

## THE PRICE I PAID FOR A SET OF RUSKIN.

IN days long past I bought a beautiful set of Ruskin with a book which I wrote myself. And I paid something besides,—more, I think, than any edition on earth is worth. I will put the case before you. Judge for yourselves.

My father was a widowed clergyman, with the clergyman's usual baker's dozen of children, of whom I was the oldest, so that I was wife to my father, mother to the children, and sister to all the parish, before I was well under way in my teens. As a family, our needs were naturally in the customary clerical disproportion to our means; and as to wants, from our childhood we were instructed to forego those altogether.

"Be content with food and shelter and clothing," said my father, patting our cheeks with that gentle hand of his. "Do the robins have more?"

I felt that the robins had a great deal more. None of *us* ever looked so fresh and smart in our spring suits, or supplemented our scanty winter gleanings with the scattered blessings of generous hands; while as to the roof above our heads, there was many a gallant oak-tree that warded the storms off better. However, the argument always silenced me at once, and cheered me, too, as did every word ever spoken by this dear voice; and when I looked up in my father's beautiful face and met his smile, I felt that, having him, I truly needed nothing more. Oh, how I idolized my father! Surely a braver, sweeter, lovelier soul never has been. He was now far past middle life, but still working with tireless zest and unswerving devotion among the people who had summoned him to be their teacher some thirty years before. All the best days of his life, all the best powers of his mind had been given to their service; and now that he was gray and weary and spent with labor, he still had no thought of rest.

"My work is not as other men's work," he would say. "I may not take it up and lay it down at pleasure. God will take it from me when it is time."

And so he toiled on, growing every day more single-minded in purpose, more holy in character, more saint-like in expression. His life was a gospel of itself. But the strength of his soul outran that of his body, and he grew to look old and worn before his time, until at last comforts became necessities instead of luxuries, and altogether ate up the paltry

salary which from the first had been but a meager one even for our not overwealthy congregation.

"Surely, father," I suggested, "they might raise it a little now, if only in recognition of your long and faithful services."

"Nay, nay, Hester, my child," he replied, with his tender smile. "You forget that I am growing old and feeble, and am not worth as much to the parish as a younger and sprier man. It is generous of the vestry that they continue my salary the same. We should be grateful that they have not lessened it. And what should we do with more? Have we not all that we need?"

"No," I said petulantly. "You need a new coat. I can see my face all down the back of that one."

"It is a recommendation of its shabbiness, my dear, that it reflects anything so comely. I shall wear it with added pleasure now."

"And you ought to have a gig to carry you about in bad weather."

"I should but break my neck getting in and out of it. I am safer by far on my feet, my child. I am not so limber at climbing as I used to be."

"At least, then, father, you should be able to indulge in a new book or two when your heart is set on it. There is that beautiful edition of Ruskin down at Carter's, that you look at so longingly every time you pass the store."

"Hoots toots!" interrupted my father gayly. "If you come to idle wishes, not all the mints in all the world could coin money fast enough for our demands, and we are better off as we are."

"But you know you do want that set of Ruskin, father."

"Ay, truly. So I would like the Bodleian Library, but that is no good reason why I should have it. I will not deny though that that is a fine set of Ruskin that Carter has,—the very handsomest edition of the work that I ever saw, and a binding that does credit to the writer. A worthy book unworthily bound is as a monarch in unseemly robes, and my simple mind prefers royalty in its pomp. Yes, it is a fine set surely. It gives me pleasure but to take up one of those books in my hand and turn over the prints, like a child with a picture primer; and Carter is very friendly, and allows me to look at it as often as I enter the store. But that is not to say I



wish it were mine, my dear. Why, there are no shelves in my study fit to hold it. I should next want to be buying that little gem of a carved bookstand at Tracey's to put it in. Nay, nay, it is unsafe to begin with wishes and wants, you see, my child. There is no knowing where they would lead me to."

