

The Woman From Purgatory

By Mrs. Belloc Lowndes

“. . . not dead, this friend—not dead,
But, in the path we mortals tread,
Got some few, little steps ahead
And nearer to the end,
So that you, too, once past the bend,
Shall meet again, as face to face, this friend
You fancy dead.”

Mrs. Barlow, the prettiest and the happiest and the best dressed of the young wives of Summerfield, was walking toward the Catholic Church. She was going to consult the old priest as to her duty to an unsatisfactory servant; for Agnes Barlow was a conscientious as well as a pretty and a happy woman.

Foolish people are fond of quoting a foolish gibe: “Be good, and you may be happy; but you will not have a good time.” The wise, however, soon become aware that if, in the course of life’s journey, you achieve goodness and happiness, you will almost certainly have a good time too.

So, at least, Agnes Barlow had found in her own short life. Her excellent parents had built one of the first new houses in what had then been the pretty, old-fashioned village of Summerfield, some fifteen miles from London. There she had been born; there she had spent delightful years at the big convent school over the hill; there she had grown up into a singularly pretty girl; and there, finally—it had seemed quite final to Agnes—she had met the clever, fascinating young lawyer, Frank Barlow.

Frank had soon become the lover all her girl friends had envied her, and then the husband who was still—so he was fond of saying and of proving in a dozen dear little daily ways—as much in love with her as on the day they were married. They lived in a charming house called The Haven, and they were the proud parents of a fine little boy, named Francis after his father, who never had any of the tiresome ailments which afflict other people’s children.

But strange, dreadful things do happen—not often, of course, but just now and again—even in this delightful world! So thought Agnes Barlow on this pleasant May afternoon; for, as she walked to church, this pretty, happy, good woman found her thoughts dwelling uncomfortably on another woman, her sometime intimate friend and contemporary, who was neither good nor happy.

This was Teresa Maldo, the lovely half-Spanish girl who had been her favourite schoolmate at the convent over the hill.

Poor, foolish, unhappy, wicked Teresa! Only ten days ago Teresa had done a thing so extraordinary, so awful, so unprecedented, that Agnes Barlow had thought of little else ever since. Teresa Maldo had eloped, gone right away from her home and her husband, and with a married man!

Teresa and Agnes were the same age; they had had the same upbringing; they were both—in a very different way, however—beautiful, and they had each been married, six years before, on the same day of the month.

But how different had been their subsequent fates!

Teresa had at once discovered that her husband drank. But she loved him, and for a while it seemed as if marriage would reform Maldo. Unfortunately, this better state of things did not last: he again began to drink: and the matrons of Summerfield soon had reason to shake their heads over the way Teresa Maldo went on.

Men, you see, were so sorry for this lovely young woman, blessed (or cursed) with what old-fashioned folk call "the come-hither eye," that they made it their business to console her for such a worthless husband as was Maldo. No wonder Teresa and Agnes drifted apart no wonder Frank Barlow soon forbade his spotless Agnes to accept Mrs. Maldo's invitations. And Agnes knew that her dear Frank was right; she had never much enjoyed her visits to Teresa's house.

But an odd thing had happened about a fortnight ago. And it was to this odd happening that Agnes's mind persistently recurred each time she found herself alone.

About three days before Teresa Maldo had done the mad and wicked thing of which all Summerfield was still talking, she had paid a long call on Agnes Barlow.

The unwelcome guest had stayed a very long time; she had talked, as she generally did talk now, wildly and rather strangely; and Agnes, looking back, was glad to remember that no one else had come in while her old schoolfellow was there.

When, at last, Teresa Maldo had made up her mind to go (luckily, some minutes before Frank was due home from town), Agnes accompanied her to the gate of The Haven, and there the other had turned round and made such odd remarks.

"I came to tell you something!" she had exclaimed. "But, now that I see you looking so happy, so pretty, and—forgive me for saying so, Agnes—so horribly good, I feel that I can't tell you! But, Agnes, whatever happens, you must pity, and—and, if you can, understand me.

It was now painfully clear to Agnes Barlow that Teresa had come that day intending to tell her once devoted friend of the wicked thing she meant to do; and more than once pretty and good Mrs. Barlow had asked herself uneasily whether she could have done anything to stop Teresa on her downward course.

But no; Agnes felt her conscience clear. How would it have been possible for her even to discuss with Teresa so shameful a possibility as that of a woman leaving her husband with another man?

