



BERKELEY

LIBRARY

UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA

PHEMIE KELLER.

BY

MRS. J. H. RIDDELL,

AUTHOR OF

'GEORGE GEITH,' 'THE WORLD AND THE CHURCH,' 'MAXWELL DREWITT,'
'TOO MUCH ALONE,' 'CITY AND SUBURB,' ETC.

LONDON:

HUTCHINSON & CO.,

25, PATERNOSTER SQUARE.

[All rights reserved.]

£ 19 - - ? ☐

By the same Author.

AUSTIN FRIARS.
TOO MUCH ALONE.
THE RICH HUSBAND.
MAXWELL DREWITT.
FAR ABOVE RUBIES.
A LIFE'S ASSIZE.
THE WORLD IN THE CHURCH.
HOME, SWEET HOME.
PHEMIE KELLER.
RACE FOR WEALTH.
THE EARL'S PROMISE.
MORTOMLEY'S ESTATE.
FRANK SINCLAIR'S WIFE.
THE RULING PASSION.
MY FIRST AND MY LAST LOVE.
CITY AND SUBURB.
ABOVE SUSPICION.
JOY AFTER SORROW.

PR
 5227
 R33
 -p4
 1900Z
 M. A. W.

CONTENTS.

CHAP	PAGE
I. AMONG THE HILLS	1
II. TORDALE	11
III. IN DANGER	18
IV. PHEMIE	24
V. A COMPACT	30
VI. BY STRAMMER TARN	38
VII. THE AGGLAND INTERIOR	48
VIII. ALL THE DIFFERENCE	62
IX. RETROSPECTIVE	76
X. YES OR NO	90
XI. SATISFIED	104
XII. FOR LIFE	114
XIII. DISAPPOINTED	125
XIV. ON VIEW	134
XV. FIVE YEARS LATER	147
XVI. BASIL	159
XVII. THE NEXT HEIR	173
XVIII. VISITORS	182
XIX. SUMMER HOLIDAYS	191
XX. KNOWLEDGE	202
XXI. FROM LESS TO MORE	213

CHAP.	PAGE
XXII. THE DOWNWARD ROAD	227
XXIII. JEALOUSY	238
XXIV. STRANGE TIDINGS	245
XXV. BASIL DECIDES	256
XXVI. THE MARCH OF EVENTS	271
XXVII. THE SOCIAL RACK	282
XXVIII. PARTED	296
XXIX. SORROWFUL TIDINGS	306
XXX. WIDOWED	317
XXXI. THE LETTER	323
XXXII. MEETING	336
XXXIII. RECONCILED	352
XXXIV. THE LAST ENEMY	363
XXXV. OLD FRIENDS AND OLD PLACES	374
XXXVI. PHEMIE'S JOURNEY	390
XXXVII. THE RETURN	402
XXXVIII. BASIL'S COMFORTER	410
XXXIX. CONFESSIONS	416
XL. PHEMIE EXPRESSES HER OPINIONS	433
XLI. CONCLUSION	444

PHEMIE KELLER.

CHAPTER I.

AMONG THE HILLS.

HE had been toiling under the noontide heat up the narrow defile which led from Grassenfel to Tordale. He had grown weary of the way, of the rough path, of the rugged scenery. He had looked to his right hand and to his left, and behold on the one side stormy Skillanscar met his view, whilst on the other the peaks of Helbeck rose towering to the summer sky.

He had looked straightforward, and there were mountains still—mountains that seemed to hem him in, and make him a prisoner in their rocky fastnesses.

Toiling onward, he had been thinking how long was the road; how great the distance; when all at once the path bore sharply round the base of a projecting rock, and brought him suddenly within view of Tordale Church.

With the everlasting hills overshadowing it, with the murmuring waterfall singing ever and always beside it—the sweet melody to which so few can listen, with the larches and the pines waving their branches gently over the grassy mounds in the graveyard, with the August sun pouring his beams down the mountains on the dancing rivulet, on the smooth velvety turf, Tordale Church stood on a little mound commanding a view of the valley, that broke like a revelation of beauty on the traveller.

He had walked far to see this piece of God's handiwork ; he had toiled wearily up the defile, over the rocks, between the mountains, to find this gem which was set so securely among the hills, that the eye of stranger rarely rested on it. He had walked far, and he felt that he was not so young as formerly ; yet when the glorious view opened before him Captain Henry Gower Stondon forgot the distance, thought no longer of fatigue, but, pausing, drank in the loveliness he beheld.

It was high noon among the Cumbertand hills—high noon on a Sunday in August—and the mighty Sabbath hush pervaded all Nature, whether animate or inanimate.

Far away down the valley, where the rivulet trickled on slowly to join the Derwent, where the grass was greenest, and the sun less scorching, cows lay lazily chewing the cud—sheep browsed the sweet herbage leisurely. There was a solemn stillness amongst the mountains ; the sunbeams rested in great patches where they had first fallen ; the wind, as it came and went, and went and came, stole through the tree-tops noiselessly ; no bird burst from the ivy or the broom, breaking with sudden flight the stillness of that noontide hour ; the wild bee was so deep in the foxglove's bell, that it had no time to tell of the treasures lying there. Even the grasshoppers seemed to have forgotten their song ; and but for the church and the graves, the stranger who now looked on Tordale for the first time might almost have fancied that he had reached an uninhabited Eden, never before trodden by the foot of man.

Very slowly he ascended the steps leading to the graveyard—primitive steps they were, too, Captain Stondon noticed, cut out of the clay,—with a piece of the stem of a fir-tree, split in two, placed as a guard on each,—awkward and dangerous steps for unaccustomed feet to essay ; but it was only well-accustomed and willing feet that, as a rule, mounted them, for Tordale was far from any town, quite out of the way of tourists, and the men and the women who paced along the mountain sides, and up the valley to the church beside the waterfall, came not for any fashion's sake, not to listen to strange words and strange doctrines,

but for love of the old story that will be ever fresh to each succeeding generation, as it was to the shepherds who first heard the glad tidings of great joy.

“It all comes to this at last,” thought the stranger, as he sat him down in the church porch, and looked at the green mounds, at the few mossy headstones, at the one solitary attempt at a monument ; “it all comes to this. Let us start where we will, let us go where we may, let us wander over the world where we like, we must end here at last ; we must come to the inexorable six feet by three, to the lonesome house prepared for us before we were born. One might have thought that death would have passed over such a valley as this ; that sickness could never enter here ; that there were scarcely any people to die in such a nook, and yet—and yet it is just as full as its fellows ; the graves are beginning to jostle one another, and new headstones are fighting for precedence with old. It is the same wherever I go ; the road always ends in a churchyard, the inhabitants are always to be found here.”

And with a not unpleasing feeling of melancholy, the man who thought this let his eyes wander out, out, over the landscape on which the sleepers around could never look more.

What did the thought signify to him ; what did death mean to this man who had faced it so often that it had no terrors left ? What was the meaning of the reflection that passed through his mind as he sat in the church porch, looking down upon Tordale Valley ? Simply this, that though he knew in an abstract kind of way he must die, yet that the wandering life he had led, had made the idea of when, and how, and where he should meet his fate so very vague and shadowy, that he never brought the subject really home to himself, never realized that six feet by three would some day suffice him as surely as it now sufficed others who had wandered, perhaps, as far as he. After looking on all manner of cemeteries ; after seeing his comrades lying down to rest in India ; after visiting the sepulchres in the East ; after criticising Père-la-Chaise ; after passing the London pest-grounds ; after treading over pavements beneath which generations slumbered peacefully ;

after entering country churchyards where, after life's fitful fever—after its mad delirium, after its success, its disappointments, its joys, its sorrows, its wild hopes, its unutterable agony—men and women slept that sleep, of the mysteries whereof we know so little, but which we may humbly hope is dreamless—he had come to think of death as a thing outside himself, as a fact which concerned others more than it did him.

The rude forefathers of this hamlet knew where their mortal remains would be laid. It was a hundred to one against their bodies being carried out of the valley—even so far as Grassenfel.

Most probably, as they came Sunday after Sunday to service, their eyes rested on the spot where, when they had held the plough for the last time, when they had turned their last furrow, scattered their last seed—reaped their last harvest—sold their last crops—they would be carried, as their fathers before them had been carried, and laid down far away in the earth, beyond the cold of the winter snows, beyond the heat of the summer sun, out of the sight of the young spring flowers—where the moaning of the autumn winds and the rustle of the autumn leaves might never disturb their repose.

“How close all this must bring death,” thought the traveller. “What a certainty they must feel about it—what a strange feeling such people must have on the subject.” And Captain Henry Gower Stondon grew so interested in the idea that he leaned his chin on his hand preparatory to thinking out the matter with greater comfort.

“It must bring it very near. I do not know that I should like it.” And then he went on to reflect further that it must be unpleasant also to have the whole of life bounded by those hills, by those frowning mountains; to have to play out the whole drama of existence in that green sequestered valley; to have the horizon of external experience brought so near that an hour's walk at any time would enable a man to lay his hand upon it; to have his internal hopes, wishes, fears, joys, bound up in a few acres of land, in a score or so of acquaintances; to have Grassenfel for his longest excursion; to see those eternal peaks for ever lift-

ing their heads to the sky ; to come Sunday after Sunday through the valley, up the steps, across the threshold, and so into the little church, in the porch of which he was then sitting ; to be christened there ; to be married there ; to be buried in some nook of the graveyard that sloped so sunnily towards the south ! Captain Stondon, who had been a wanderer on the face of the earth from his youth up, decided that he should not like such a lot at all ; and that such a lot—the sole birthright of millions—was a curious one to sit in the shade and strive to realize.

From the porch he could get a side view into the church ; he could see some of the people about whom he was speculating—a fine stalwart race of men and women—a generation of handsome giants, with faces hard and steady and impassive, and enduring as the mountains under whose shadow they dwelt. A people who had something of the Scotch blood in them, who were not a fickle and light-minded generation, but rather occasionally be a trifle obstinate and stiffnecked.

Their very psalms were not as the spiritual songs of the dwellers in cities, of the inhabitants of the plains. There was a fierceness about the old Cameronian hymn they were singing which seemed in keeping with the loneliness, the desolation, the unutterable grandeur and solitude of the spot wherein this isolated band praised the Lord.

There was no organ—a violin and a flute sufficed to guide the choir ; and with all their hearts, and with all their souls, the congregation aided the vocalists. The singing might be a little loud, perhaps, but it was not discordant ; and suddenly, at the third verse, as though she had been holding back till the others got so thoroughly into the air as to overlook her, some girl lifted up her young, clear voice ; and while Captain Stondon almost involuntarily rose to listen, mourned out,—

“ Our night is dreary, and dim is our day,
 And if Thou shalt turn Thy face away,
 We are sinful, feeble, and helpless dust,
 With none to look to, and none to trust.”