Nevertheless there was scarcely a day but on some pretext or other my father found his way to Carter's, to have just one peep more at that beautiful morocco-bound edition of his favorite author. How eagerly he took up one volume of it after another! how regretfully he laid each down! how lingeringly he turned away! I yearned unspeakably to make it his. His love of beautiful books amounted almost to a passion, and was his one innocently extravagant taste. Ah, if I could but gratify it in this single instance! By degrees all my soul became absorbed in this intense desire, and by day and by night I dreamed over one by one the few arts for earning money at an ignorant woman's command. And at last I determined that I would write a book.

So these are the circumstances which made me an author; for, like many poor women who earn their living by their pen, I was by no means a writer born; and this is how that first and last book of mine was begun. I felt confident that, once started, I could tell my story well enough, and to write it would cost me no outlay save time, which I took from the night hours, that I might leave none of my day-duties undone; and if I failed, therefore, I would at least lose nothing by my venture.

But I had little imagination, which was scarcely to be wondered at, for a life passed among hard realities soon loses its frail hold on the ideal; and I could not invent a plot, try as I would, till at last, in despair, I fell back on an ended romance in my own life, a sad little story which I had lived through all unknown to any one — even to my father — one eventful, never-to-be-forgotten summer not many years before, when I had chanced to be away from home. It seemed almost like reopening a grave, or betraying some sacred trust to write out this sorry secret of mine to lay before the world's desecrating eyes. But after all, I said to myself, people will think it merely a story; no one can ever guess I wrote about myself; and at least my book must be life-like, and will run no risk of being overdrawn, if I put in it only what really happened. In all my life I had been but that once outside our city, and I knew so little therefore of any other that I preferably laid my scene where I lived, where I naturally took myself for my heroine, for how could I fit my own story to any other woman? Yet every stroke of my pen seemed such an absolute revelation

of myself, such a complete unmasking of my inmost and dearest thoughts and feelings, that my cheeks grew scarlet, and a burning shame possessed my whole soul as I wrote. What could the world think of me if it knew that I—I—the reserved, reticent, quiet Hester Brooks, had given away my heart's love to one so utterly unworthy it, to one so unworthy the love of any true woman living, and who had won it only to scorn it and fling it from him as a valueless toy?

But to the world it will only be a novel, a fiction, a made-up story, I said reassuringly to myself over and over again. It cannot seem true to any but myself, for no one living dreams that I ever had a lover, and not even he who trifled with me knew that he broke my heart, for all I learned to despise him through my love, and only forgave him long after, when I heard that he was dead.

And so I wrote my book, the simplest of books in very truth, and with only myself in it; for the few other characters necessary to the unfolding of the tale were all shadowy and indistinct, forming a dim background against which this one figure stood out in clear relief. A great morose-looking house which adjoined ours, and which had stood empty ever since I could remember, was the familiar home I chose for my heroine; and I described her from a fancy sketch, which, hanging in my room since childhood, seemed now almost more like my second self than could any reflection from my mirror. My story should be real throughout, I determined, and any visionary head would sit strangely on my shoulders. But this picture over my desk was as my half-sister, and it seemed not unnatural to link her features with my fate. Surely she would be willing to lend so much as that toward helping on my book, she who had watched me through so many years, witnessing with silent sympathy a sorrow hidden from all others.

So in the still hours of the night, for my dear father's sake, I sat and told my tale. My deep love for him, my passionate desire to give him pleasure, lent a strange inspiration to my pen; and if I needed further incentive, if my brain wearied or my courage failed, I would slip quietly out of the house toward dusk and go down to Carter's, and look through the window at that wonderful set of Ruskin, over which my father's spirit yearned. Several times I caught him there. He seemed unable to keep away.

"It is those books bring me here," he would say, deprecatingly, as I came up. "They are a magnet I cannot resist. Truly, I believe I could hardly enjoy them more were they my own."

And the recollection of the subdued long-



ing in his face as he turned away gave wings to my midnight pen. I felt that I was writing well, and I knew that I should never write as well again. But what matters another time? I thought. It is for this once that I seek success, and I will pour all my heart into my book. I will keep back nothing of what I have to give. I will risk my all on this one venture. Ah, my poor little book, wrought in silence and secrecy, like an evil deed, yet so innocent of evil! Oh, had I but known! Had I but known!