Agnes thought of the two sinners with a touch of fascinated curiosity. They were said to be in Paris, and Teresa was probably having a very good time—a wildly amusing, exciting time.

She even told herself, did this pretty, happy, fortunate young married woman, that it was strange, and not very fair, that vice and pleasure should always go together! It was just a little irritating to know that Teresa would never again be troubled by the kind of worries that played quite an important part in Agnes's own blameless life. Never again, for instance, would Teresa's cook give her notice, as Agnes's cook had given her notice that morning. It was about that matter she wished to see Father Ferguson, for it was through the priest she had heard of the impertinent Irish girl who cooked so well, but who had such an independent manner, and who would *not* wear a cap!

Yes, it certainly seemed unfair that Teresa would now be rid of all domestic worries—nay, more, that the woman who had sinned would live in luxurious hotels, motoring and shopping all day, going to the theatre or to a music-hall each night.

At last, however, Agnes dismissed Teresa Maldo from her mind. She knew that it is not healthy to dwell overmuch on such people and their doings.

The few acquaintances Mrs. Barlow met on her way smiled and nodded, but, as she was walking rather quickly, no one tried to stop her. She had chosen the back way to the church

because it was the prettiest way, and also because it would take her by a house where a friend of hers was living in lodgings.

And suddenly the very friend in question—his name was Ferrier—came out of his lodgings. He had a tall, slight, active figure; he was dressed in a blue serge suit, and, though it was still early spring, he wore a straw hat.

Agnes smiled a little inward smile. She was, as we already know, a very good as well as a happy woman. But a woman as pretty as was Agnes Barlow meets with frequent pleasant occasions of withstanding temptation, of which those about her, especially her dear parents and her kind husband, are often curiously unknowing. And the tall, well-set-up masculine figure now hurrying toward her with such eager steps played a considerable part in Agnes's life, if only as constantly providing her with occasions of acquiring merit.

Agnes knew very well—even the least imaginative woman is always acutely conscious of such a fact—that, had she not been a prudent and a ladylike as well as (of course) a very good woman, this clever, agreeable, interesting young man would have made love to her. As it was, he (of course) did nothing of the kind. He did not even try to flirt with her, as our innocent Agnes understood that much-tried verb; and she regarded their friendship as a pleasant interlude in her placid, well-regulated existence, and as a most excellent influence on his more agitated life.

Mr. Ferrier lifted his hat. He smiled down into Agnes's blue eyes. What very charming, nay, what beautiful eyes they were! Deeply, exquisitely blue, but unshadowed, as innocent of guile, as are a child's eyes.

"Somehow, I had a kind of feeling that you would be coming by just now," he said in a rather hesitating voice; "so I left my work and came out on chance."

Now, Agnes was very much interested in Mr. Ferrier's work. Mr. Ferrier was not only a writer—the only writer she had ever known; he was also a poet. She had been pleasantly thrilled the day he had given her a slim little book, on each page of which was a poem. This gift had been made when they had known each other only two months, and he had inscribed it: "From G. F. to A. M. B."

Mr. Ferrier had a charming studio flat in Chelsea, that odd, remote place where London artists live, far from the pleasant London of the shops and theatres which was all Agnes knew of the great City near which she dwelt. But he always spent the summer in the country, and his summer lasted from the 1st of May till the 1st of October. He had already spent two holidays at Summerfield, and had been a great deal at The Haven.

When with Mr. Ferrier, and they were much together during the long week-days when Summerfield is an Adamless Eden, Agnes Barlow made a point of often speaking of dear Frank and of Frank's love for her,—not, of course, in a way that any one could have regarded as silly, but in a natural, happy, simple way.

How easy, how very easy, it is to keep this kind of friendship—friendship between a man and a woman—within bounds! And how terribly sad it was to think that Teresa Maldo had not known how to do that easy thing! But then, Teresa's lover had been a married man separated from his wife, and that doubtless made all the difference. Agnes Barlow could assure herself in all sincerity that, had Mr. Ferrier been the husband of another woman, she would never have allowed him to become her friend to the extent that he was now.

Mr. Ferrier—Agnes never allowed herself to think of him as Gerald (although he had once asked her to call him by his Christian name)—held an evening paper in his hand.

"I was really on my way to The Haven," he observed, "for there are a few verses of mine in this paper which I am anxious you should read. Shall I go on and leave it at your house, or will

you take it now? And then, if I may, I will call for it some time tomorrow. Should I be likely to find you in about four o'clock?"

"Yes, I'll be in about four, and I think I'll take the paper now."