“ What a voice !—good Heavens, what a voice ! ” thought the

officer; and he drew more to the inner door to see if he could discover the singer.

A chord or two from the violin, and the hymn proceeded,—

“The powers of darkness are all abroad,
They know no Saviour, they fear no God;
And we are trembling in dumb dismay—
Oh, turn not Thou Thy face away!”

He had entered the church by this time, and found her. She was but three seats from the porch. He could have stretched out his arm and touched her; but the sexton, honest old man, just as though he divined the stranger's wishes, opened the door of the pew she alone occupied, and signed to Captain Stondon to enter, which signal Captain Stondon, nothing loth, obeyed accordingly, and with his face bent over his hat, hearkened to the last verse,—

“Thine aid, O mighty One, we crave,
Not shortenèd is Thine arm to save;
Let not Thine anger ever burn—
Return, O Lord of Hosts, return!”

Then the officer, who, though he might be as polite as most people, was not above feeling human curiosity, turned and looked at the girl, who owned a voice which seemed to him more like the warbling of a bird than anything he had ever heard before in his life,—turned and looked at Phemie Keller, at a girl dressed in a pink muslin gown, which had evidently been bought and made for some middle-aged woman, which had been as evidently worn shabby by the older individual and cut down and altered for its present wearer—a divinity in a washed-out, large-patterned, curiously befrilled dress—a Hebe in a cottage bonnet trimmed with brown and white checked ribbons—a beauty who wore thread gloves, and had on a rusty-black silk cape that might have belonged to Noah's grandmother.

But her face! Such perfection of colour—such delicacy of feature! Where had this rustic stolen her beauty? Eyes of the deepest, softest, darkest blue; eyes that looked black when you looked at them in the shade; dark brows and lashes; and hair—

without half a dozen paints to my hand to mix together, and blend, and powder with gold dust, I could never hope to show what Phemie's hair was like; and I could not then, because, as she moved, the shade changed also. Now it was sunny, now brown, now red, now brown and sunny, now red and brown; and then red, and gold, and brown, would all mix and skimmer together in the varying light.

Hair to have made one of the old Venetian painters go mad, first with rapture and then with anger, because brush and palette could never hope to reproduce its colouring—hair that might well (to recall the quaint conceit of other days) tangle a lover in its meshes;—hair such as Captain Stondon had never seen before, though he had mixed much with society, and been favoured with locks, not a few, in the days when he was young, in the days that were gone and fled.

In the matter of beauty, the officer had, his whole life long, been possessed of a truly catholic taste. Before loveliness he had always, figuratively speaking, bared his head, and bowed down and worshipped. Dark locks and shining curls, sorrowful eyes, dimpled cheeks, laughing girls, thoughtful women, tall and stately, short and fairylike, Captain Stondon had admired them all. Given a woman, and pretty, and he would kneel at any shine. He would pay compliments, he would flatter, he would lay all good gifts at the feet of his divinity save love, and that in the years departed he had give once to one woman, and could offer no more, as he firmly believed, to any living being.

That one woman had won his heart, worn it, played with it, exhibited it, and then, weary of the toy, had flung it under-foot, and trampled it in her wicked selfishness, in her unfeeling triumph.

She sold herself for money, for the pomps and vanities of a world which courted her exceedingly, and went and stayed at her house, and followed her to the grave; and then strove, not without success, to console her husband for her loss. She had deserted the poor man for the rich; but though she had used the former spitefully, though she had made him work hard for her sake,

though she had left his early manhood and middle age lonely, he had been true to the love of his youth, and loved no woman since.

He had admired, he had followed in the train of many a queen of beauty, he had whispered soft nothings, he had flirted, perhaps, but he had not loved, he had not married. Matchmakers had given him up in despair; manœuvring mammas valued Captain Stondon's opinion of their daughters, simply because it was the opinion of a connoisseur, not because it was that of a person who might be expected to take any shares in the matrimonial market. He knew what was what, in a word, and he consequently knew that the young girl with the divine voice would grow up into a most beautiful woman.

"Well dressed," thought the officer, critically examining her, while the clergyman adjusted his spectacles, and opened his sermon-case, and coughed, and looked for his pocket-handkerchief,—"well dressed, well instructed, with a clever chaperone, what a sensation she would make in a West End drawing-room! What a pity that she should have been born to wear her grandmother's old gowns in a place like this, for—"

"For the wages of sin is death," was the text that terminated both his scrutiny and his soliloquy; and if Captain Stondon had thought for a moment that the young lady might be conscious at once of her own beauty and of his admiration, he was immediately undeceived by her handing him her open Bible, his attention being called to the passage in question by the finger of Miss Keller's well-worn glove.

It was a shock; it tried the officer's gravity for the moment; but his companion so evidently regarded him as a very commonplace stranger, to whom she was nevertheless bound to offer the customary civility of the neighbourhood, that it would have been difficult for him to help feeling his vanity touched also.

Nevertheless, he took the book, and he looked at the text, and he listened to the sermon, not a bad one by the way, with the attention expected from him; and, when the service was over, he walked out into the graveyard, where, taking possession of a

quiet corner, he watched the congregation returning, some down the valley, some under the shadow of the mountains, some up the hill paths, to their respective homes.

If there were one figure the officer's eyes followed longest, it was that of the girl beside whom he sat in church. She had waited for a man whom Captain Stondon recognized as the violinist of the choir, and he now looked after the pair as they climbed the side of Helbeck, and wended their way—whither?

Listening to the low murmur of the waterfall—looking idly now down the valley, now up to the summit of the distant hills—Captain Stondon stood with his arms resting on the churchyard wall, cogitating whether he should return to Grassenfel, or inquire for some place near at hand in which to rest and refresh himself, when he was roused from his reverie by the clergyman, who, passing through the graveyard, saw the stranger, and spoke to him.

The place was so lonely—so few tourists penetrated to Tordale—that it seemed natural to the clergyman to accost the middle-aged individual who had listened with much apparent attention to his sermon.

Where people are few acquaintanceship is easy. Perhaps also the clergyman saw something in the bearing of the stranger which had been overlooked by Miss Keller; in any case, he paused to speak, and then the two men walked down the steps side by side, and, turning from the direct path, strolled towards the waterfall together.

It was a picturesque spot: over the rock came the mountain stream, dropping with a dull, monotonous splash into the basin it had worn for itself below, whence over moss-grown stones it trickled off into the valley beyond. A few trees overshadowed the pool beside which Captain Stondon and his companion stood for a moment in silence looking at the Fall; ivy and lichens covered the face of the rocks, ferns and foxgloves grew between the stones, and the water bathed the green banks, and touched the familiar flowers, and mosses, and blades of grass caressingly, ere it left them behind for ever.

There were broom and gorse, and patches of heather on the

hill-side ; under-foot the turf was smooth as velvet ; above their heads was the clear blue sky ; around was loneliness and nature ; and, as if reluctant to break the spell, the two men held their peace, until Captain Stondon, stepping from stone to stone in order to reach the basin, declared he must have a draught of the water, it looked so cool, and pure, and sparkling.

“While you drink you should wish,” remarked the clergyman, with a smile ; “and if it be, as I suppose, your first draught, your desire will surely be gratified.”

“Wish !” repeated the other, seating himself on a fragment of rock. “It is an important moment. What shall I wish ?”

“You must not tell me, or wishing will be useless,” was the reply.

“What have I to wish for ?” persisted the officer ; “what is there left that I could wish to come to pass, unless for the years of my youth to be given back to me ? and I could scarcely wish for that. Mine has been a happy lot as lots go ; still, I do not know that I should like to travel the road over again.”

“Can you wish nothing for your wife ?”

“I have none. I have neither wife nor child, sister nor brother, nephew nor niece,” and as he said this a change came over his face, and, stooping towards the pool, he took a long, deep draught, as he did so silently wishing this wish, or rather praying this prayer, “O God, when Thy good time comes, leave me not to die alone !”

Then he stepped back on to the green turf, and the pair fell into conversation about the place and its scenery, about the parish and its inhabitants, about the church, and how long it had been built, about Cumberland generally, and finally about the world that, full of temptation and struggle and pleasure and disappointment, lay outside those mountains, far away from the green valley of Tordale.

CHAPTER II.

TORDALE.

It was so seldom that the Vicar of Tordale met with any man able and willing to talk about the outside world in which he had once played his part, that he felt loth to lose his new acquaintance, and insisted on Captain Stondon accompanying him home, and accepting of such hospitality as a widower's *ménage* could afford.

Finding the prospect of rest and refreshment by no means disagreeable, the officer availed himself of the invitation, and before the afternoon was ended very friendly relations were established between himself and his host.

Both were lonely men ; but there all similarity between themselves or their antecedents stopped. The one had lost ; the other had never possessed. The one had hoped much, and yet the low-ceiled parlour of a country vicarage, which a stranger rarely entered, to which there came few new books, no excitement, no change, sufficed him now ; the other had started in life with his way to make, with no apparent future save what his own right arm should win for him, and yet at forty-five he came back from India to enter into possession of Marshland Manor and four thousand a year.

The vicar had married young, and been the father of many children ; the officer had never married, and at fifty-six had no nearer relative than Montague Stondon, barrister-at-law, who was some fifteenth cousin of the owner of Marshlands, and next heir to that desirable property and the rents appertaining thereto.

Captain Stondon had done his best for his relative ; he had invited him to Marshlands ; he sent him up presents of game and fruit and—money ; he paid for the education of Montague Stondon's only son ; and the thanks he got for all his kindness was a morning and evening aspiration which the barrister never failed to utter for his speedy translation to a better world.

Montague Stondon would have driven his relative into matrimony years before had it not been for that little romantic corner of his heart, wherein he had placed his young ideal of what marriage should be—an ideal from which the world and its ways had never estranged him ; and so it was quite a settled matter with everybody who knew anything about the property that Captain Stondon would never have chick nor child, and that if Montague Stondon outlived his cousin, he might confidently expect to enter into possession of the Norfolk estates, which were, by the way, strictly entailed.

Without domestic ties, without household treasures, it was natural that Captain Stondon should reside but little in Norfolk—that he should remain indeed only for a very short period in any place.

During the ten years that had elapsed since his return from India he had visited many countries, seen many and many a foreign town. His passports would have bound up into quite a bulky volume ; and whenever he started on a fresh pilgrimage Montague Stondon offered up his little litany for him to be brought back to England a corpse.

It might be excusable, and very probably was excessively natural ; but still nobody could say it was pleasant for a man to know, as Captain Stondon knew perfectly well, that his cousin, limping with bleeding feet along the flinty road to ruin, was cursing him for wearing good shoes and declining to take them off for his benefit.