But why dwell longer on preliminaries? My book at last was not only finished, but accepted, and in due course of time published. They told me it "took" wonderfully. I smiled to myself. It seemed whimsically odd that my heart's spoiled happiness should now make my life's success. It was like beating gold out of grief. But I experienced none of an author's reputed emotions over a first book. I thought of it only as a means to something dearer than personal fame, valuing it solely as it accomplished the end for which it was written.

Never shall I forget my dear father's amazement when the book came out. He at once locked himself into his study with it, and when he came to me afterwards, his eyes were moist and shining, and his lip trembling.

"I didn't know you had it in you, Hester," he said. "It is a wonderful book, my child. It is truer to life than life itself, but sad!—oh, my dear, sad! Were it not that I knew your life through from end to end, I could almost have believed you were telling your own experiences, so vividly is it written. It is a great gift, Hester, and you have written a wonderful book, a very wonderful book, my dear."

Not all the praise of all the world could have touched me more nearly or satisfied me more perfectly than this praise from my father. I hid my face on his breast, and could not speak for content. Ah, I thought, when I buy him that beautiful set, when he knows why I wrote my book, surely Heaven itself cannot give me more of ecstasy than that moment!

Almost simultaneously, however, with the publication of my story, I began to notice a change in people's manners toward me. I had always been rather a favorite in the parish, and till now had had only the very pleasantest relations with my father's friends. I could not comprehend what was making the difference, yet there it surely was. Mrs. Van Anden, one of our oldest friends, who had almost brought me up with her daughter Juliet, bowed to me so strangely the first time I met her after my book had appeared, that I thought something must have happened, and ran across the street to ask if any of them were ill.

"Oh, no; oh, no. Juliet is *perfectly* well.

She was never better, never happier—never in her life. Thank you *very much*," replied Mrs. Van Anden, hurrying by with such a sarcastically polite smile that I was completely dumbfounded.

And Mrs. Brownson, who lived next door to us, and whose daughter Annie—a fragile, delicate little thing—had always been a particular pet of mine, actually pretended not to see me at all at the sewing society, betraying herself by a vivid blush every time I passed anywhere near her.

Even our senior warden, dear old Mr. Drake, greeted me with a positive scowl one day, when father sent me to him with some parish question. He was still at the breakfast table, and inferring that the interruption displeased him, I hurried through my errand and left as speedily as possible. His daughter followed me out to the door. Perhaps it is because she, too, is motherless, that of all my friends I have always been most drawn to Adelaide; but she is certainly a lovely girl, though sensitive and proud to a fault. She stood silently beside me as I fastened on my veil, not offering her usual assistance, and with a strange, constrained manner, which I could not help noticing.

"What is the matter, Adelaide, dear?" I asked. "Is anything wrong? Can I help you in any way?"

"No, I thank you, Hester," she replied, a slight flush tinging her cheek. "I need nothing from you."

There was the faintest possible emphasis on the *you*. I looked up at her quickly. She threw back her head and returned my gaze steadily. Her eyes were full of keenest reproach.

"Why, Adelaide!" I exclaimed, going to her and taking her hands, "what is the matter, dear? Why do you look at me so?"

She drew away her hands and turned aside. "Your own conscience must tell you why," she answered, with a contemptuous ring in her voice. "Surely you cannot need to be told that after this we can never be friends again."

I caught hold of her dress in despair. "Have you taken leave of your senses, Adelaide? After *this*? After what? No, you *must* tell me. After what, Adelaide?"

"After your book. Why should you pretend not to understand? You must have known when you wrote it that you were forfeiting my friendship forever."

I was speechless with astonishment.

"My book!" I gasped.

Adelaide came nearer, the scorn in her face intensifying.