And then—for she was walking very slowly, and Ferrier, with his hands behind his back, kept pace with her—Agnes could not resist the pleasure of looking down at the open sheet, for the newspaper was so turned about that she could see the little set of verses quite plainly.

The poem was called "My Lady of the Snow," and it told in very pretty, complicated language of a beautiful, pure woman whom the writer loved in a desperate but quite respectful way.

She grew rather red. "I must hurry on, for I am going to church," she said a little stiffly. "Good evening, Mr. Ferrier. Yes, I will keep the paper till to-morrow, if I may. I should like to show it to Frank. He hasn't been to the office to-day, for he isn't very well, and he will like to see an evening paper."

Mr. Ferrier lifted his hat with a rather sad look, and turned back toward the house where he lodged. And as Agnes walked on she felt disturbed and a little uncomfortable. Her clever friend had evidently been grieved by her apparent lack of appreciation of his poem.

When she reached the church her parents had helped to build, she went in, knelt down, and said a prayer. Then she got up and walked through into the sacristy. Father Ferguson was almost certain to be there just now.

Agnes Barlow had known the old priest all her life. He had baptized her; he had been chaplain at the convent during the years she had been at school there; and now he had come back to be parish priest at Summerfield.

When with Father Ferguson, Agnes somehow never felt quite so good as she did when she was by herself or with a strange priest; and yet Father Ferguson was always very kind to her.

As she came into the sacristy he looked round with a smile. "Well?" he said. "Well, Agnes, my child, what can I do for you?"

Agnes put the newspaper she was holding down on a chair. And then, to her surprise, Father Ferguson took up the paper and glanced over the front page. He was an intelligent man, and sometimes he found Summerfield a rather shut-in, stifling sort of place.

But the priest's instinctive wish to know something of what was passing in the great world outside the suburb where it was his duty to dwell did him an ill turn, for something he read in the paper caused him to utter a low, quick exclamation of intense pain and horror.

"What's the matter?" cried Agnes Barlow, frightened out of her usual self-complacency. "Whatever has happened, Father Ferguson?"

He pointed with shaking finger to a small paragraph. It was headed "Suicide of a Lady at Dover," and Agnes read the few lines with bewildered and shocked amazement.

Teresa Maldo, whom she had visioned, only a few minutes ago, as leading a merry, gloriously careless life with her lover, was dead. She had thrown herself out of a bedroom window in a hotel at Dover, and she had been killed instantly, dashed into a shapeless mass on the stones below.

Agnes stared down at the curt, cold little paragraph with excited horror. She was six-and-twenty, but she had never seen death, and, as far as she knew, the girls with whom she had been at school were all living. Teresa—poor unhappy, sinful Teresa—had been the first to die, and by her own hand.

The old priest's eyes slowly brimmed over with tears. "Poor, unhappy child!" he said, with a break in his voice. "Poor, unfortunate Teresa! I did not think, I should never have believed, that she would seek—and find—this terrible way out."

Agnes was a little shocked at his broken words. True, Teresa had been very unhappy, and it was right to pity her; but she had also been very wicked; and now she had put, as it were, the seal on her wickedness by killing herself.

“Three or four days before she went away she came and saw me,” the priest went on, in a low, pained voice. “I did everything in my power to stop her, but I could do nothing—she had given her word!”

“Given her word?” repeated Agnes wonderingly.

“Yes,” said Father Ferguson; “she had given that wretched, that wickedly selfish man her promise. She believed that if she broke her word he would kill himself. I begged her to go and see some woman—some kind, pitiful, understanding woman—but I suppose she feared lest such a one would dissuade her to more purpose than I was able to do.

Agnes looked at him with troubled eyes.

“She was very dear to my heart,” the priest went on. “She was always a generous, unselfish child, and she was very, very fond of you, Agnes.”

Agnes’s throat tightened. What Father Ferguson said was only too true. Teresa had always been a very generous and unselfish girl, and very, very fond of her. She wondered remorsefully if she had omitted to do or say anything she could have done or said on the day that poor Teresa had come and spoken such strange, wild words—?

“It seems so awful,” she said in a low voice, “so very, very awful to think that we may not even pray for her soul, Father Ferguson.”

“Not pray for her soul?” the priest repeated. “Why should we not pray for the poor child’s soul? I shall certainly pray for Teresa’s soul every day till I die.”

“But—but how can you do that, when she killed herself?”

