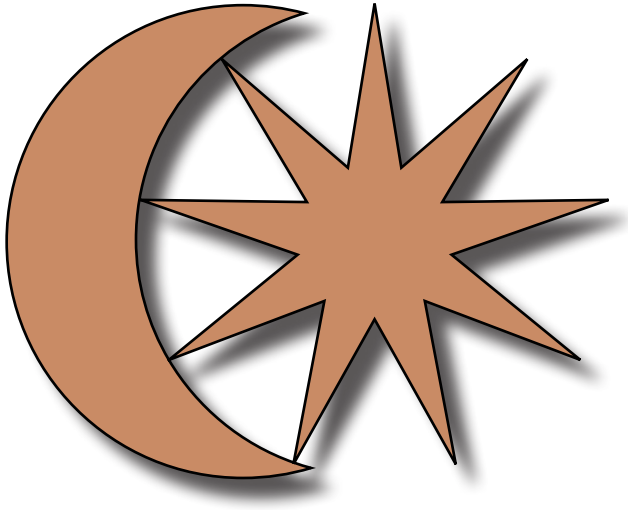
A Daughter of Strife

Jane Helen Findlater



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Chapter 1

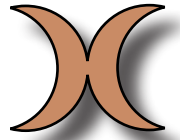
As long ago as the year 1710 there lived in London town a girl of the name of Anne Champion—a straw-plaiter by trade, and by hard fortune a beauty. Anne lived alone in a garret, and earned her bread by the sweat of her brow, plaiting straws for hats from early morning to late at night. Then she would go out and buy her food for the next day, if she had earned enough to buy food with, and if she had not, she would do without food and work on.

A hard life enough; but it was not to last for ever. For Anne had a fine lover at the wars—Surgeon Sebastian Shepley,—and ere very long he was to return, and Anne was to say farewell to work. Partings were partings in those days, and Anne never thought of getting a letter from Flanders more than once in seven or eight weeks. When she got one, poor girl, she could not read it—no, nor answer it; for she had no 'book-learning,' and had never been taught to write; but she used to take her letters to a former adorer of her own who served in a print-shop, and he kindly read his rival's love-letters aloud, and, when Anne could afford to send one in return, would even be forgiving enough to write it for her. Anne's fine lover had caused considerable jealousy among her neighbours, and old Mrs. Nare, the mother of Matthew, the young man in the news-shop, was never tired of hinting to Anne that no good ever came of such unequal alliances. When she saw that Anne was quite undisturbed by these prognostications, Mrs. Nare tried to persuade her that there was little chance Shepley would ever return from the wars.

'The surgeons do come by their deaths in war-time so well as the soldiers,' she would say; 'best not set your heart overly on him, Anne.' And Anne would whiten, and turn away at her words.

Yard's Entry, where Anne Champion and Mrs. Nare lived, is a place that smells of age now—it was counted old even in these far-away days I write of,—and the stone stairs leading up to Anne's garret were worn away into crescent shape by the tread of many generations. At the foot of these stairs, on warm evenings, Mrs. Nare used to stand and watch all her neighbours' affairs; so it was natural enough that a stranger coming in to the Entry one evening should address himself to her when he made inquiry for Anne Champion. He was a young man with very bright eyes, and his voice, as clear as the note of a flute, echoed up the stair as he spoke.-----

Chapter 2



The young man Richard Meadowes found a coach waiting for him round the corner of Yard's Entry; he jumped in and bade the coachman drive home to St. James' Square: a long drive, but Meadowes did not find it so, his thoughts were amply occupied. When he reached home he went in and sat down in a chair beside the fire, apparently in a brown study. What was he thinking about so intently all the time? About a lie: for the whole story of Sebastian Shepley's marriage had been invented by Richard Meadowes on the spur of the moment, as he stood stammering and hesitating before Anne Champion.

Meadowes had known Sebastian Shepley from his childhood. They had been born and brought up in the same little country village of Wynford, where Meadowes' father had owned the Manor House and the wide lands appertaining to it, while Shepley's father was the village apothecary. Then they both went to the wars; Meadowes to fight, Shepley to heal; now, tired of campaigning, which had never been to his mind, Meadowes had left the service and returned to England, where, since his parents' death, he had inherited, together with the Manor House of Fairmeadowes, this house in St. James' Square and enough of money to ruin most men.

But Richard Meadowes was neither idle nor without interests. The whole of life appealed vividly to him, every day was crowded with incident and amusement, his difficulty was to select between his pleasures: now of a sudden he had brought himself into a curious place. It had been from the easy pleasantness of his nature that Meadowes had offered, when leaving Flanders, to carry any letters home to Wynford for Dr. Sebastian Shepley. The young surgeon had hesitated for a moment before asking if, instead of bearing a letter to Wynford, Meadowes would deliver one in London.

'With all my heart—a dozen an' you please,' said Meadowes kindly; for he liked the young man with his steady blue eyes, who came moreover from Wynford like himself.

So Sebastian Shepley had intrusted a bulky letter to his care, and along with it a package containing, said he, some amber beads for 'Annie,' 'as yellow as her hair.' These were to be given to his sweetheart by Meadowes' own hand.

Now, like most men who are good at making pleasant promises, Meadowes was not quite so good at keeping them. He forgot all about Sebastian Shepley's love-letter for

Chapter 3

Meadowes did not pay much heed to where he was going as he left Yard's Entry that Sunday afternoon. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he walked forward without aim or direction. And these thoughts were curiously involved: a horror of what he was about; a determination to persist in it.

'What's this I am doing? what's this I've done? Broken a woman's heart, and played a good man false . . . and I am gaining (perhaps) my desires, and losing (certainly) my soul. . . . Soul? Have we got souls? I that am doing this, have I a soul? I doubt it . . . we are but as the beasts that perish—and yet——'

He stumbled along through the narrow, crowded streets. 'I'll go and pray,' he said, stopping suddenly before the door of one of the old city churches (it stands there yet, grey and cool).

'Here,' he said to the verger, 'is the church empty?'

'Empty as a new-made grave, sir,' said the man cheerfully.

Meadowes passed into the musty coolness of the church. He walked up the aisle and chose out the darkest corner he could find, where to offer up his strange petitions. There was a brass let into the wall here commemorating the brave fall of men who had died gallant deaths; a banner, bullet-singed and tattered, hung from the roof. Meadowes knelt under the faded fringes and covered his eyes with his hands, to shut out the world.

Then the former doubt invaded him, and the terror that the unseen was a delusion and man but a soulless higher brute with a hand-breadth of Time to sport in, overcame him with the blackness of despair.

'Better far have a lost soul than none at all,' he cried out in horror. He looked up at the banner above him; for things, after all, as intangible as the soul he doubted of, some happy mortals had bled and died—for Honour, Patriotism, Courage. Had they forfeited the merry years for shadows, been fools for their pains? Remembrances crowded on him of War and Death: he seemed to see whole spectral armies of the slain arise. He named them happy as they rose; for had they not died undoubtingly, bartering life for these