"Did you suppose," she said, almost in a hiss, "that such slight alterations justified you in taking as your plot what I told you last



fall in strictest confidence? I meant no one but my father ever to know my miserable history. You remember it was only by accident that you learned it. But I trusted you as I trusted myself. I thought a friend's heart was a confessional that held its secrets under seal. I told you what I would have torn out my tongue rather than have told to any one living besides. And you—you have laid it unblushingly before all the world. Is a confidence less betrayed, when betrayed with pen instead of voice? You have played with my humiliating sorrow. You have used me as a tool. You have been false to the holiest of trusts. Hester, I *never* will forgive you! never—never—never!"

The angry words dashed over me like a torrent, taking my breath away.

"Adelaide!" I cried, when at last she paused, "what mistake are you making? You are not the heroine of my book. I never once thought of you when I wrote it. Don't you see that the story is altogether different? Any resemblance is purely accidental or imaginary. The story is my own, Adelaide—not yours. Why, I would no more have taken your secret for my book than I would have stolen your photograph for its frontispiece. Adelaide—let me explain—listen!"

I might as well have appealed to a marble image. The look on her proud face deepened to actual hatred, and she turned haughtily away, closing the door in my face. No explanation that I could give availed to win back her faith in me. She never fully believed in me again. I lost her friendship forever.

It was a day or two after that Mrs. Van Anden called. I was cutting out a set of aprons for Mollie, but no interruption was unwelcome that came from this friendly quarter, and I threw down my scissors and turned to her with my usual warm greeting. To my surprise, she pushed me rudely away when I would have kissed her, and sat down, facing me sternly.

"Hester," she said bluntly, "we can't go on in this way. I've made up my mind to have it out with you. That's what I've come for. Look here. Why did you do it?"

"Why did I do what?"

"Don't look so innocent. Of course you know what I mean. Why did you put my Juliet in your book?"

"Mrs. Van Anden, Juliet is *not* in my book."

"Oh, isn't she! Why, then, have you described her face, her figure, her manner even, so unmistakably that the blindest can't fail to recognize her in your heroine, in spite of the feigned name—as if that were any real disguise? You had the grace not to call her out and out Juliet Van Anden; nevertheless, there's not a soul that knows us and has read

your story but believes she sat to you for her portrait, the same as if she went to be photographed when you wrote that book."

I was almost in tears. "But my heroine is entirely a fancy picture, Mrs. Van Anden," I insisted. "I didn't mean her to look like anyone I knew. There are plenty of tall girls with black hair and eyes in the world. The description would fit any other brunette just as well as Juliet, and I never meant Juliet in the very, very least. I tried to describe a sketch hanging in my room. I can show it to you there now."

"It's a most singular coincidence, then," said Mrs. Van Anden, not in the least mollified. "And you can't expect me to believe it's merely by chance that a fancy picture should so precisely resemble Juliet, that every word of your description might have been written for her, even to the identical way she wears her hair, in that loose coil in her neck. I wonder you didn't mention, too, how it is forever falling down. The poor girl is so mortified she doesn't know where to look. Here are all her brothers twitting her now on account of that fellow Goodrich, who used to hang about her last summer. Any one can see your hero is meant for him. They're as like as two peas. And of course it's taken for granted now all over town that he left Juliet in the lurch when he went off, while the fact is that she refused him up and down two and three times over, and wouldn't look at him if he were the only man in the world, though he's so dead in love with her. It's hard on the girl, I must say, to have you go and put it into people's heads that she's pining her soul out for love of him, when it's all the other way. I never would have believed you could have played us such a trick, Hester, and we always such friends!"

What could I say? What could I do? Vainly I took Mrs. Van Anden upstairs and showed her the picture above my desk, looking wistfully down at us with its deep, dark eyes, as if longing to enforce the truth with speech. She declared it did not look an atom like the girl in my book, and that my description would fit nobody she ever saw but only her daughter Juliet. There was no pacifying her. She stormed, she cried, she denounced me in the severest terms, and finally flung herself out of the house, even angrier than when she had entered it.