Wherever he went Captain Stondon felt that he had his cousin's best wishes for some misadventure to befall him ; and as he sat opposite to the clergyman, and listened to his tale of how this boy had been drowned, of how that one had studied too hard

to pass his examination, and died three weeks afterwards of brain-fever ; of how his only daughter had married happily, only to be laid a twelvemonth afterwards in her coffin with her baby on her breast—he thought that after all it might be better to have these memories than none at all—to have loved and lost, rather than never to have had anything on earth to take home and love and entreat the Lord to spare.

For these children were with the vicar still ; their memories were green in his heart, and would remain there till he went to join them ; and it seemed preferable to endure much misery rather than know no happiness ; to bear partings on earth, to the end that some friends might be waiting to greet the wayfarer when he reached the eternal shores.

To the vicar his children were not dead—they slept ; they were not lost—merely gone before.

“He had one boy in India,” he said ; and Captain Stondon at once inquired in what part.

“Benares—he is buried there,” explained the clergyman, and he covered his face with his hands for a moment, before he went on to tell how his son had gone out to India full of youth, and hope, and life—to die.

By degrees, when he had exhausted the tale of his troubles, Mr Conbyr grew quite cheerful, and talked at large of his parishioners, their peculiarities, their prejudices, their attachments. Like all clergymen, he had his little budget of petty annoyances to open and explain—how there was a strong element of Dissent in Tordale ; how Methodists from Grassenfel held house-to-house meetings ; how the service was not conducted exactly to his liking ; how he wanted a new collection of psalms, and his congregation would have none of it ; how the choir was poor, and required an organ to back it ; how sorely Tordale stood in need of a squire and squire’s family to take a high hand in the parish ; and how, in fact, Tordale required but being altered in every particular to become a model valley—a valley for all England to hear of and envy.

Then he retraced his steps, and praised his people, their sturdy

independence, their rough-and-ready kindness, their thorough devotion, their willingness to help one another ; and how long he would have gone on lauding their virtues it is impossible to say, had Captain Stondon, seizing his opportunity, not inquired,—

“Pray what is the name of that young person who was in the same pew with me to-day—a girl with auburn hair, and a magnificent voice?”

“Oh! you remarked her voice, did you? That is the cousin, or niece, or niece by marriage, or something, of the very singular individual who plays the violin in Church. She is called Phemie Keller—sings sweetly, I consider, and is pretty, too. Do you not think so?”

“Sings sweetly! What can the man be made of,” thought Captain Stondon, “to use such an expression about the matter? Sings sweetly! If the nightingale came outside his bedroom window and trilled to him all the night long, he would get up in the morning and say he had heard a nice bird whistling. Pretty, too!” Straightway the officer fell to wondering what manner of woman the deceased Mrs Conbyr had been—whether she had black hair as coarse as a horse’s mane, and a Roman nose, high cheek-bones, and hard eyes ; or whether she was a washed-out looking creature, with the pink of her face running into the white, and sandy-coloured corkscrew curls, and an anxious, frightened expression of countenance.

He thought a person who called Miss Keller only pretty must have very benighted ideas on the subject of beauty ; and yet the fact was, Mr Conbyr had married quite a belle, a sparkling brunette, whose friends all thought she threw herself away when she accepted a curate with only a prospective living for his fortune.

Mrs Conbyr had been a toast, a flirt, a very captivating, winning little creature, and perhaps it was no wonder that now she was dead her husband held to her memory as to his beau-ideal of all which was most lovely and charming in women. Nevertheless even he admitted that Miss Keller was pretty.

“And intelligent, too,” he added ; “if she wouldn’t giggle so

much, and hadn't such stuck-up ideas, and would dress herself more like a farmer's niece, she might grow into a superior woman. But vanity is the besetting sin of the whole household. Aggland himself tells you candidly he considers he understands the violin better than any man in the country, and he calls his brother farmers, openly, fools and prejudiced donkeys. As for me, he thinks me perfectly ignorant of theology. He has a curious smattering of learning; can talk French a little, German a little, and quote some Latin passages. He draws likewise, and formerly used to play on the guitar. He has begun to build himself an organ, which he offered to present to the church when completed, if I would give him the sole management of the choir. He had laid himself out to have none but the members of his own family in it, and depended on Phemie to lead; but she refused, and saved me the trouble and annoyance of declining. 'Ah, there is the cloven foot peeping out,' he said, as if delivering an oration; 'the taint of aristocracy, which hates to do anything for the democracy, appearing.'"

"And what the dence did he mean?" asked Captain Stondon, bewildered.

"Why, he meant, I suppose, that she didn't care to sing, and that there was good blood in her veins. I fancy she is illegitimate. He is always raving against the better classes—quite a character, I assure you."

"Do your mountains grow many such?" asked his guest.

"He is not a home product," was the reply. "Erratic genius of that description is not indigenous to the Cumberland soil. He is from Hereford, and his present wife is Lancashire, and his niece Scotch. His first wife was Scotch also, I fancy, and he has a tribe of young Agglands, sturdy, independent children of the hills. It is a strange household altogether, and one that, could I persuade you to stay with me, I should take you to see."

"Thank you," said Captain Stondon; "but I must leave Cumberland to-morrow. I am going first to Norfolk, and then abroad. I shall always think pleasantly," he added, after a pause, "of the valley of Tordale: always retain a memory of the

happy Sunday afternoon I have spent with you." And with that, as it was now getting on towards the hour for evening service, and as he had far to walk before he could reach Grassenfel and his inn together, the officer rose to go, but his intention was overruled by his host.

"I will not ask you," he said, "to come to church, because, if you must return to Grassenfel to-night, it would throw you too late on the road; but walk back with me to the waterfall, and then I will show you a path which runs right along the side of Helbeck for a couple of miles at least. You can form no idea of the beauty and grandeur of the defile till you have seen it from above, and the path, an easy one, leads down to the road you came by before you reach the Broken Stone bridge. The view from the top is worth seeing. I only wish this was Monday instead of Sunday, so that I could go with you myself."

Having made which frank confession the clergyman looked out his sermon, put on his hat, took his stick, and announced his readiness to depart.

"I can accompany you a little way up the path," he said; and accordingly the pair sallied out again together, and sauntered through the green vale side by side.

If Tordale had looked lovely in the noon-time, it was more beautiful still in the soft evening light. It wanted then nearly an hour to sunset, but the western sky was already like molten gold. Down the hill-sides long shadows were lying; still, sad, and stern looked the mountain peaks, with each jagged projection—each sharp outline—clearly reflected against the evening sky. A cloud frowned over Helbeck, which betokened a storm, the clergyman thought.

"But it is scarcely warm enough for thunder," he added; "and unless the wind die away we shall not have any rain before morning. Is not our valley lovely, Captain Stondon? When you are abroad—when you are looking at what is considered far more magnificent scenery—will you ever think, I wonder, of our little nook hidden away among the Cumberland hills?"

"I shall never forget Tordale," answered the officer, truthfully enough ; but little knowing how truthfully, for all that.

In the after-days of joy and of sorrow which he was then walking on to pass through to reach the end, he forgot the name of many a town—he forgot the road by which he had travelled to many a city ; mountain passes, smiling lakes, the weariness of Indian marches, gorgeous Eastern palaces, the brilliancy of Eastern flowers—these things were forgotten, or remembered only as a man remembers dreams. The Hindoo standing by his sacred river, the Arabs in the desert, the long line of foam that alone broke the eternity of waters as the outward-bound ship cleft her way to the Cape, the tramp of the sailors as they paced the deck, the faces of his old comrades faded, as the years stole on out of sight and out of mind ; but clear and distinct, like the memory of his mother's face—like the recollection of his boyhood's home—Tordale stood out a picture hung on the walls of his heart for ever.

He was never to forget it—never to forget the glory of its noon-tide, the murmur of its waterfall, the calm of its lonely graveyard, the ivy, the ferns, the foxglove, and the broom. In the loneliness and solitude of night he was to feel the calm of that scene soothe his spirit once again. He had but to close his eyes, and he could hear the dull plash of the waterfall, the rustling of the leaves, the mourning farewell of the rivulet. He could look at the long wet blades of grass bending ever and always into the water, and turning down the stream as though wanting to be pulled from their roots, that they might float away and away with the brook, first to the river and then to the sea. He could hear the water trickling among the stones ; he could touch the moss with his powerless fingers ; he could feel the cool drops touching his parched lips ; he could remember how he had drained a deep draught from the basin in the rock ; and then he would think likewise, if he hastened not to exorcise the evil thought, of his unavailing petition, of the prayer which had been granted to the letter, not in the spirit, to add to his troubles rather than to increase his joy.

CHAPTER III.

IN DANGER.

AFTER parting from his new friend, Captain Stondon ascended the path that led past the waterfall, across the little mountain stream, and half way to the top of Helbeck. It was hard work climbing up the track which wound now through rocks, now over stones, till skirting the side of the mountain, it bore off straight towards Grassenfel.

Heather, purple and glowing, bordered the track—wild flowers grew beside it. The whole earth was tinted with the hues of August. The richest, the most luxuriant month of all the year was sweeping, like a king in his glory, over the hills and the valleys, decking the former in their robes of state, clothing the latter with the yellow of the ripening corn and the emerald of the aftermath. To the right lay Tordale, bathed in the beams of the setting sun; below him lay the defile that led to Grassenfel; and, like a speck, he could discern the Broken Bridge which he must cross on his way back to his inn. Every crag and peak of Skillanscar shone in the bright rays of the glory wherein the whole landscape was steeped; and Captain Stondon, who had sat himself down amongst the heather to watch to its close this sunset amid the mountains, acknowledged to his heart that he had never seen anything in the way of scenery which so thoroughly satisfied and filled his soul as the smiling valley and the desolate hills—the gloomy ravine and the grey rugged mountains, on all of which the sun poured his light as though he were blessing the green earth ere leaving her to darkness and repose.

At last, with more than his accustomed pomp of red and gold and purple, he set behind the hills ; and, as he did so, the cloud Mr Conbyr had noticed rolled up from the east, covering Helbeck with a dark curtain of gloom. It was very grand to see Skillanscar reflecting back the glory of the western sky, but it was by no means agreeable to Captain Stondon to perceive a storm brewing so near him. He knew he had lingered too long on the road already ; for which reason he quickened his pace, and hurried to reach the point where the path began to descend into the ravine below. If he could but get to the Broken Stone bridge before the rain began, he thought he should be better able to work his way to Grassenfel.

It was not easy, however, to walk fast along the narrow track he was following, and when he at length commenced to descend, a flash of lightning heralded the approach of the coming storm. If his life had depended on it, Captain Stondon could not have helped halting to listen for the first peal of the thunder. After a pause it came, breaking the silence at first with a sullen roar like that of a distant cannonade ; but with every flash it drew nearer and nearer, echoing from mountain to mountain, from summit to summit, till one might almost have thought that height was defying height, and firing volley after volley across the defile.