He looked at her surprised. “And do you really so far doubt God’s mercy? Surely we may hope—nay, trust—that Teresa had time to make an act of contrition?” And then he muttered something—it sounded like a line or two of poetry—which Agnes did not quite catch; but she felt, as she often did feel when with Father Ferguson, at once rebuked and rebellious.

Of course there *might* have been time for Teresa to make an act of contrition. But every one knows that to take one’s life is a deadly sin. Agnes felt quite sure that if it ever occurred to herself to do such a thing she would go straight to hell. Still, she was used to obey this old priest, and that even when she did not agree with him. So she followed him into the church, and side by side they knelt down and each said a separate prayer for the soul of Teresa Maldo.

As Agnes Barlow walked slowly and soberly home, this time by the high road, she tried to remember the words, the lines of poetry, that Father Ferguson had muttered. They at once haunted and eluded her memory. Surely they could not be

Between the window and the ground,
She mercy sought and mercy found.

No, Agnes was sure that he had not said “window,” and yet window seemed the only word that would fit the case. And he had not said, “*she* mercy found”; he had said, “*he* mercy sought and mercy found”—of that Agnes felt sure, and that, too, was odd. But then, Father Ferguson was very odd sometimes, and he was fond of quoting in his sermons queer little bits of verse of which no one had ever heard.

Suddenly she bethought herself, with more annoyance than the matter was worth, that in her agitation she had left Mr. Ferrier’s newspaper in the sacristy. She did not like the thought that Father Ferguson would probably read those pretty, curious verses, “My Lady of the Snow.”

Also, Agnes had actually forgotten to speak to the old priest of her impertinent cook!

II

We find Agnes Barlow again walking in Summerfield; but this time she is hurrying along the straight, unlovely cinder-strewn path which forms a short cut from the back of The Haven to Summerfield station; and the still, heavy calm of a late November afternoon broods over the rough ground on either side of her.

It is nearly six months since Teresa Maldo's elopement and subsequent suicide, and now no one ever speaks of poor Teresa, no one seems to remember that she ever lived, excepting, perhaps, Father Ferguson. .

As for Agnes herself, life had crowded far too many happenings into the last few weeks for her to give more than a passing thought to Teresa; indeed, the image of her dead friend rose before her only when she was saying her prayers. And as Agnes, strange to say, had grown rather careless as to her prayers, the memory of Teresa Maldo was now very faint indeed.

An awful, and to her an incredible, thing had happened to Agnes Barlow. The roof of her snug and happy House of Life had fallen in, and she lay, blinded and maimed, beneath the fragments which had been hurled down on her in one terrible moment.

Yes, it had all happened in a moment—so she now reminded herself, with the dull ache which never left her.

It was just after she had come back from Westgate with little Francis. The child had been ailing for the first time in his life, and she had taken him to the seaside for six weeks.

There, in a day, it had turned from summer to winter, raining as it only rains at the seaside; and suddenly Agnes had made up her mind to go back to her own nice, comfortable home a whole week before Frank expected her back.

Agnes sometimes acted like that—on a quick impulse; she did so to her own undoing on that dull, rainy day.

When she reached Summerfield, it was to find her telegram to her husband lying unopened on the hall table of The Haven. Frank, it seemed, had slept in town the night before. Not that that mattered, so she told herself gleefully, full of the pleasant joy of being again in her own home; the surprise would be the greater and the more welcome when Frank did come back.

Having nothing better to do that first afternoon, Agnes had gone up to her husband's dressing-room in order to look over his summer clothes before sending them to the cleaner. In her careful, playing-at-housewifely fashion, she had turned out the pockets of his cricketing coat. There, a little to her surprise, she had found three letters, and idle curiosity as to Frank's invitations during her long stay away—Frank was deservedly popular with the ladies of Summerfield and, indeed, with all women—caused her to take the three letters out of their envelopes.

In a moment—how terrible that it should take but a moment to shatter the fabric of a human being's innocent House of Life!—Agnes had seen what had happened to her—to him. For each of these letters, written in the same sloping woman's hand, was a love letter signed "Janey"; and in each the writer, in a plaintive, delicate, but insistent and reproachful way, asked Frank for money.

Even now, though nearly seven weeks had gone by since then, Agnes could recall with painful vividness the sick, cold feeling that had come over her—a feeling of fear rather than anger, of fear and desperate humiliation.

