drying her eyes, offered to help the little woman as best she could.

Abel Graham looked keenly and critically at his niece when she returned to the room and laid the cloth for tea. His eye was not trained to the admiration or appreciation of beauty, but he was struck by a singular grace in her every movement, by a certain still and winning loveliness of feature and expression. It was not the beauty sought for or beloved by the vulgar eye, to which it would seem but a colourless and lifeless thing; but a pure soul, to which all things seemed lovely and of good report, looked out from her grave eyes, and gave an expression of gentle sweetness to her lips. With such a fair and delicate creature, what should he do? The question suggested itself to him naturally, as a picture of his home rose up before his vision.

When he thought of its meagre comfort, its ugly environment, he confessed that in it she would be quite out of place. The house in which he had found her, though only a hired shelter, was neat and comfortable and home-like. He felt irritated, perplexed; and this irritation and perplexity made him quite silent during the meal. They ate, indeed, without exchanging a single word, though the old man enjoyed the fragrant tea, the sweet, home-made bread, and firm, wholesome butter, and ate of it without stint. He was not, indeed, accustomed to such dainty fare. Gladys attended quietly to his wants, and he did not notice that she scarcely broke bread. When the meal was over, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and rose from the table.

'Now, if you don't mind,' he said almost cheerfully, the good food having soothed his troubled mind, 'I would like to take a last look at my brother. I hope they have not screwed down the coffin?'

Gladys gave a violent start. The word was hideous; how hideous, she had never realised till it fell from her uncle's lips. But she controlled herself; nothing was to be gained by exhibitions of feeling in his presence.

'No, they will come, I think, to-morrow, quite early. I did not wish it done sooner,' she answered quietly. 'If you come now, I can show you the door.' She took the lamp from the table, and, with a gesture of dignity, motioned him to follow her. At the door of the little room where the artist had suffered and died she gave him the lamp, and herself disappeared into the studio. Not to sit down and helplessly weep. That must be over now; there were things to be thought of, things to do, on the threshold of her new life,

and she was ready for action. She found the matches, struck a light, and began at once to gather together the few things she must now sacredly cherish as mementoes of her father. First she took up with tender hand the little canvas from the easel, looked at it a moment, and then touched the face with her lips. It was her mother's face, which she remembered not, but had been taught to love by her father, who cherished its memory with a most passionate devotion. She wrapped it in an old silk handkerchief, and then began a trifle dreamily to gather together the old brushes with which John Graham had done so much good, if unappreciated, work. Meanwhile the old man was alone in the chamber of death. He had no nerves, no fine sensibilities, and little natural affection to make the moment trying to him. He entered the room in a perfectly matter-of-fact manner, set the lamp on the washhand-stand, and approached the bed. As he stood there, looking on the face, calm, restful, beautiful in its last sleep, a wave of memory, unbidden and unwelcome, swept over his selfish and hardened heart. The years rolled back, and he saw two boys kneeling together in childish love at their mother's knee, lisping their evening prayer, unconscious of the bitter years to come. Almost the white, still outline of the dead face seemed to reproach him; he could have anticipated the sudden lifting of the folded eyelids. He shivered slightly, took an impatient step back to the table for the lamp, and made haste from the room.

CHAPTER III

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THE NEW HOME.

ext day at noon that strangely-assorted pair, the sordid old man and the gentle child, set out in a peasant's waggon, which he had hired for a few pence, to ride across the meadows to Boston. The morning was very fair. In the night the mist had flown, and now the sun shone out warm and cheerful, giving the necessary brightness to the scene. It lay tenderly on the quaint fen village, and the little gilt vane on the church steeple glittered proudly, almost as if it were real gold.

Gladys sat with her back to the old horse, quite silent, never allowing her eyes for a moment to wander from that picture until distance made it dim. She had no tears, though she was leaving behind all that love had hallowed. She wondered vaguely once or twice whether it would be her last farewell, or whether, in other and happier years, she might come again to kneel by that nameless grave. Abel Graham paid small attention to her. He tried to engage in a conversation with the peasant who sat on the front of the waggon, holding the reins loosely in his sunburnt hands; but that individual was stolid, and when he did vouchsafe a remark, Abel did not understand him, not being familiar with fen vernacular. They reached Boston in ample time for the

train, even leaving half an hour to spare. This half hour the old man improved by hunting up the dealer in whose hands were two of his brother's pictures, leaving Gladys at the station to watch their meagre luggage. He drove a much better bargain than the artist himself could have done, and returned to the station inwardly elated, with four pounds in his pocket; but he carefully concealed from his niece the success of his transaction—not that it would have greatly concerned her, she was too listless to take interest in anything. At one o'clock the dreary railway journey began, and after many stoppages and changes, late at night Gladys was informed that their destination was reached. She stepped from the carriage in a half-dazed manner, and perceived that they were in a large, brilliantly-lighted, but deserted, city station. All her worldly goods were in one large, shabby portmanteau, which the old man weighed, first in one hand and then in the other.