With the sun the wind had sunk to rest likewise, and as he stood watching the lightning darting down the hill-sides, running along the rocks, and leaping from crag to crag like a living foe, Captain Stondon became conscious that the air had suddenly become warm and oppressive, and that a heat like that of a furnace seemed to pervade the atmosphere.

“What an idiot I was to come this way at all,” he thought ; “what a still greater idiot to loiter as I have done.” And with the lightning racing past him, with the thunder crashing and roaring overhead, the officer turned his face steadily towards the defile and pursued his road downwards.

But spite of all his haste he got on but slowly. In places the descent was steep and the path slippery ; wherever grass grew, or wherever rock and stone mixed with the earth, it was difficult

to get a firm footing. What with the evening shadows which were beginning to fall, and the darkness of the cloud overhead, and the dazzling flashes of the lightning that made everything seem darker afterwards for their sudden brilliancy, he soon found he was feeling his way rather than seeing it—groping down the path rather than pacing it securely.

“If I could but reach the road in the ravine,” he muttered, as he slipped and staggered and recovered himself, and then slipped again. “If I were only safe at the bottom I might—”

He never completed that mental sentence, for at the instant he stumbled over a loose stone and rolled down the path, clutching as he went at the short grass, at the heather, at the brambles.

Fighting for dear life, he caught sticks and stones; he tried to save himself by grasping the very earth itself; he saw as he went over and over, the mountain peaks, the ravine, the road he had been trying to reach, the track by which he had descended. He could see at that moment as he could not have seen had he been standing erect, with the noontide sun shining upon him. Even in his struggle he found time to wonder what would stop him—whether he should be dashed to pieces? Among the mountain peaks—a hundred miles above him as it seemed—the thunder was pealing. He heard it as he had heard the roaring of cannon on battle-fields far away. The lightning came flashing down among the rocks, and he found time to remember it resembled the flash which followed “Fire!” in the days when he was fighting like the best; and then all at once he held out his arms instinctively to save himself, and with a crash his descent was arrested; and stunned, and bruised, and battered—he remembered no more.

When he came to his senses it was dark, and the rain pouring in torrents; the lightning had ceased; the thunder had rolled far away; there was not a sound to be heard save the rushing of the rain, and the greedy noise which the dry earth made as she drank the welcome moisture in. It was some time before he could remember what had happened, and then he tried to raise himself, but fell back shrieking with pain.

He shouted for help, but if help had been close at hand the noise of the pelting rain sweeping down the mountains would have drowned his feeble cries. Mercilessly, pitilessly the rain beat upon him as he lay there powerless. With an effort he turned his face towards the piece of rock which had stayed his fall; and while the large drops fell on his unprotected head, he lay and thought in a kind of half-delirium about the end that was to be.

Was he to die there? Was he to die all alone on the mountain side with the rain pouring down upon him, alone in this solitude, amid the darkness of night? Before now he had lain wounded on a battle-field, but that had not seemed so desolate as this. His comrades had sought him out then, but here no one would dream of looking for him. His landlord at Grassenfel did not know where he had gone; he had no one to miss him—to wonder at his absence; no one in Cumberland—no one on earth.

If Montague Stondon could only imagine where he was lying how happy he would be. Was he to die thus to gratify him? Was the life-story (one which had been none too happy) to be finished thus? How long could he lie there and live? Was it likely any one would find him? Would his body ever be discovered, or would it lie there for the winter's snows to fall on?—for the winter's wind to moan over?

If he was not found how soon could Montague Stondon take possession of Marshlands? Was there any chance of making himself heard? How far down the ravine did he lie? When the morning dawned he should be able to see. His arm was broken, he supposed, but the intolerable pain in his ankle was harder to endure than that. He tried once again to raise himself, and, spite of what the effort cost, managed to get his back up against the rock. He was drenched with rain; a pool had formed round about where he lay; every thread of his light summer clothes was saturated; and yet, though he was shivering with the damp and the wet, the pain caused by the slightest movement threw him into a violent heat.

He had not strength to keep himself against the rock, and ere

long he slipped back on to the earth,—back with a jar which made him scream aloud once more. Then everything grew confused—he was in India—he was at sea—he was at home, dreaming of being in some awful peril; he peopled the mountain sides with shapes of horror; the darkness did not seem like darkness, for he could see phantoms and spectres flitting hither and thither ceaselessly. At last they all came rushing down on him, but the very horror of the vision made him recall his scattered senses. Where was he? What had happened? He remembered, and then his mind wandered off afresh. He was a boy again, robbing the first bird's nest he had ever despoiled; he was playing truant, and looking for blackberries with Bob Sedgemore, and as they passed Farmer Gooday's strawyard they hunted Mrs Gooday's favourite cat with Bob's terrier up the bank of the little stream, till the poor thing turned on her tormentors, when Bob and he stoned her to death.

He had not thought about that tortoise-shell cat for seven-and-forty years. What could make him remember her now? The way she stretched out her legs and turned up her eyes was horrid, and yet Bob and he had not been affected by the sight then. Bob merely kicked her into the stream, after which agreeable interlude they went on, and ate more blackberries.

Bob was dead. He had seen his corpse so blackened with powder, so maimed, and mangled, and mutilated, that the mother who bore him would not have recognized her boy. He was dead—everybody was dead; the girl he had been walking with only the other day, as it seemed, beside the yew-hedge in her father's garden, was dead and buried too. People came by their deaths in every conceivable way, and why should he not come to his on the side of a Cumberland mountain, with the wet earth for his bed, and the rain and darkness for companions?

Heavens, how the rain poured down!—how the dead gathered round about him! There were the men and women of the long and long ago walking along the path he had followed from Tor-dale. He saw them looking down at him through the night. There was his mother; could she be looking for him? Yes; he

could hear her light footfall on the grass—she was coming to fetch him. She put her cold hand on his cheek, and Captain Stondon, with a shout for help, fainted again.

After that he heard, as in a confused dream, answering shouts coming up the valley ; he heard dogs barking, and people talking, and knew that **he** was lifted and carried a long distance to a house, into which he was borne like a dead man.

He remembered a vain attempt that was made to get him to swallow something which they held to his lips. He recollected subsequently the scared look with which the bystanders started back at the scream he uttered when an attempt was made to pull off his right boot ; then all became a blank ; for days and days he raved incessantly ; for days his life hung on a thread, and he knew nothing of the patient care, of the devoted nursing which brought him back from the Valley of the Shadow of Death to the morning and the sunshine of life and health,—from the bleak hill-side and the cold earth's breast, to such home comfort, happiness, and contentment, as through all the years of his pilgrimage he had never known.

CHAPTER IV.

PIEMIE.

AFTER many days Captain Stondon, with the fever which had prostrated him subdued, awoke from a quiet sleep, and looked as well as extreme weakness would permit about the room he occupied.

The apartment was small, clean, and scantily furnished. There were white curtains to the bed, white curtains to the latticed windows.

Without moving his head, Captain Stondon could see, over the short muslin blind, the valley of Tordale stretching away below; he beheld the mountains bounding the view, and then, remembering what he had suffered amongst those mountains, he closed his eyes again, and with a sensation of luxurious weakness, fell asleep once more.

When next he woke it was getting late in the afternoon, and between him and the window next the bed there sat a man, whose face he knew he had seen before. This man was busily engaged in cleaning a gun, and with a lazy interest Captain Stondon watched him removing the barrels, and washing the stock, and going through the other ceremonies usually performed on an occasion of the kind. As he rose to leave the room, in which there was no fire, in order that he might finish the operation in orthodox fashion over some live coals, the man glanced at the bed, and noticing that his patient's eyes were open, he laid down the gun, and, stooping over the bed, inquired how the invalid felt.

"I am better, I suppose," Captain Stondon answered feebly. "How long?"

"A fortnight," was the reply; and straight away went Mr Aggland to his wife.

"Beef tea, Priscilla," he commanded, "beef tea of superlative strength and in unlimited quantity. He is awake and sensible. Yes," soliloquized Mr Aggland, "he has come back to that 'stage where every man must play a part.' What have you there? Mutton broth! Let him have some of that. I did not save him from 'Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder, such groans of roaring wind and rain,' to let him die of starvation at last."

"Lor' a mercy, Daniel, how you do talk," remarked his better half, as she obeyed his commands. "Give you your own way, and I believe you would stew down a bullock for him."

"And why not, woman?" demanded her husband: "why not a bullock? What is the life of a beast in comparison to the life of a man; not that I myself—" At which point Mr Aggland, growing argumentative, was interrupted by a little scream from his wife.

"For any sake, Daniel, don't turn its mouth next me! Put it down, or I won't take up the broth at all."

"Mercy alive! it has not a barrel on it. There is not a thing about it to go off. It is as harmless now as my walking-stick."

"Well, harmless or not, I can't a-bear it nigh me," answered Mrs Aggland. "I had just as lief see a lion in the room as a gun. How does the gentleman seem, Daniel? Has he spoken at all?"

"Yes, but I don't want him to speak much till he has eaten. What says Burns?—"

' Food keeps us livin',
Tho' life's a gift no worth receivin'.'

"Drat Burns!" interposed Mrs Aggland. "Ay, and for that matter," she continued, "drat all them poets, say I. Here, take the broth, and I'll send one of the boys over to Grassenfel in the

morning to see if we can get any beef. Won't I go up to him? Not I, indeed. Am I fit, Daniel, am I fit—I put it to you—to be looked at by any gentleman? There's Phemie,—if you want anybody to go and see him, ask her. She's always dressed; she always seems just to have come out of a bandbox; she has not to go mucking about like your wife; she is a lady, and can sit in her parlour. Ask her."

"I will, my dear, as you wish it," replied Mr Aggland, and he went straight into the apartment his wife called the parlour, but which was in reality the living room of the family, where sat the apple of discord in the Aggland household, with a pile of needle-work before her that it would have appalled the most skilful seamstress to attack.

If that was being a lady, Daniel Aggland decided then, as he had decided many a time before, the position was not one to be envied. Rather the baking and brewing and cooking than that eternal stitch—stitch! And, moreover, had not Phemie to do many a thing about the house besides stitching? Whenever the bread was best and lightest, had not Phemie kneaded it? When the butter was the colour of daffodil, had not Phemie's soft, white hands, that no work made hard or coarse, taken it off the churn? Who dressed the children, and sent them clean and tidy off to school? Phemie, to be sure. Who helped them with their lessons, and caused the three batches of children (the Agglands by the first wife, the Agglands by the second wife, and the Kings, whose mother had brought them with her to the Cumberland Farm, as her contribution to the general weal) to be far ahead of all competitors in their respective classes? Who made and mended for them all? Phemie. Who sewed the buttons on Mr Aggland's shirts, and kept his clothes in the order he loved? Why, Phemie still, who now sat with her lovely hair reflecting back the sunbeams, plying her needle busily.

