

she says, and go up till we knock our heads against the tiles."

We climbed two stairs more—the last very steep, and so dark that when we reached the top we found it necessary to follow the woman's directions literally, and feel about for a door. But we had not to feel long or far, for there was one close to the top of the stair. My father knocked. There was no reply, but we heard the sound of a chair, and presently some one opened it. The only light being behind her, I could not see her face, but the size and shape were those of Miss Clare.

She did not leave us in doubt, however, for, without a moment's hesitation, she held out her hand to me, saying, "This is kind of you, Mrs. Percivale"; then to my father, saying, "I'm very glad to see you, Mr. Walton. Will you walk in?"

We followed her into the room. It was not very small, for it occupied nearly the breadth of the house. On one side the roof sloped so nearly to the floor that there was not height enough to stand erect in. On the other side the sloping part was partitioned off—evidently for a bedroom. But what a change it was from the lower part of the house! By the light of a single mould candle, I saw that the floor was as clean as old boards could be made, and I wondered whether she scrubbed them herself. I know now that she did. The two dormer windows were hung with white dimity curtains. Back in the angle of the roof, between the windows, stood an old bureau. There was little more than room between the top of it and the ceiling for a little plaster statuette with bound hands and a strangely crowned head. A few books on hanging shelves were on the opposite side, by the door to the other room, and the walls, which were whitewashed, were a good deal covered with—whether engravings or etchings or lithographs I could not then see—none of them framed, only mounted on cardboard. There was a fire cheerfully burning in the gable, and opposite to that stood a tall old-fashioned cabinet piano, in faded red silk. It was open, and on the music-rest lay Handel's *Verdi Prati*—for I glanced at it as we left. A few wooden chairs, and one very old-fashioned easy-chair, covered with striped chintz, from which not glaze only but colour almost had disappeared, with an oblong table of deal, completed the furniture of the room. She made my father sit down in the easy-chair, placed me one in front of the fire, and took another at the corner opposite my father. A moment of silence followed, which I, having a guilty conscience, felt awkward. But my father never allowed awkwardness to accumulate.

"I had hoped to have been able to call upon you long ago, Miss Clare, but there was some difficulty in finding out where you lived."

"You are no longer surprised at that difficulty, I presume," she returned, with a smile.

"But," said my father, "if you will allow an old man to speak freely—"

"Say what you please, Mr. Walton. I promise to answer *any* question *you* think proper to ask me."

"My dear Miss Clare, I had not the slightest intention of catechising you, though, of course, I shall be grateful for what confidence you please to put in me. What I meant to say might indeed have taken the form of a question, but as such could have been intended only for you to answer to yourself—whether, namely, it was wise to place yourself at such a disadvantage as living in this quarter must be to you?"

"If you were acquainted with my history, you would perhaps hesitate, Mr. Walton, before you said I *placed myself* at such disadvantage."

Here a thought struck me.

"I fancy, papa, it is not for her own sake Miss Clare lives here."

"I hope not," she interposed.

"I believe," I went on, "she has a grandmother, who probably has grown accustomed to the place, and is unwilling to leave it."

She looked puzzled for a moment, then burst into a merry laugh.

"I see," she exclaimed. "How stupid I am! You have heard some of the people in the house talk about *grannie*: that's me! I am known in the house as grannie, and have been for a good many years now—I can hardly, without thinking, tell for how many."

Again she laughed heartily, and my father and I shared her merriment.

"How many grandchildren have you then, pray, Miss Clare?"

"Let me see."

She thought for a minute.

"I could easily tell you if it were only the people in this house I had to reckon up. They are about five-and-thirty; but unfortunately the name has been caught up in the neighbouring houses, and I am very sorry that in consequence I cannot with certainty say how many grandchildren I have. I think I know them all, however, and I fancy that is more than many an English grandmother, with children in America, India, and Australia, can say for herself."

Certainly she was not older than I was; and while hearing her merry laugh and seeing her young face overflowed with smiles, which appeared to come sparkling out of her eyes as out of two well-springs, one could not help feeling

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)