I felt as if turned to stone. I was unable to move or think. The day darkened slowly, and I was still sitting there, helplessly idle, with my hands fallen in my lap, and the uncut aprons seeming to stare reproachfully at me out from the folded muslin, when George came in from school.



"Oh, I say, Hester," he began impetuously, throwing himself face downward on the sofa with his heels in the air, irresistibly suggesting a lizard in boots, "all the fellows are talking of your novel. You've made such a hit. There never was anything like it. Mrs. Brownson is raving distracted."

"O Georgie, don't!" I implored, putting out my hands to ward off what might be coming. "Don't speak to me of that unlucky book. It has brought me nothing but distress!"

"Now, don't you be thin-skinned!" said Georgie, contemptuously. "If you're going to put people in books, why just do it and keep your pluck up. It must be splendid fun, and you do it capitally. Why, all us fellows knew in a minute it was Mrs. Brownson's old hole of a house you meant. I declare I could draw it with my eyes shut after your description. Only you're a little off when it comes to the French roof. I suppose you clapped that on as a blind."

"But I wasn't describing Mrs. Brownson's house at all, Georgie," I said, indignantly. "I meant the one on our right. That has a French roof. How stupid of you not to recognize it. It never entered my head to appropriate Mrs. Brownson's house for my heroine."

"La — la!" answered Georgie, and made an expressive, if disrespectful, gesture of disbelief. "It's all right, anyhow. The old duffer deserves a rub for being so miffy; only, you see, she says every one will suppose, from your laying the scene in her house, that you mean Annie by the heroine; and Annie's being so sickly and all,—just booked for a decline and so on, like your girl,—it really does look as if you were on the inside track of her story, don't you see? And Mrs. Brownson as good as told me we needn't any of us make too free about her premises any more. I don't care. I don't want any of her old cherries. They're all bird-pecked, anyway. And, oh, I say, Het, *did* you mean old Mr. Brown by Mr. Green?"

"No! no! O Georgie, what nonsense!"

"Well, he thought you did. The names are so like, you see. Both names of colors. And the old maid — what's her name? didn't you mean Miss Tibbets? It's as like! And she's as mad over it as all outdoors."

"O Georgie, Georgie, I didn't mean *anybody* — not *anybody*!" I cried, well-nigh beside myself. "Why will you listen to such stories!"

"Oh, come now, you can't stuff *me*, you know," rejoined Georgie, with a wink. "I can see round a corner straight as most folks. But I must say your hero is an awful gump, Hester. I really don't wonder Mrs. Brownson didn't like your passing him off as Annie's beau, when he's the only beau she's likely ever to have, poor girl."

Oh, what could I do! I wrung my hands in impotent misery. Though I should proclaim the truth upon every housetop, would even that dispel all these false illusions now? There seemed no help anywhere. I tried to hold up my head and brave out the storm, conscious of my innocence; but my spirits sank day by day, as I felt more and more how completely I was in disgrace, and how impossible it was to right myself.

But when at last there came that momentous letter from my publishers, inclosing me a check, whose amount exceeded my wildest dreams, and when not only the precious volumes for whose sake I had undergone so much, but the tiny carved book-case, too, stood snugly in place in my father's study, while I sat waiting his coming — then for one brief moment I forgot all else, and my heart overflowed with a proud and perfect joy. After all, is not that a costlier gift that has been purchased at a sacrifice? Had I not more to give him, having bought it with such tears?

Oh, how unutterably happy I was, how my heart beat for pleasure, when I heard the dear familiar step in the hall outside! I gave a hurried glance at my treasure; it must show off at its best now; and darting to the window I hastily drew up the shade. The rays of a magnificent sunset instantly flooded all the room, and shot slanting across the red-covered books on the new shelves, lighting them up to regal splendor. That bit of brilliant coloring in the heretofore dark corner seemed to my excited fancy almost like a rival sunset. I gave it one more loving, satisfied glance, then opened the door and called my father.