She was not dressed in the finery to which Mr Conbyr had taken exception—finery that had descended to her from Mrs Aggland; and there was so great a contrast between her beauty and her attire, that Mr Aggland felt it strike him painfully.

He loved the girl, and would have clothed her in silks and satins if he could. With the memory of all that was calmest and best and happiest in his life, she was interwoven; and he would have liked to make her lot different, if only for the affection he bore to the dead woman who was so fond of her.

Further, he admired beauty, and the beautiful, in his opinion, had no business to be useful likewise; for both of which reasons Mr Aggland, with his wife's complaints of Phemie's "uppishness" still ringing in his ears, could not help but pause and look at the girl who, if Mrs Aggland's oft-repeated assertion might be believed, "was not worth her salt."

A really pretty woman always looks prettier without her bonnet, and Phemie Keller proved no exception to this rule. The small well-shaped head with its glory of luxuriant hair, the white graceful neck, the shell-like ear!—the bonnet had concealed all these things from Captain Stondon's eyes,—and stripped of the old-fashioned clothes which were her very best, and dressed in a faded and well-darned mousseline de laine of the smallest pattern imaginable, which de laine had likewise descended to her from remote centuries, with her soft round arms peeping from below the open sleeves, with her snowy collar fastened by a bow of dark brown ribbon, Phemie Keller sitting in the sunshine with the pile of unfinished work before her, looked every inch what she was—a lady.

"Will you carry this up to our patient, Phemie?" said her uncle; and there was a tone in his voice as he spoke which made the girl look at him wonderingly. "He is awake now—awake and sensible; but we must keep plenty of oil in the lamp, or it will go out after all our trouble."

"It won't go out, uncle, for want of oil while you are in the house," she answered, laying down her work and taking the tray from him. "Duncan had better run down to the Rectory when he comes back from school, had he not, and tell Mr Conbyr the good news? Do you remember how, when he was at the very worst, you used to say he would do us credit yet? Arn't you proud to have saved him? I am."

That last speech, I am very sorry to say, had a spice of antagonism in it. Mrs Aggland had said, whenever she got tired of the extra fuss and trouble, that as the man was sure to die anyway, he might better have died on the hill-side than in the house of poor folks like themselves, for which reason Phemie was triumphantly glad that Captain Stondon had lived, "if only to spite the cross old thing," the latter observation being made in strict confidence to their only servant, Peggy MacNab.

But for Mr Aggland and Phemie it is indeed more than likely that Mrs Aggland's prophecies might have been fulfilled, and the pair had certainly cause for gratulation at the progress made by their patient.

"It is positively refreshing to see you getting on so well," remarked Mr Aggland, as he took his seat by the bedside again, and, the broth having been swallowed, resumed his gun-cleaning performance; "but you must not talk much—you must not talk at all. The less you exert yourself, and the more you sleep, the sooner you will be able to go—

'Chasing the wild deer and following the roe,'"

finished Mr Aggland, who probably felt at a loss how to complete his sentence otherwise.

In compliance with this advice, Captain Stondon refrained from speaking, and did not exert himself at all, unless, indeed, looking with half-closed eyes at his host could be called exertion.

To him Mr Aggland was a never-ending, ever-beginning source of wonder: dark, wild-looking hair, that looked as though it had met with some terrible surprise, hung over a face as strange and weird as the face of man need to be; hollow cheeks, thoughtful, greenish-grey eyes, a large mouth, a nose that seemed all nostril, a ragged beard, a feeble attempt at a moustache; lines where lines never appeared in other men's faces; a general effect of cleverness and eccentricity. It was this Captain Stondon took in by degrees, as he lay between sleeping and waking listening to Mr Aggland humming, in a low falsetto,

“The Lord my pa-hasture sha-hall prepare,
And feed me wihith ha she-heperd’s care.”

Many a day afterwards, when he saw Phemie’s gravity completely upset by her uncle’s melody, he thought how weak he must have been that night when he first heard his host speaking in what he called his “natural language,” music.

CHAPTER V

A COMPACT.

THERE is an Indian plant which will grow and flourish in any place, under any circumstances.

Earth it does not ask—care it does not demand. Cut it off from all apparent means of support, and it thrives notwithstanding. Detach a leaf from the parent plant, suspend it by a thread from the ceiling, and behold! the leaf, receiving all the nourishment it requires from the atmosphere alone, puts out roots.

As he lay in bed wearily counting away the long hours of convalescence; as he sat in the family sitting-room; as he followed his host or his host's children slowly around the farm, Captain Stondon never ceased thinking about that strange plant, and likening it to Mr Aggland.

Cut off apparently from all temptation to eccentricity—removed from contact with a world which, galling sensitive natures, sometimes produces curious mental sores and running humours in the best—earning his bread in a primitive manner, trying neither to his brain nor to his temper—placed in a station that seems to have been removed by Providence further from slight and aggravation than any other under heaven, Mr Aggland was yet peculiar in his manners, habits, and ideas,—peculiar to a degree.

Like the air plant, his oddities were self-supporting and self-propagating; the older he grew the more eccentric he became. Time only increased his prejudices; years only brought his peculiarities into more prominent relief; a large family merely gave

him endless opportunities of airing his pet crotchets, of exhibiting his singular stock of information. Never by any chance did he do anything like other people. He had a way and a fashion of his own—even of sowing seeds in his garden; and his ideas on the subject of training and education had produced as singular a flock of argumentative children as could have been found in the length and breadth of “canny Cumberlan’.”

True offspring of the hills—sturdy, self-reliant, self-opinionated, courageous—the Agglands and the Kings composed a remarkable household; one in which, nevertheless, whenever he was able to rise from his bed and limp about the place, Captain Stondon speedily found himself at home.

His first advances towards acquaintanceship had been received by the juvenile fry with caution, not to say suspicion. Distrust of a stranger being, however, mingled with a feeling that they held a kind of property in him, that he was the spoil of their bow and arrow, of their sword and spear, produced a certain—I cannot say graciousness—but unbending of their usual ungraciousness in his favour. They did not know what to make of this “‘gowk’ who had been so feckless as to miss t’rod, and go sossing from wig to wa’ down the hul;” but the very fact of their dog “Davy” having found the injured man in a “soond,” and of their father having procured help and brought him home, and nursed him through his illness, caused the lads to feel a kind of compassionate interest in their new friend.

They had been kept so much out of the sick-room that their curiosity had naturally been excited likewise. Indeed, Captain Stondon’s first interview with Duncan, Mr Aggland’s eldest born, was held under difficulties, while that young gentleman stood with the chamber-door half open, surveying the man who had lain in bed till they all settled he was never going to rise again.

“Have you got anything to say to me, my lad?” asked Captain Stondon, stretching out one weak hand towards his visitor.

“No; have you got anything to say to me?” replied Duncan, clenching the handle of the door tighter as he spoke.

“I do not know that I have,” answered Captain Stondon, who

was rather taken aback by this unexpected question. "Did you do well at school to-day?"

"You do not care to know that; you have no lessons to get," replied Duncan, with the air of a bird far too old to be caught by such conversational chaff, but he took a step forward into the room notwithstanding.

"Are you no dowly lying there so long?" he asked, after a pause.

"If you tell me what you mean by dowly, I will answer your question," said Captain Stondon.

"Are you thinking long? You know what that is, I suppose," explained Duncan, who had learnt the phrase from his Scotch mother.

"I am not exactly sure that I do; but if you want to know whether I am tired of being laid up here, I must answer 'yes.' I shall feel very glad to be out of bed, and walking about once more."

"I will take you to see the Strammer Tarn, if you like, when you are well," volunteered his visitor.

"Now I tell you what it is, Duncan," broke in Mr Aggland at this juncture; "if I ever catch you here again without my permission I will box your ears. Indeed, I have a very great mind to box them now."

And straightway the father inflicted condign punishment on his son, who retired howling from the apartment, while Mr Aggland walked to the window, and looked out, muttering to himself half-apologetically—

"Be then to him

As was the former tenant of your age,
When you were in the prologue of your time,
And he lay hid in you unconsciously,
Under his life."

Captain Stondon had not the remotest idea what Mr Aggland meant by this quotation, but he knew that the man's face looked softened and sorrowful when he turned from the window, and re-

marked that "boys would be boys, and that Duncan was his mother's son all over."

Of course it was impossible for Captain Stondon to negative this statement, but he thought Duncan greatly resembled his father for all that.

"You will excuse their ill-manners, sir," proceeded Mr Aggland. "They see no one, poor things. They can learn no better in a wilderness like this. I do my best to bring them up honest men and women, 'fearing God, honouring the Queen.' But for anything else! What can I teach them here in this 'cell of ignorance,' as Guiderius happily calls the country."

"You can teach them what you know, doubtless," answered Captain Stondon. "Your education seems to have been much better attended to than that of most persons, whether in town or country; and you can surely impart to your children a portion at least of that which you once learnt yourself."

"Superficial—all superficial," said Mr Aggland, with a sigh. "Here a little, there a little—a mere smattering of education. Once, indeed, the fields of learning lay open before me, but I would not when I could; and you know what is the fate of people who trifle with their opportunities. Afterwards I could not when I would; and the result is that I am here, and my children are here, and here we shall remain till the end of the chapter. The boys, some of them, have fair abilities, and with good fortune it is probable they may eventually—hold the plough well," finished Mr Aggland, abruptly.

Truth was, the father had been going to end his sentence very differently, but feeling that a stranger could scarcely sympathise with his hopes, and knowing that between the future he desired and the present in which he lived there was a gap broad as poverty, he substituted other words for those he was about to speak, and before Captain Stondon could reply to his remark hastened to change the subject.

"I should be sorry to go back into the world again," he said, "though I do rail at times against this wilderness, and, like

Lamb, consign hills, woods, lakes, mountains, to the eternal devil. I abuse nature as men often show their tenderness by speaking disparagingly of the women they love best; and I cannot understand the state of that soul which should find its love of natural scenery satisfied by the 'patches of long waving grass and the stunted trees that blacken in the old churchyard nooks which you may yet find bordering on Thames Street.'

"I never was in Thames Street, so far as I recollect," remarked Captain Stondon, to whom it never occurred that Mr Aggland was quoting from a book; "but I do not think the scenery to be met with there would satisfy me. Nevertheless, I confess that for the future I shall like mountains better at a distance. Of one thing I am positive, namely, that I shall be content hereafter to admire their beauties from below."

Mr Aggland laughed. "You had a bad fall," he said, "and would have had a long lie of it but for Mr Conbyr and my dog Davy. Mr Conbyr could not rest in his bed till he had sent a man over on his Galloway to see if you were safely housed in your inn at Grassenfel; and when the news came back that you had not been heard of, nothing would serve him but that I should turn out and look for you. So Davy and I, and Jack Holms, started on the search. Mr Conbyr wanted to come with us, but I would have none of him. Davy knew what we were out for as well as if he had been a Christian."