'I think we can manage it between us. It isn't far, and if I leave it, it will cost tuppence, besides taking Wat Hepburn from his work to-morrow to fetch it.'

'Can't we have a cab?' asked Gladys innocently.

'No, we can't; you ought to know, if you don't, that a cab is double fare after midnight,' said the old man severely. Just look in the carriage to make sure nothing is left.'

Gladys did so, then the melancholy pair trudged off out from the station into the quiet streets. Happily the night was fine, though cold, with a clear, star-begemmed sky, and a winter moon on the wane above the roofs and spires. A great city it seemed to Gladys, with miles and miles of streets; tall, heavy houses set in monotonous rows, but no

green thing—nothing to remind her of heaven but the stars. She had the soul of the poet-artist, therefore her destiny was doubly hard. But the time came when she recognised its uses, and thanked God for it all, even for its moments of despair, its bitterest tears, because through it alone she touched the great suffering heart of humanity which beats in the dark places of the earth. In the streets after midnight there is always life—the life which dare not show itself by day, because it stalks in the image of sin. Gladys was surprised, as they slowly wended their way along a wide and handsome thoroughfare, past the closed windows of great shops, to meet many ladies finely dressed, some of them beautiful, with a strange, wild beauty, which half-fascinated, half-terrified her.

'Who are these ladies, Uncle Abel?' she asked at length. 'Why are so many people in the streets so late? I thought everybody would be in bed but us.'

'They are the night-birds, child. Don't ask any more questions, but shut your eyes and hold fast by me. We'll be home in no time,' said the old man harshly, because his conscience smote him for what he was doing.

Gladys again became silent, but she could not shut her eyes. Soon they turned into another street, in which were even more people, though evidently of a different order. The women were less showily dressed, and many of them had their heads bare, and wore little shawls about their shoulders. As they walked, the crowd became greater, and the din increased. Some children Gladys also saw, poorly clad and with hungry faces, running barefoot on the stony

street. But she kept silence still, though growing every moment more frightened and more sad.

'Surely this is a terrible place, Uncle Abel,' she said at last. 'I have never seen anything like it in my life.'

'It isn't savoury, I admit; but I warned you. This is Argyle Street on a Saturday night; other nights it is quieter, of course. Oh, he won't harm you.' A lumbering carter in a wild state of intoxication had pushed himself against the frightened girl, and looked down into her face with an idiotic leer.

Gladys gave a faint scream, and clung to her uncle's arm; but the next moment the man was taken in charge by the policeman, and went to swell the number of the drunkards at Monday's court.

'Here we are. This is Craig's Wynd, or The Wynd, as they say. We have only to go through here, and then we are in Colquhoun Street, where I live. It isn't far.'

In the Wynd it was, of course, rather quieter, but in the dark doorways strange figures were huddled, and sometimes the feeble wail of a child, or a smothered oath, reminded one that more was hidden behind the scenes. Gladys was now in a state of extreme mental excitement. She had never been in a town larger than Boston, and there only on bright days with her father. It seemed to her that this resembled the place of which the Bible speaks, where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. To the child, country born and gently reared, whom no unclean or wicked thing had ever touched, it was a revelation which took away from her childhood for ever. She never forgot it. When years had passed, and these dark days seemed

almost like a shadow, that one memory remained vivid and most painful, like a troubled dream.

'Now, here we are. We must let ourselves in. Wat Hepburn will be away long ago. He goes home on Saturday night,' said the old man, groping in his pocket for a key. It was some minutes before he found it, and Gladys had time to look about her, which she did with fearful, wondering eyes. It was a very narrow street, with tall houses on each side, which seemed almost to touch the sky. Gladys wondered, not knowing that they were all warehouses, how people lived and breathed in such places. She did not know yet that this place, in comparison with others not many streets removed, was paradise. It was quiet—quite deserted; but through the Wynd came the faint echo of the tide of life still rolling on through the early hours of the Sabbath day.

'Here now. Perhaps you had better stay here till I bring a light,' said the old man at length.

'Oh no, I can't; I am terrified. I will come in, cried Gladys, in affright.

'Very well. But there's a stair; you must stand there a moment. I know where the matches are.'

Gladys stood still, holding in to the wall in silent terror. The atmosphere of the place depressed her—it smelt close and heavy, of some disagreeable oily odour. She felt glad to turn her face to the door, where the cool night air—a trifle fresher—could touch her face. Her uncle's footsteps grew fainter and fainter, then became louder again as he began to return. Presently the gleam of a candle appeared at the farther end of a long passage, and he came back to the door, which he carefully closed and locked. Then Gladys saw