Locking the door of the dressing-room, she had searched eagerly—a dishonourable thing to do, as she knew well. And soon she had found other letters—letters and bills; bills of meals at restaurants, showing that her husband and a companion had constantly dined and supped at the Savoy, the Carlton, and Prince's. To those restaurants where he had taken her, Agnes, two or three times a year, laughing and grumbling at the expense, he had taken this—this person again and again in the short time his wife had been away.

As to the further letters, all they proved was that Frank had first met "Janey Cartwright" over some law business of hers, connected—even Agnes saw the irony of it—in some shameful way with another man; for, tied together, were a few notes signed with the writer's full name, of which the first began:

Dear Mr. Barlow:

Forgive me for writing to your private address [etc., etc.].

The ten days that followed her discovery had seared Agnes's soul. Frank had been so dreadfully affectionate. He had pretended—she felt sure it was all pretence—to be so glad to see her again, though sometimes she caught him looking at her with cowed, miserable eyes.

More than once he had asked her solicitously if she felt ill, and she had said yes, she did feel ill, and the time at the seaside had not done her any good.

And then, on the last of those terrible ten days, Gerald Ferrier had come down to Summerfield, and both she and Frank had pressed him to stay on to dinner. He had done so, though aware that something was wrong, and he had been extraordinarily kind, sympathetic, unquestioning. But as he was leaving he had said a word to his host: "I feel worried about Mrs. Barlow"—Agnes had heard him through the window. "She doesn't look the thing, somehow! How would it be if I asked her to go with me to a private view? It might cheer her up, and perhaps she would lunch with me afterwards?" Frank had eagerly assented.

Since then Agnes had gone up to London, if not every day, very nearly every day, and Mr. Ferrier had done his best, without much success, to "cheer her up."

Though they soon became more intimate than they had ever been, Agnes never told Ferrier what it was that had turned her from a happy, unquestioning child into a miserable woman; but, of course, he guessed.

And gradually Frank also had come to know that she knew, and, man-like, he spent less and less time in his now uncomfortable home. He would go away in the morning an hour earlier than usual, and then, under pretext of business keeping him late at the office, he would come back after having dined, doubtless with "Janey," in town.

Soon Agnes began to draw a terrible comparison between these two men—between the husband who had all she had of heart, and the friend whom she now acknowledged to herself—for hypocrisy had fallen away from her—had lived only for her, and for the hours they were able to spend together, during two long years, and yet who had never told her of his love, or tried to disturb her trust in Frank.

Yes, Gerald Ferrier was all that was noble—Frank Barlow all that was ignoble. So she told herself with trembling lip a dozen times a day, taking fierce comfort in the knowledge that Ferrier was noble. But she was destined even to lose that comfort; for one day, a week before the day when we find her walking to Summerfield station, Ferrier's nobility, or what poor Agnes took to be such, suddenly broke down.

They had been walking together in Battersea Park, and, after one of those long silences which bespeak true intimacy between a man and a woman, he had asked her if she would come back to his rooms—for tea.

She had shaken her head smilingly. And then he had turned on her with a torrent of impetuous, burning words—words of ardent love, of anguished longing, of eager pleading. And Agnes had been frightened, fascinated, allured.

And that had not been all.

More quietly he had gone on to speak as if the code of morality in which his friend had been bred, and which had hitherto so entirely satisfied her, was, after all, nothing but a narrow counsel of perfection, suited to those who were sheltered and happy, but wretchedly inadequate to meet the needs of the greater number of human beings who are, as Agnes now was, humiliated and miserable. His words had found an echo in her sore heart, but she had not let him see how much they moved her. On the contrary, she had rebuked him, and for the first time they had quarrelled.

“If you ever speak to me like that again,” she had said coldly, “I will not come again.”

And once more he had turned on her violently. “I think you had better not come again! I am but a man after all!”

They parted enemies; but the same night Ferrier wrote Agnes a very piteous letter asking pardon on his knees for having spoken as he had done. And his letter moved her to the heart. Her own deep misery—never for one moment did she forget Frank, and Frank’s treachery—made her understand the torment that Ferrier was going through.

For the first time she realized, what so few of her kind ever realize, that it is a mean thing to take everything and give nothing in exchange. And gradually, as her long, solitary hours wore themselves away, Agnes came to believe that if she did what she now knew Ferrier desired her to do,—if, casting the past behind her, she started a new life with him—she would not only be doing a generous thing by the man who had loved her silently and faithfully for so long, but she would also be punishing Frank—hurting him in his honour, as he had hurt her in hers.

And then the stars that fight in their courses for those lovers who are also poets fought for Ferrier.