"What breed is he?" interrupted Captain Stondon: "a St Bernard?"

"Not a bit of it," answered Mr Aggland; "he is something between a Coolie, a Skye, and a Scotch terrier—but what I cannot tell you. Anyhow, he knew what we were looking for, and just when Jack and I thought we must give over the search, he picks up your hat, sir, and brings it to us in his teeth. Then we knew you must be somewhere in the neighbourhood, and Davy hunted about, smelling up and down till he found you behind the rock, and a nice pickle you were in when found. I had no notion but that you were dead. I tell you honestly now, sir, I no more expected ever to hear you speak when we carried you

into this house than I expect the Queen to send for me and make me an earl."

"I do not think I ever should have spoken much again but for the good care you bestowed upon me.

"Well, I flatter myself I am a tolerable nurse," replied Mr Aggland; "'tis a trick I learned in my early youth. When Mr Conbyr came here, wanting to have you carried down to the Vicarage, I said him gently nay. 'You'll excuse me, Mr Conbyr,' I remarked, 'but out of my house the gentleman does not stir till he is fit to make a choice for himself. You sent him up the hill-path with a storm brewing, as any child could have told you, and I brought him off the mountain side with the rain pouring down heavens hard: so, with your leave, sir, I'll e'en see to the curing of him myself.' I suppose, however, when once you are able to limp about on a stick he will have you away, and then—'for ever and for ever farewell.'"

Here was the opening Captain Stondon had for days been anticipating, and seizing his opportunity, he assured Mr Aggland he entertained no such passionate friendship for the clergyman as would cause him to desert the Hill Farm for the Vicarage. But at the same time Captain Stondon hinted that sickness brought its attendant expenses, that it entailed various and sundry inconveniences; that, in short, unless Mr Aggland, who was blessed with a large family, agreed to permit the speaker, who had no children, to—

"In short," broke in Mr Aggland at this point, "you want to pay me; you are, I presume, rich; I am, you presume, poor; and there you chance to be quite correct. Whatever troubles I have, I am not 'perk'd up in a glistening grief;' I do not 'wear a golden sorrow.' Yes, I am a poor man. There is no use in my trying to deny the fact." And Mr Aggland took a halfpenny from his pocket, tossed it in the air, then covered it over with his hand, and turning towards Captain Stondon a little defiantly, waited for his answer.

"I do not want to pay you," said that gentleman; "I never could pay you for the kindness you have shown me. For my life,

for the long hours you have sat beside my bed, for all you have done by me, I shall be your debtor always, and I am not of so thankless a nature that I desire to be out of your debt. All I meant was, that as long as a man is alive you cannot keep him for nothing—you must acknowledge the truth of that proposition, Mr Aggland. There is not a child you have but costs you something every day—”

Up went the halfpenny once again, and once again Mr Aggland covered it with his hand.

“I, a bachelor,” proceeded Captain Stondon, “should not be a burden on you, that is all. If you are willing to let me feel that I am not a burden I will stay here, with your leave, till I am strong enough to go back to my own home; but if not, I must try to get over to Grassenfel as soon as may be.”

For the third time Mr Aggland spun up the halfpenny. “Heads thrice running,” he said, and pocketed the coin gravely.

“You have won, sir,” was his answer to Captain Stondon’s speech. “I *am* a poor man and money *is* an object; but for all that, I had rather luck had turned the other way. So long as there is independence, there may be friendship even between a high man and an humble, but once money passes from hand to hand, adieu to even the semblance of equality.” And with this speech Mr Aggland would have left the room, had not Captain Stondon detained him.

“I have been a poor man myself,” he said. “For years life was a continual struggle; and those years are not so far behind me but that I can still feel more fellowship with, and friendship for, a poor man than a rich. Because I want to be a little independent, do not think I wish to prevent your being independent likewise.”

And with that he held out his hand, which Mr Aggland took.

“Shall we be friends?” asked the officer.

“It is a question for you to decide,” answered the other. “I am not a gentleman; I make no pretension to ever having been one; still—

'The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that.'

And straightway it was settled that Captain Stondon should remain ; that he should stay to be conducted to Strammer Tarn by Duncan ; that he should wait to see Davy, the wisest dog in Cumberland ; that he should not leave the Hill Farm for the Vicarage, or Grassenfel, or any other piace, till he was strong and well once more ; that he should not, in one word, leave Tordale till Tordale had become a part of nunsit—a place destined to remain green in his memory all his life long.

CHAPTER VI.

PY STRAMMER TARN.

IT was the middle of October. The September harvest had been reaped and carried ; the sickles were laid aside for another year, and the barns were full to overflowing ; it was getting late in the season for any stranger to be lingering among the hills, but still Captain Stondon remained on at the Farm contentedly. Had there been no outside world at all,—had there been no Norfolk estates, no London clubs, no Paris, no Vienna,—he could not have seemed better satisfied to stay, more loth to stir than was the case.

Each week, it is true, he said he must soon be journeying southward ; but then each fresh week found him still loitering across the valley to the Parsonage ; still contemplating the effects of the autumnal tints on heather, grass, and tree ; still watching the changing leaves on the branches that overhung the waterfall ; still climbing the mountain sides, or wending his way to Strammer Tarn.

His arm had knit by this time, and although he continued to carry a stick, his ankle was almost strong again. He had drunk in a new draught amid the hills ; he had gone back years, seated by the ingle nook, wandering among the heather ; he had forgotten the weary years of his lonely manhood ; and he was taking his youth—his unenjoyed, unprofitable youth—once more in the autumn of existence, and living it out again, thoroughly, happily, among the mountains of Cumberland.

He had found rest ; he had found contentment. He had put the gloom of the shadow that formerly rested over his soul aside, and in that strange household, surrounded by young people, by nature, by activity, by life, and hope, and strength, he grew light-hearted, and with boys became as a boy, capable of enjoying each day that dawned upon the earth.

To be sure, at first he found it no easy matter either to understand what the lads said, or to make them comprehend exactly what he said in return. They had run so wild about the hills ; they had mixed so much with the boys in the valley ; they had grown up so entirely amid Cumberland sounds and Cumberland associations, that their every sentence contained some word which seemed strange and unaccustomed in the ear of their guest.

But, as a rule, Phemie was close at hand to comprehend and to explain. She it was who told him what Duncan meant by a "bainer" way to Strammer Tarn ; by a "whang" of bread ; by Mrs Aggland being in a "taaking," and by calling Davy a "tyke."

With her lovely face turned up to his she would laugh out at his perplexities, and then make darkness clear before him. She would scold Duncan in a pretty womanly way for using the Cumberland dialect, and then "draw him out" for the officer's benefit. She would dance over the moors and the heather, as Duncan sometimes told her, like a "rannigal," and then she would sit down quietly at the edge of the Black Tarn, and talk to Captain Stondon about her childhood, while she pulled off her bonnet and wreathed the broom and the wild flowers into garlands for her hair.

It was not an exciting life, but it was peaceful, without being solitary. Since his boyhood, since the time which lay almost half a century behind him, Captain Stondon had never known what it was to enter any house, not even his own, and to feel he was crossing the threshold of home. To rest and be thankful ; to live and rejoice ; to look on the merest excursion as a pleasure ; to understand that leisure was never given to man solely that he might employ his leisure in killing time,—these things were to

Captain Stondon almost like revelations, and he accepted the new light and lay down and basked in its glory joyfully.

Home! What makes a home, I wonder? Looking back in the after days to that queer old Cumberland farm-house across the sea, thinking of its quiet, and its happiness, even whilst surrounded by the warmth, and the beauty, and the gaiety of southern climes, Captain Stondon came to believe that home is not so much one great fact as the total of an aggregation of trifles; that the way the sunbeams steal into the windows, the particular description of rose that is trained round the casements, the scent of the honeysuckle which climbs over the porch, the plan of the house, the position of the doors, the placing of the furniture, the eccentricities of the servants, the tricks of the animals,—all these odds and ends frame and fit together so as to make one great and perfect whole, which shall remain stamped on the memory when the soul has sickened of lordly mansions, and the brain refuses to remember the cold bare discomfort of houses that are not homes, that lack the thousand-and-one charms which oftentimes form a chain strong enough to bind the heart of some great man to the lowliest cottage standing by the wayside of life. It is the sunlight on the floor, it is the trees that overshadow the roof, it is the springing of the turf under foot, it is the perfume of the flowers stealing in through the open windows, it is the grouping of a circle round a blazing fire, it is the tone of the voices, it is a series of sensations which engross the soul, and forge fetters around the wisest and the best.

The Hill Farm had every element of home strong about it. The sunbeams seemed never weary of shining on it, as if they loved the very stones in its walls; the roses put out buds and bloomed even in the frost. There was no such piece of grass in any nobleman's park as Mr Aggland boasted beneath his parlour windows. Most part of the year the little garden was a blaze of flowers, but specially in the autumn the place seemed on fire with scarlet verbenas and Tom Thumb geraniums, with nasturtiums, and stately dahlias, and heliotropes, and fuchsias.

The poor man's flowers, when he takes care of them, always

bloom before the buds burst in the parterre of his richer neighbour. As though God loved best him to whom He gives the least, He seems to send His sun and His rain with richer blessing to the one than to the other, and the little crop comes up more abundantly before the door of the cottager than the great crop is ever seen to do in the broad fields that are owned by his landlord and master the squire. It was thus at any rate with the Agglands—what they planted they gathered; what they watered and tended grew up to perfection. The great man of Grassensfel, Lord Wanthorpe, who kept six gardeners, could not for wages obtain such efficient help as Mr Aggland brought round him after school-hours every afternoon.

Delving and digging, watering and wheeling, clearing and weeding, was fun to the lads—exercise to their father. With all his quotations, he did not bring them up in idleness: not one of the boys but could clean a horse, harness and drive him, saddle and ride him, as well as any groom in the country.

They could have bought and sold, those lads; you might have sent them to market, and trusted their judgment of a drove of beasts as well as that of any bailiff. They would argue—Duncan more particularly—with their father, knotty points of colour, vein, and shape; they would stand with their hands in their pockets, and criticise a two-year-old as gravely as any *habitué* of Tattersall's. They were great on sheep; they were learned about dogs; occasionally they were pleased to drop some words of wisdom about hens and chickens for the edification of Captain Stondon; and concerning geese and turkeys they were a vast deal better informed than the person who took charge of those interesting animals in the poultry yard at Marshlands.

Altogether, brought up in the country, the boys were *au fait* in matters appertaining to the country. They knew all about soils; they spoke lovingly of manures. In advance of their farming brethren in the matter of rotation crops, they were apt, following their father's lead, to be a little dogmatical and wearisome on the subject of exhausting and recruiting the ground.