He came in slowly, reluctantly, as if unwilling to answer the call. His head was bent, and his white hair fell over his forehead with a melancholy sweep unusual to him who generally stood so erect. It struck me, even, that his step faltered. Still I was too full of joy to more than notice it vaguely, as I drew him before the book-case. I could scarcely speak for gladness. My cheeks were aflame, and my foolish hands trembled as I clasped them over his arm.

"They are yours, father dear, *yours*," I stammered. "I bought them for you with my own money. It is my present to you. It is for this that I wrote my book."

My father gave a sharp cry; it sounded as much like pain as surprise; and, turning, he took me in his arms and held me close for a long, long time without speaking. "For this — for this!" he said at last, and I felt a hot tear fall on my head. "Oh, my child — my Hester!"

"Yes, father, dear, dear father," I repeated, clasping him close. "I wrote it, not for the



pleasure of it—not for the stress of it—not because it was in me to write, but only, only that I might earn the money for these books. I could not bear you not to have them, and that is why I wrote the story, dear; that is why.”

Again he gave that cry; it frightened me, it rang so strangely from his lips; and though he smiled at me when I looked up at him, it was a smile that cut through to my soul, for it seemed to come from a broken heart.

He saw the startled look in my eyes; and putting me gently from him, he bent over the shelves as if to examine them, and patted the books fondly, and tried to take one out; but his hand shook, and he gave it up. I stood by with a great dread stealing over me, and put my arm about his shoulders as he stooped down, suddenly conscious that he needed a support.

“Yes—yes—poor dear—poor child,” he said, softly. “It is a sad price you have paid for my books; oh, a sad price, indeed; but it is God’s will.”

“Father, what is it?” I cried. “Oh, what is it?”

“There, there, do not you mind it too sorely, Hester,” he answered brokenly. “I am glad of the books, very glad, and it was nobly done of you. Do not you mind it, dear. I am old—too old—do not you see? It is only a pretext. Perhaps it is easier so than if they had turned me away outright. Oh, yes. It is much easier so.”

My heart stood still. “Father,” I whispered, “tell me the worst at once. Let me know.”

“I will,” he said, patting my hand, and trying still to smile at me. “It is best you

should know it first from me. They say, dear—do not lay it to heart, my child, *we* know it is not so—but they say you could never have written the book alone; it shows too much knowledge about the people here. Some one—I—who was in the confidence of my people—I—must have helped you with it; and—O Hester, Hester! it is only an excuse, you know, only that they want a younger man; but the vestry has—has asked me—to resign! Oh, my child!”

The brave smile went suddenly all out of his face, as if an overwhelming wave of sorrow had swept up from his heart and quenched it; he staggered to the nearest chair, and, falling into it, bowed down his head upon his hands and burst into uncontrollable sobs.

I stood near him, speechless. I do not know what I did. I scarcely know what I felt. I think I was stunned beyond power of sensation, and felt absolutely nothing. My first conscious act was to bend down and draw to the little silk curtain before those beautiful red-bound books over which the heartless sun was streaming so mockingly. They blinded me.

Many years have passed, and we have a new home now, where the same books stand in a similar little study; and my father pores over them often with loving but faded eyes, and seems to take pleasure in their beauty, and tells me how glad, how very, very glad he is of them. But since that terrible day I have never touched them once; and when by chance my eye falls on them, I feel a stab like a knife-wound in my heart.

For this is the price I paid for them.

*Grace Denio Litchfield.*

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## IN FANCY'S FIELD.

THE pastures of the mind are never sear,  
 Their springs and rivulets run never dry,  
 Nor Autumn hears their shorn shrubs nightly sigh  
 As do the growths of nature; never blear  
 Their bright-eyed flowers, their hollows never drear,  
 Graves of dead leaves and weeds that in them lie.  
 Green feeding-ground of thought, they, like the sky,  
 Spring with new passion all the changing year.

Here, young birds fledge and flutter from the nest;  
 There, young winds play along the bending grass,  
 Chasing the sunlight; long, rich, glad days yield  
 Exhaustless fragrance; down the golden west  
 Comes ever peace with evening: no days pass  
 But dew-drops deck the blades in fancy's field.

*John Vance Cheney.*