The day after they had quarrelled and he had written her his piteous letter of remorse, Gerald Ferrier fell ill. But he was not too ill to write. And after he had been ill four days, and when Agnes was feeling very, very miserable, he wrote and told her of a wonderful vision which had been vouchsafed to him.

In this vision Ferrier had seen Agnes knocking at the narrow front door of the lonely flat where he lived solitary; and through the door had slipped in his angelic visitant, by her mere presence bringing him peace, health, and the happiness he was schooling himself to believe must never come to him through her.

The post which brought her the letter in which Ferrier told his vision brought also to Agnes Barlow a little registered parcel containing a pearl-and-diamond pendant from Frank.

For a few moments the two lay on her knee. Then she took up the jewel and looked at it curiously. Was it with such a thing as this that her husband thought to purchase her forgiveness?

If Ferrier’s letter had never been written, if Frank’s gift had never been despatched, it may be doubted whether Agnes would have done what we now find her doing—hastening, that is, on her way to make Ferrier’s dream come true.

At last she reached the little suburban station of Summerfield.

One of her father's many kindnesses to her each year was the gift of a season ticket to town; but to-day some queer instinct made her buy a ticket at the booking-office instead.

The booking-clerk peered out at her, surprised; then made up his mind that pretty Mrs. Barlow—she wore to-day a curiously thick veil—had a friend with her. But his long, ruminating stare made her shrink and flush. Was it possible that what she was about to do was written on her face?

She was glad indeed when the train steamed into the station. She got into an empty carriage, for the rush that goes on each evening Londonward from the suburbs had not yet begun.

And then, to her surprise, she found that it was the thought of her husband, not of the man to whom she was going to give herself, that filled her sad, embittered heart.

Old memories—memories connected with Frank, his love for her, her love for him—became insistent. She lived again, while tears forced themselves into her closed eyes, through the culminating moment of her marriage day, the start for the honeymoon,—a start made amid a crowd of laughing, cheering friends, from the little station she had just left.

She remembered the delicious tremor which had come over her when she had found herself at last alone, really alone, with her three-hour-old bridegroom.

How infinitely kind and tender Frank had been to her!

And then Agnes reminded herself, with tightening breath, that men like Frank Barlow are always kind—too kind—to women.

Other journeys she and Frank had taken together came and mocked her, and especially the journey which had followed a month after little Francis's birth.

Frank had driven with her, the nurse, and the baby, to the station—but only to see them off. He had had a very important case in the Courts just then, and it was out of the question that he should go with his wife to Littlehampton for the change of air, the few weeks by the sea, that had been ordered by her good, careful doctor.

And then at the last moment Frank had suddenly jumped into the railway carriage without a ticket, and had gone along with her part of the way! She remembered the surprise of the monthly nurse, the woman's prim remark, when he had at last got out at Horsham, that Mr. Barlow was certainly the kindest husband she, the nurse, had ever seen.

But these memories, now so desecrated, did not make her give up her purpose. Far from it, for in a queer way they made her think more tenderly of Gerald Ferrier, whose life had been so lonely, and who had known nothing of the simpler human sanctities and joys, and who had never—so he had told her with a kind of bitter scorn of himself—been loved by any woman whom he himself could love.

In her ears there sounded Ferrier's quick, hoarsely uttered words: "D'you think I should ever have said a word to you of all this—if you had gone on being happy? D'you think I'd ask you to come to me if I thought you had any chance of being happy with him—now?"

And she knew in her soul that he had spoken truly. Ferrier would never have tried to disturb her happiness with Frank; he had never so tried during those two years when they had seen so much of each other, and when Agnes had known, deep down in her heart, that he loved her, though it had suited her conscience to pretend that his love was only "friendship."

III

The train glided into the fog-laden London station, and very slowly Agnes Barlow stepped down out of the railway carriage. She felt oppressed by the fact that she was alone. During the last few

weeks Ferrier had always been standing on the platform waiting to greet her, eager to hurry her into a cab—to a picture gallery, to a concert, or of late, oftenest of all, to one of those green oases which the great town still leaves her lovers.

But now Ferrier was not here. Ferrier was ill, solitary, in the lonely rooms which he called “home.”

Agnes Barlow hurried out of the station.

Hammer, hammer, hammer went what she supposed was her heart. It was a curious, to Agnes a new sensation, bred of the fear that she would meet some acquaintance to whom she would have to explain her presence in town. She could not help being glad that the fog was of that dense, stifling quality which makes every one intent on his own business rather than on that of his neighbours.