Mr Aggland piqued himself on having brought the "best ideas

of all nations" into practical use on his little farm ; and the days came when, knowing more about the man, about the difficulties he had surmounted, the troubles he had struggled through, Captain Stondon acknowledged that, possibly, no other individual could have made as much of the Hill Farm as Mr Aggland ; that he had kept a large family well, and brought them up respectably, where a different father might have found it a hard struggle to provide such a tribe of children with dry bread off so bare and inhospitable a corner of the earth.

The Hill Farm was cheap, the Hill Farm was picturesque, but it was likewise poor and inaccessible.

"No man before me was ever able to pay his rent out of the ground," said Mr Aggland, with excusable vanity ; "each successive tenant planted on the hill as he would have planted in the valley, and the result was disappointment and ruin. I, who had never been a farmer, was looked upon as a madman for supposing I should succeed where practical men had failed ; but, remembering Seneca's axiom, that 'Science is but one,' I laboured on with patience and in hope. And through all my labour I had pleasure. I have been happier here than I was in the days when my prospects were brighter. Did you ever read Burns' 'Twa Dogs,' sir?"

If Captain Stondon had thought saying "Yes" would have saved him the quotation, he might have replied falsely ; but, knowing that the verse was sure to come in any case, he answered, "No."

"The poem is neither more nor less than a comparison between riches and poverty," explained Mr Aggland. "It is a conversation between two dogs ; between one whose

" —Locked, lettered, brass, braw collar,
Showed him the gentleman and scholar,"

and another—

" 'A ploughman's collie . . . a gude and faithfu' tyke.'

The gentleman—'Cæsar'—is made to say—

" 'I see how folk live that hae riches,
But surely poor folk maun be wretches.'

“Was not it, sir, a clever notion putting in the mouth of a dog the thought that passes so often through the heart of a man?”

“And what does the other answer?” asked Captain Stondon.

“He says with truth that ‘they are nae sae wretched’s ane wad think,’ and then goes on to what I was going to remark at first,—

“‘An’ tho’ fatigued wi’ close employment,
A blink o’ rest’s a sweet enjoyment.

That was it, sir. After I had done my day’s work I could enjoy rest as I had never enjoyed anything in the time when I was idle and earning my bread easily, and, as I think now, meanly. And even now I feel it a pleasure to see the seed I have helped to sow springing up, and bearing fruit in the Lord’s due season. Although toil has been my lot, I can sing, with the sweetest of our modern poets,

“‘There is not a creature, from England’s king
To the peasant that delves the soil,
That knows half the pleasure the seasons bring,
If he have not his share of toil.’

Look at the farm, sir. It was like moorland when I came here first, and now I pay my rent and keep my family off it, and I have a trifle besides in the Grassenfel Bank. To be sure, if I were to die, things might go hard with the wife and children, but there are few in any station who can do more than support their boys and girls, and give them education. Duncan certainly might soon take the farm, and Phemie would help him. It may be that some day they will make a match, and then—”

“The man is come over from Grassenfel about the sheep, uncle,” interrupted Phemie at this juncture; and as Mr Agglard left Captain Stondon to attend to business, the officer turned and looked strangely at the girl whose probable future he had just heard sketched out.

There was a colour in her face which seemed to imply that she had heard likewise; but half-an-hour afterwards, when she and all her cousins, Duncan included, accompanied their guest up the

hill and over the heather to Strammer Tarn, her step was as light and her laugh rang out as clear as though there were no such thing as marrying or giving in marriage on earth.

"A nice fate, truly," thought Captain Stondon, savagely; "to keep a girl like that making butter and darning stockings all her life. Such hair, such features, such a complexion, such grace wasted on a raw-boned Cumberland lout. Great Heavens! such sacrilege should not be permitted in a Christian country. What would she like, I wonder. It might be worth while trying to get to know what she thinks on the subject."

But, frank as she seemed, what she hoped, what she feared, what she dreamed, were things Phemie Keller was never going to tell to Captain Stondon. In the world she had but one confidante; the hard-featured, high-checked, loud-voiced Scotchwoman, who had been with her from her childhood, who had come with her from Scotland, who had served the first Mrs Aggland, and was now serving the second, and who loved blue-eyed, bright-haired, laughing, light-hearted Phemie Keller with a love passing the love of woman.

Sitting on the boulders that lay near the edge of the Strammer Tarn, with her cousin Helen's head resting on her lap, with the clear October sky above, with the black rocks frowning on her girlish beauty, with the dark water at her feet, Phemie talked to the stranger of everything save the dreams she dreamed when she lay wide awake in her little bed at night, save the romantic future she and Peggy sketched out when "croonin'" together over the winter fire in the kitchen, or basking in the glorious sunlight of some summer Sunday afternoon.

Did he think the girl unconscious of her loveliness?—did he imagine that, though she might seem merely "pretty" to her neighbours, Phemie Keller did not know she was the making of as beautiful a woman as ever turned men's heads and caused honest hearts to ache for love of her? Is not beauty a talent, and did not she know God had given her that one talent, at any rate? He had lived long, and he had seen much, but he fell into error here. Phemie was fully aware of the extent of her

own charms. All her earlier years she had been "my bonnie, bonnie bairn" to somebody; and now her glass, small though it might be, told the little lady she was beautiful, whilst, if other proofs were wanting, Mr Conbyr's entreaties that she would set her face against vanity, and the whispered compliments of young Mr Fagg, the surgeon, from Grassenfel, should have fully convinced her of the fact.

And so while they talked together, and while Captain Stondon thought he was reading this girl's nature as though it were an easy book, Phemie was keeping back the dreams and the visions that made her young life tolerable to her. She could sit contentedly at work because airy castles rose to the sky at her lightest bidding; she could go about the housework cheerily, thinking of the future day which was to dawn and free her from all drudgery and all toil, and she could talk frankly and naturally to this middle-aged man, who tried to draw her out, because he was as far from her ideal of a lover, or a husband, or a hero, as Mr Fagg, or even her hard-headed cousin Duncan himself.

"My father was an officer too," Phemie was pleased to explain on the afternoon in question; "but he was only a lieutenant,—Lieutenant Keller; I have got his portrait at the farm, if you would like to see it. He looks so young and so handsome," the girl added, with a tremor in her voice, and she bent her head over her favourite Helen, touching the child's dark locks lovingly as she spoke.

"You resemble him, then, doubtless," suggested Captain Stondon, gallantly.

"I believe I do," she said, apparently without noticing the implied compliment; "but my mother was fair too. I remember her with such a colour in her face that, if people had not known to the contrary, they would have said she was painted. She died when she was only one-and-twenty; but I remember her. Uncle tells me they were both little more than boy and girl—boy and girl," Phemie repeated, with her eyes straining over the Black Tarn, as though she saw the shadowy forms of those dead parents standing on the opposite shore.

Up to that moment Captain Stondon had taken Mr Conbyr's statement for granted ; but now he began to waver in his faith. If she were really illegitimate, Phemie's uncle would never have spoken to her about her parents so unreservedly, she would never have been suffered to retain the portrait of which she had just made mention.

Hitherto the question of her birth had been one studiously avoided by the officer ; but suddenly he became desirous to know all about Miss Keller's parents, and began to insinuate questions accordingly.

"Was her father dead or abroad?" he ventured, after a pause.

"Oh, he died before my mother," Phemie answered ; "and she never held up her head after, Peggy says. It was at Malta we were then, and my mother brought his body back to his own people, and then returned to her father's house with me."

"Why did she not remain with her husband's family?" asked Captain Stondon.

"Because they would not have her remain, and because she thought a Scotch Duncan as good as an English Keller any day, and would not be looked down on by them. The Kellers are great folks somewhere, or think themselves great folks ; and they never forgave my father for marrying a poor minister's daughter. He told her to go to them after his death for my sake, and she went because he bade her ; but they turned her from the door, and—and—"

Phemie bowed her head and sobbed aloud as she tried to finish her sentence. She had heard her mother's wrongs so often spoken of,—she had heard Peggy M'Nab tell so pathetically how that young creature, repulsed by her husband's kindred, had travelled home to the old manse to die, that she could not speak without weeping as she recalled the story.

Home to die! home to the familiar places she had left so few years before to look her last on them ere she passed from earth for ever ;—home to the lonely manse by the desolate sea-shore ;—home to the well-remembered rooms where she could lie and listen to the long roll of the Atlantic waves as they came booming

up against the rocky coast ;—home to the haunts and the friends of her girlhood ;—home—or, as Peggy said so plaintively—

“Hame, hame, puir thing, to dee.”

Phemie could not talk of it calmly ; Phemie could scarcely talk of the manse itself calmly, let alone of her mother ; and whilst Captain Stondon retraced his steps towards Tordale in the gathering twilight, with Duncan and Helen and Phemie beside him, and the other children running on towards home as fast as their little legs could carry them, he made up his mind to have some talk with Mr Aggland, and discover how he might best advance that eccentric individual's views, and do something at the same time for Pnemie Keller.

CHAPTER VII.

THE AGGLAND INTERIOR.

THE short October day was drawing to a close when the party reached home; and it had grown so dark by the time they reached the Hill Farm, that candles were lighted and curtains drawn, and the tea-things set, awaiting their arrival. Amazingly cozy looked the parlour, with sofa pulled round beside the fire, a steaming kettle on the hob, and coals piled high blazing up the chimney.

Though the furniture was of the plainest, the room seemed homelike and cheerful to Captain Stondon, who was greeted by Mr Aggland with—

“You must have found Strammer Tarn unusually attractive this afternoon. Were you watching ‘Autumn like a faint old man sit down—by the wayside a-weary?’ Have you brought an appetite back with you from the hills? Mr Conbyr has been here begging that you will dine with him to-morrow. So, in common courtesy, you are in for two sermons—two of *his* sermons—good lack! Nevertheless ’tis a good man ‘Gray, with his eyes uplifted to Heaven.’ I do think Mr Conbyr does try to keep both eyes and soul uplifted; for which reason I make the children write down his sermons as well as they can after they come from church. In a literary point of view, what he says may not be super-excellent, but the words of a good man must always hold something worth remembering. Now, Phemie, let us have some tea,” finished Mr Aggland, with the air of a person

who felt that, having delivered himself of a Christian sentiment, he deserved some refreshment after it.

Dutifully obedient, the girl poured out the tea, and when he had handed a cup to his wife, who sat knitting by the fire and another to Captain Stondon, who was contemplating Phemie, Mr Aggland duly and solemnly stirred up the sugar from the bottom, and then tasted the infusion.

“Wormwood! wormwood!” he exclaimed, surveying the tea with astonishment and Phemie with reproach. “There’s rue for you,” he added, turning to Captain Stondon, “and here’s some for me. We may call it herb of grace o’ Sundays, but it is quite a different matter to drink it any evening in the week. What the deuce, child, have you done to it? Salts and senna—soda and bark! ugh!” and Mr Aggland began putting all the cups back on the tray.

