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WITHOUT KITH OR KIN.

BY

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CHAPTER I.

WITH the greater number of us memory can stretch back and connect our present existence with the past; we are the natural product of those old years; we have grown out of them by a gentle and imperceptible progression; there are faces round us now that we knew when we were little children,—spots of the earth that we are familiar with still where we played long ago,—names that we yet speak daily which we used to lisp with baby lips: but the woman whose story I am going to tell you was cut off from all such recollections—all such aids to memory—as these. A sudden blow had divided her early years from all the other years that came afterwards,—a sharp severance that left that first poor little pallid fraction of a life to die out and fade away into the unknown. Where had she been born?—what had her name been?—who were her kith or kin in all the world? She never knew. Vaguely, as in an almost forgotten dream, she had a remembrance of a garden where she had been used to play, of a room with a mirror in it, of a little frock with bright-coloured ribbons, of a woman who

must have been her mother. There were moments once when it seemed to her that she could recall these things almost distinctly; but as the years passed on they all grew more and more dim, uncertain, dream-like,—poor, scattered, fragmentary, useless memories of a life that was wholly lost now.

The gas was burning brightly, and the little theatre was filling by degrees. A whole coronet of flaming lights surmounted the painted pasteboard entrance, where a clown in clown's costume, in glowing language and with stentorian lungs, was shouting out the programme of the evening's entertainment. He was a big, spare man, with a lank and rather melancholy face, that looked ghastly enough beneath its patches of white and scarlet paint. It was a summer evening, too, and the glory of a golden sunset mingled incongruously with the yellow glare of the gas, making the artificial light, in spite of its lavish abundance, seem tawdry and poor and coarse.

The little temporary theatre—it was a mere booth—had been set down on the edge of a green common. On one hand stood the neat houses of a good-sized village; on the other stretched the unbroken country, level and wooded. The month was August, the hour was sunset, when the day's work was ended, and pleasure-seekers were abroad. They lingered in groups about the pasteboard entrance, and then gradually, in

ones and twos and threes, they passed in under the archway, and paid their pence, and took their seats.

It was a little place, and it grew full presently, and very hot. It was noisy, too, and odoriferous with perfumes of pipes and beer and spirituous drinks. There was a little wrestling got up to pass the time before the regular performances should commence, and a good deal of singing of an amateur and lively sort, which, being generally approved of, was kept up with considerable spirit, till at last the signal that public proceedings were about to commence was given by the ringing of a bell, upon which the audience, suddenly silent, composed itself in its seats, and the curtain—which was a gorgeous one, representing (so at least it said upon a scroll below) a street in Rome—was parted in the middle and drawn back.

The play that proceeded to be enacted was entitled "The Father's Curse," and was composed of incidents of a very dramatic character indeed. It was an almost severely moral play, inculcating the lesson of obedience to parents with a stern and uncompromising force that must have made some youngsters present quake in their shoes. The hero of the drama was an unfortunate young man, who, having been so unhappy as to incur his father's displeasure in early youth, led a terrible career afterwards, going from bad to worse, till he ended on the gallows, at the foot of which, however, his stern parent, in a burst of fine enthusiasm, at length forgave and blessed him,—the