Then something happened which scared Agnes. She was walking, now very slowly, out of the station, when a tall man came up to her. He took off his hat and peered insolently into her face.

“I think I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you before,” he said.

She stared at him with a great, unreasonable fear gripping her heart. No doubt this was some business acquaintance of Frank’s. “I—I don’t think so,” she faltered.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Don’t you remember, two years ago at the Pirola in Regent Street? I don’t *think* I can be wrong.

And then Agnes understood. “You are making a mistake,” she said breathlessly, and quickened her steps.

The man looked after her with a jeering smile, but he made no further attempt to molest her.

She was trembling—shaken with fear, disgust, and terror. It was odd, but such a thing had never happened to pretty Agnes Barlow before. She was not often alone in London; she had never been there alone on such a foggy evening, an evening which invited such approaches as those she had just repulsed.

She touched a respectable-looking woman on the arm. “Can you tell me the way to Flood Street, Chelsea?” she asked, her voice faltering.

“Why, yes, Miss. It’s a good step from here, but you can’t mistake it. You’ve only got to go straight along, and then ask again after you’ve been walking about twenty minutes. You can’t mistake it.” And she hurried on, while Agnes tried to keep in step behind her, for the slight adventure outside the station became retrospectively terrifying. She thrilled with angry fear lest that—that brute should still be stalking her; but when she looked over her shoulder she saw that the pavement was nearly bare of walkers.

At last the broad thoroughfare narrowed to a point where four streets converged. Agnes glanced fearfully this way and that. Which of those shadowy black-coated figures hurrying past, intent on their business, would direct her rightly? Within the last half-hour Agnes had grown horribly afraid of men.

And then, with more relief than the fact warranted, across the narrow roadway she saw emerge, between two parting waves of fog, the shrouded figure of a woman leaning against a dead wall.

Agnes crossed the street, but as she stepped up on to the kerb, suddenly there broke from her, twice repeated, a low, involuntary cry of dread.

“Teresa!” she cried. And then, again, “Teresa!” For in the shrouded figure before her she had recognized, with a thrill of incredulous terror, the form and lineaments of Teresa Maldo.

But there came no answering cry; and Agnes gave a long, gasping, involuntary sigh of relief as she realized that what had seemed to be her dead friend’s dark, glowing face was the face of a little child—a black-haired beggar child, with large startled eyes wide open on a living world.

The tall woman whose statuesque figure had so strangely recalled Teresa's supple, powerful form was holding up the child, propping it on the wall behind her.

Still shaking with the chill terror induced by the vision she now believed she had not seen, Agnes went up closer to the melancholy group.

Even now she longed to hear the woman speak. "Can you tell me the way to Flood Street?" she asked.

The woman looked at her fixedly. "No, that I can't," she said listlessly. "I'm a stranger here." And then, with a passionate energy which startled Agnes, "For God's sake, give me something, lady, to help me to get home! I've walked all the way from Essex; it's taken me, oh! so long with the child, though we've had a lift here and a lift there, and I haven't a penny left. I came to find my husband; but he's lost himself—on purpose!"

A week ago, Agnes Barlow would have shaken her head and passed on. She had always held the theory, carefully inculcated by her careful parents, that it is wrong to give money to beggars in the street.

But perhaps the queer illusion that she had just experienced made her remember Father Ferguson. In a flash she recalled a sermon of the old priest's which had shocked and disturbed his prosperous congregation, for in it the preacher had advanced the astounding theory that it is better to give to nine impostors than to refuse the one just man; nay, more, he had reminded his hearers of the old legend that Christ sometimes comes, in the guise of a beggar, to the wealthy.

She took five shillings out of her purse, and put them, not in the woman's hand, but in that of the little child.

"Thank you," said the woman dully. "May God bless you!" That was all, but Agnes went on, vaguely comforted.

And now at last, helped on her way by more than one good-natured wayfarer, she reached the quiet, but shabby Chelsea street where Ferrier lived. The fog had drifted towards the river, and in the lamplight Agnes Barlow was not long in finding a large open door, above which was inscribed: "The Thomas More Studios."

Agnes walked timorously through into the square, empty, gas-lit hail, and looked round her with distaste. The place struck her as very ugly and forlorn, utterly lacking in what she had always taken to be the amenities of flat life—an obsequious porter, a lift, electric light.

How strange of Ferrier to have told her that he lived in a building that was beautiful!

