

She did not finish the sentence. Mrs. Little, seeing that her rallying had had quite another effect from that intended, came to Alice's aid by a sudden exclamation about the beauty of the rising moon. This was successful; for ten minutes every eye was turned on the lovely crescent that rose, as bright as burnished silver, above the dark line of forest. In the midst of this admiration, Alice slipped away from the happy group, and spent the evening alone in her own room.

A few days later, she sat in the arbor of the convent garden, while Sister Cecilia watered her flower-beds. Sitting so, her mind went reaching back after one memorable incident in her life. And by some chance, the already-vibrating chord was touched at that moment by the little nun.

'Here is my first rose-bud, Alice,' she said, coming into the arbor; 'see how pretty those two young leaves are.'

Alice's eyes were suffused with tears as she bent her head over the lovely bud. It appealed to her now, in the midst of her happiness, with unspeakable tenderness of recollection. She held it to her lips, almost prayerful, so moved that she could not speak.

'Only think,' continued Sister Cecilia, 'for nine months to come we shall never want for roses and buds. Ah me! I think we value them less for their plenty. It's a good thing to visit the prison now and again, isn't it, Alice? We love rose-buds all the better for remembering the weeds.'

Alice raised her head, and looked her eloquent assent at Sister Cecilia.

'I love all the world better for the sweet rose-bud you gave me in prison,' she said.

Sister Cecilia seemed puzzled for a moment, and then she smiled as if she recalled something.

'It was not I who gave you that rose-bud, Alice.'

Alice's face became blank with disappointment: her hands sank on her knees.

'O, do not say that it was left there by accident or by careless hands. I cannot think of that. I have drawn so much comfort from the belief that your kind heart had read my unhappiness, and had discovered such a sweet means of sending comfort. Do not break down my fancies now. If you did not give it me, you prompted the act? You knew of it, Sister, surely you did?'

'No. I did not know of it until it was done. I should never have thought of it. It was thought of by one whose whole life seems devoted to others and to the Divine Master. Do not fear that careless hands put the flower in your cell, Alice. It was placed there by Mr. Wyville.'

'By Mr. Wyville?'

'Yes, dear; it was Mr. Wyville's own plan to win you back to the beautiful world. I thought you knew it all the time.'

'It was nearly five years ago; how could Mr. Wyville have known?' There was a new earnestness in Alice's face as she spoke.

'He had learned your history in Millbank from the governor and the books; and he became deeply interested. It was he who first said you were innocent, long before he proved it; and it was he who first asked me to visit you in your cell.'

Alice did not speak; but she listened with a look almost of sadness, yet with close interest.

'He was your friend, Alice, when you had no other friend in the world,' continued Sister Cecilia; not looking at Alice's face, or she would have hesitated; 'for four years he watched your case, until at last he found her whose punishment you had borne so long.'

'Where did he find her?' Alice asked, after a pause.

'He found her in the jail of your native village, Walton-le-Dale.'

'Walton-le-Dale!' repeated Alice in surprise; 'he took much trouble, then, to prove that I was innocent.'

'Yes; and he did it all alone.'

'Mr. Sheridan, perhaps, could have assisted him. He was born in Walton,' said Alice in a very low voice.

'Yes, Mr. Sheridan told me so when he gave me the package for you at Portland; but he was here in Australia all the years Mr. Wyville was searching for poor wretched Harriet. But come now, Alice, we will leave that gloomy old time behind us in England. Let us always keep it there, as our Australian day looks backward and sees the English night.'

Soon after, Alice started to return to her home. She lingered a long time by the placid river, the particulars she had heard recurring to her and much disturbing her peace. In the midst of her reflections she heard her name called, and looking toward the road, saw Mr. Wyville. She did not move, and he approached.

'I have come to seek you,' he said, 'and to prepare you to meet an old friend.'

She looked at him in surprise, without speaking.

'Mr. Sheridan has just returned from Adelaide,' he said; 'and you were the first person he asked for. I was not aware that you knew him.'

There was no tone in his voice that betrayed disquiet or anxiety. He was even more cheerful than usual.

'I am glad you know Mr. Sheridan,' he continued; 'he is a fine fellow; and I fear he has been very unhappy.'

'He has been very busy,' she said, looking down at the river; 'men have a great deal to distract them from unhappiness.'

'See that jagged rock beneath the water,' he said, pointing to a stone, the raised point of which broke the calm surface of the river. 'Some poet likens a man's sorrow to such a stone. When the flood comes, the sweeping rush of enterprise or duty, it is buried; but in the calm season it will rise again to cut the surface, like an ancient pain.'

Alice followed the simile with eye and mind.

'I did not think you read poetry,' she said with a smile, as she rose from her seat on the rocks.

'I have not read much,' he said—and his face was flushed in the setting sun—'until very recently.'

As they walked together toward the house, Alice returned to the subject first in her mind. With a gravely quiet voice she said:

'Mr. Sheridan's unhappiness is old, then?'

'Yes; it began years ago, when he was little more than a boy.'

Alice was silent. She walked slowly beside Mr. Wyville for a dozen steps. Then she stopped as if unable to proceed, and laying her hand on a low branch beside the path, turned to him.

'Mr. Wyville,' she said, 'has Mr. Sheridan told you the cause of his unhappiness?'

'He has,' he replied, astonished at the abrupt question; 'it is most unfortunate, and utterly hopeless. Time alone can heal the deep wound. He has told me that you knew him years ago: you probably know the sad story.'

'I do not know it,' she said, supporting herself by the branch.

'He loved a woman with a man's love while yet a boy,' he said; 'and he saw her lured from him by a villain, who blighted her life into hopeless ruin.'

'Does he love her still?' asked Alice, her face turned to the darkened bush.

'He pities her; for she is wretched—and guilty.'

At the word, Alice let go the branch and stood straight in the road.

'Guilty!' she said in a strange voice.

'Miss Walmsley, I am deeply grieved at having introduced this subject. But I thought you knew—Mr. Sheridan, I thought, intimated as much. The woman he loved is the unhappy one for whom you suffered. Her husband is still alive, and in this country. I brought him here, to give him, when she is released, a chance of atonement.'

A light burst on Alice's mind as Mr. Wyville spoke, and she with difficulty kept from sinking. She reached for the low branch again; but she did not find it in the dark. To preserve her control, she walked on toward