Springing in bold and simple curves, rose a wrought-iron staircase, filling up the centre of the narrow; towerlike building. Agnes knew that Ferrier lived high up, somewhere near the top.

She waited a moment at the foot of the staircase. She was gathering up her strength, throwing behind her everything that had meant life, happiness, and—what signified so very much to such a woman as herself—personal repute.

But, even so, Agnes did not falter in her purpose. She was still possessed, driven onward, by a passion of jealous misery.

But, though her spirit was willing, ay, and more than willing, for revenge, her flesh was weak; and as she began slowly walking up the staircase she started nervously at the grotesque shapes cast by her own shadow, and at the muffled sounds of her own footfalls.

Half-way up the high building the gas-jets burned low, and Agnes felt aggrieved. What a mean, stupid economy on the part of the owners of this strange, unnatural dwelling-place.

How dreadful it would be if she were to meet any one she knew—any one belonging to what she was already unconsciously teaching herself to call her old, happy life! As if in cruel answer

to her fear, a door opened, and an old man, clad in a big shabby fur coat and broad-brimmed hat, came out.

Agnes's heart gave a bound in her bosom. Yes; this was what she had somehow thought would happen. In the half-light she took the old man to be an eccentric acquaintance of her father's.

"Mr. Willis?" she whispered hoarsely.

He looked at her, surprised, resentful.

"My name's not Willis," he said gruffly, as he passed her on his way down, and her heart became stilled. How could she have been so foolish as to take that disagreeable old man for kindly-natured Mr. Willis?

She was now very near the top. Only a storey and a half more, and she would be there. Her steps were flagging, but a strange kind of peace had fallen on her. In a few moments she would be safe, for ever, in Ferrier's arms. How strange and unreal the notion seemed!

And then—and then, as if fashioned by some potent incantation from the vaporous fog outside, a tall, grey figure rose out of nothingness, and stood, barring the way, on the steel floor of the landing above her.

Agnes clutched the iron railing, too oppressed rather than too frightened to speak. Out in the fog-laden street she had involuntarily called out the other's name. "Teresa?" she had cried, "Teresa!" But this time no word broke from her lips, for she feared that if she spoke the other would answer.

Teresa Maldo's love, the sisterly love of which Agnes had been so little worthy, had broken down the gateless barrier which stretches its dense length between the living and the dead. What she, the living woman, had not known how to do for Teresa, the dead woman had come back to do for her—for now Agnes seemed suddenly able to measure the depth of the gulf into which she had been about to throw herself. . . .

She stared with fearful, fascinated eyes at the immobile figure swathed in grey, cere-like garments, and her gaze travelled stealthfully up to the white, passionless face, drained of all expression save that of watchful concern and understanding tenderness. . . .

With a swift movement Agnes turned round. Clinging to the iron rail, she stumbled down the stairway to the deserted hall, and with swift terror-hastened steps rushed out into the street.

Through the fog she plunged, not even sparing a moment to look back and up to the dimly lighted window behind which poor Ferrier stood,—as a softer, a truer-natured woman might have done. Violently she put all thought of her lover from her, and as she hurried along with tightening breath, the instinct of self-preservation alone possessing her, she became more and more absorbed in measuring the fathomless depth of the pit in which she had so nearly fallen.

Her one wish now was to get home—to get home—to get home—before Frank got back.

But the fulfilment of that wish was denied her—for as Agnes Barlow walked, crying softly as she went, in the misty darkness along the road which led from Summerfield station to the gate of The Haven, there fell on her ear the rhythmical tramp of well-shod feet.

She shrank near to the hedge, in no mood to greet or to accept greeting from a neighbour. But the walker was now close to her. He struck a match.

"Agnes?" It was Frank Barlow's voice—shamed, eager, questioning. "Is that you? I thought—I hoped you would come home by this train.

And as she gave no immediate answer, as he missed—God alone knew with what relief—the prim, cold accents to which his wife had accustomed him of late, he hurried forward and took her masterfully in his arms. "Oh! my darling," he whispered huskily, "I know I've been a beast—but

I've never left off loving you—and I can't stand your coldness, Agnes; it's driving me to the devil! Forgive me, my pure angel—”

And Frank Barlow's pure angel did forgive him, and with a spontaneity and generous forgetfulness which he will ever remember. Nay, more; Agnes—and this touched her husband deeply—even gave up her pleasant acquaintance with that writing fellow, Ferrier, because Ferrier, through no fault of his, was associated, in both their minds, with the terrible time each would have given so much to obliterate from the record of their otherwise cloudless married life.