“I will keep mine,” said Mrs Aggland defiantly. “If yours does not please you, have some more made. As Phemie was out wasting her time as usual on the hills, I wet the tea; but I won’t wet it again—what I brew never contents you.”

Having concluded this pleasant sentence, Mrs Aggland resumed her knitting, while Mr Aggland, having muttered something that sounded very like “Damn the tea!” directed his conversation towards his guest, who had long doubted the prudence of the farmer’s second choice, and who felt more and more convinced of the fact of its imprudence every day he passed in the house.

Not a virago was Mrs Aggland; not a noisy, headstrong, passionate woman. There was no quarrelling and making up with her. She did not fly into a passion one moment, and calm down the next. She simply “nagged.” There is no other word I know of to express her mode of proceeding, or I would use it.

Man could not delight her, nor woman neither, if the man and the woman chanced to be of her own household. From the time she rose in the morning till she laid her pinched, discontented face on the pillow at night, the thing was never done, by child or adult, that pleased her; and the person who seemed able to displease her most was Phemie Keller.

In her youth, which takes us back to a somewhat remote period, Mrs Aggland had been reckoned rather a beauty by the young men in her own class of life. She was a belle of the genteel sentimental style; laced tight, minced her words, drank vinegar to keep herself pale, wore her ugly drab hair in curls, held her head on one side, simpered like a fool when spoken to, and was altogether a superior young person, who married, in her two-and-thirtieth year, Mr King, a struggling grocer in Lancaster.

Mr King survived the unhappy event for five years, at the end of which time he died, leaving her a small business and four children. When or how Mr Aggland first became acquainted with the widow he never informed his neighbours. All any one could say for certain was, that he took her to wife, and that she brought him some money and the children aforesaid. So much the world knew; but Mr Aggland knew, besides, that he had made a bad bargain, an irreparable blunder, that life had been a harder struggle with him than ever during the six years which had elapsed since his second marriage.

There were already three young pledges of affection—two aged five years, and a burly child just able to run about alone—born to him of this ill-assorted union.

What the future held it might be difficult for him to say, but if it held many more children, Mr Aggland confessed to his own heart that the prospect was not inviting. Had it not been for Phemie, he scarcely knew how the house would have gone on at all; and Mrs Aggland hated Phemie for reasons which I am about to tell.

Mrs Aggland had been a beauty relatively, Phemie was a beauty positively. Mrs Aggland had taken pains to make and keep herself "genteel." Without any arts or devices Phemie looked a lady even in her aunt's cast-off finery.

Mrs Aggland had been given to melody in her younger days. Her rendering of pathetic songs, such as "Oh! no, we never mention her," "The Soldier's Tear," "The Banks of Allan Water," and others of the same stamp, had won for her immense

applause from her numerous admirers. The high note in the "Banks of Allan Water," and the *rallentando* passage in the "Soldier's Tear," when very softly and with the help of quavers and semi-quavers the tear is wiped away, used always to produce a sensation, and it was therefore no wonder that Mrs Aggland resented Phemie's voice as a personal injury, and detested her for possessing it.

Even the children liked best to hear their cousin sing. They would leave the "Lass of Gowrie" for "Love's Ritornella," and "Young Lochinvar" for "Allan-a-dale." It is not given to every *prima donna* to make way for a younger comer gracefully, and Mrs Aggland was only human; for which reason, it may be, she would not have repined against the decrees of Providence if Phemie had caught bronchitis and lost her voice.

Further, though Mrs Aggland had brought her husband some small dowry, she had brought him encumbrances likewise; and this girl—this Hagar in the household—this Mordecai at the gate—possessed her trifling portion too, a hundred pounds, the principal and interest and compound interest of which were to be hers on coming of age, or on marriage.

Mr Aggland could have used the money had he liked—taken it in payment for her board and lodging; but he had settled that not even in their blackest distress was the girl's "tocher" to be touched, and the money was kept intact accordingly.

Heaven help us! perhaps the man had more than hoped she and Duncan would spend it together, and try and stock a small homestead for themselves, where he could visit them, and smoke and quote and sing in peace.

Had he any other dream? Did he think that Duncan, with his turn for mechanics, with that passion for making a pump and a steam-engine which seems to be the besetting sin of English lads—the snare and the delusion that Satan in these latter days has devised for the disappointment and confusion of parents—with his dogged perseverance, and his intensely Scotch hard-headedness, might rise to eminence in the future? Perhaps that was the reason why he kept the boy at school long after the age when

most farmers' sons had completed their education and relapsed into boorishness for ever.

Mr Aggland was so fond of talking about Watt, Arkwright, Strutt, Foley, Petty, and a number of other self-made men, as to suggest the idea that far away down in his heart he was nourishing ambitious hopes concerning his eldest son's worldly advancement. One thing, however, was certain. He wanted Phemie and Duncan to grow up into lovers and to marry in due time, for which reason he encouraged the visits of none of the young men who would perhaps have thought themselves good enough to aspire to the hand of Miss Keller; and consequently Miss Keller had heard as few compliments and blushed as little at pretty rustic speeches as the strictest matron could have desired.

Nevertheless Phemie knew she was pretty, and so did Mrs Aggland, which mutual knowledge by no means conduced to the maintenance of peace and quietness between the pair.

Moreover, Phemie was far more clever than Mrs Aggland; more clever and quick not merely at catching up book learning, but at needlework, at household duties, and in all other practical affairs. Given opportunity, there could be no doubt but that the girl would have been as accomplished and well-informed as she was pretty. Even as matters stood, she had got a curious smattering of knowledge into her head. She had read and re-read all the books in her uncle's singularly miscellaneous library. He had taught her what he knew of French; she had learned to play the guitar almost without his help; and Mrs Aggland, looking askance, prophesied that such "goings on," "such ways," "such notions," would bring Phemie to ruin; while there were not a few in the neighbourhood—Mr Conbyr himself, worthy man, amongst the number—who sympathized with Mrs Aggland, and thought Phemie was being fairly spoiled by her eccentric and imprudent uncle.

"Even to the making of the tea," muttered Mrs Aggland, as she went on with her knitting, and with one light-coloured eye watched Phemie pouring out the fresh infusion, "I might as well be nobody. He had better never have married at all."

Which was undeniably true ; at any rate, he had better never have married at all than married her, and he was perhaps thinking something of the kind even while he went on talking to Captain Stondon about indifferent subjects.

All at once Mrs Aggland broke into the conversation. She did not like being left on one side so completely. Even the pleasure of indulging her bad temper, and seeing other people uncomfortable, was dearly purchased at the price of such neglect ; therefore, when Captain Stondon was making some remarks about the loneliness and desolation of Strammer Tarn, she laid down her knitting, a sure sign of truce, and observed that she had not seen Strammer Tarn. "I have never been to Grassenfel since I came home to this house," she said ; "except to church once in a way, and to a chance prayer-meeting at a neighbour's, I never set foot across the threshold."

"You find so many home occupations, doubtless," suggested Captain Stondon.

"Yes, and it is the children," she replied. "Where there is so much work to be done, and so few to do it, where there are so many mouths to fill, and so much planning needed to fill them, it stands to sense I can't be running over the hills like a girl. I can't leave things to go to wrack and ruin by themselves."

"I am certain," said Captain Stondon, gallantly, "that nothing can go to ruin in the same house with you."

"I am sure it is very good of you to think so. It is not every one that would say as much, though I do work early and late, though I can say with a safe conscience I never eat the bread of idleness," remarked Mrs Aggland, darting a look towards her husband, who coolly said :—

"If you mean me, Prissy, my dear, you are quite mistaken. I am willing to say all Captain Stondon said, and more ; I am willing to say all you said, and more. You rise early, you take your rest late, you do not eat the bread of idleness, you eat that of carefulness—what more ? 'The man in the world who shall report he has a better wife, let him in nought be trusted.'"

"Capital, Mr Aggland ! a most happy quotation," remarked

Captain Stondon. For Phemie's sake ; for Phemie, who was now out of the room putting the younger children to bed, he wanted to throw oil on the waters, to calm the tempest that had literally arisen in a teapot.

"Many a one wondered," went on Mrs Aggland, "how I ever could think of marrying again after losing the kind, good, blessed husband, for which I were a-wearing weeds when I met with Mr A. And, most of all, how I ever came to marry a man with children. I had made up my mind never to leave off widow's caps no more. I had set down my foot against matrimony and every folly of the sort, when Mr Aggland came and persuaded me to change my mind. To hear him talk now sometimes, nobody would think he had tried so hard to get me, for I had a'most sworn never to put a step-father over my boys ; but you see, sir, what it is to be tempted," and Mrs Aggland executed an idiotic giggle, while Captain Stondon answered :—

"See, rather, madam, what it is to be tempting." Which speech put the *ci-devant* beauty into a seventh heaven of good temper, and straightway the pair began a little skirmish of assertion and retort.

"He, the captain, was only making fun of an old woman like herself."

"No, upon his honour, he had merely stated a self-evident fact."

"Ten years before she might have been, at least some folks had said so ; but now, with a growing-up family about her—"

"She failed to rate herself as highly as her friends did," put in Captain Stondon.

"The care of children soon put all those kind of foolish notions out of a woman's head ; not that even in her youngest days she had been given to vanities, and now she was a mother—"

"Ah, Captain Stondon," she finished pathetically, "*you* don't know what it is to be a mother—"

"And he doesn't want to know, I am sure," interrupted Mr Aggland ; which statement was so incontrovertibly true, that the officer could not for the life of him help laughing at his host's way of putting things.

Just then Phemie re-entered the room, carrying a bonnet in one hand and her workbox in the other. Having her little vanities too, she had asked a neighbour to bring her some ribbon from Grassenfel, and her heart was set on trimming her bonnet that very Saturday night with the laudable view of wearing it the next morning in church.

There was no absolute sinfulness, we will conclude, in this desire; but Mrs Aggland fired up on the spot to denounce such wickedness.

“Was it not enough that she had wasted her whole afternoon? was she going to waste the evening as well? With a hole in Duncan’s jacket; with the pockets in her uncle’s coat like sieves; with Helen’s plaid dress wanting lining; with all the children needing stockings mended for the morrow, was she going to sit down and make up finery for herself? She, Mrs Aggland, wondered how Phemie could have the face to go to church after such selfishness. She wanted to know what her Maker would think of her when He saw her sitting there with new trimmings on her bonnet, and the children’s toes, poor dears, coming through their socks.”

“Phemie mended twenty pairs this morning,” said Duncan, who had followed his cousin into the room; “I counted them.”

“Then she can get to Helen’s frock,” answered Mrs Aggland.

“Now let’s have an end of this,” broke in Mr Aggland angrily. “I won’t have the girl made a slave of by anybody. Go on with your bonnet, Phemie.”

But the beauty had been taken off the ribbons for the girl. She could not see them for tears; and so, putting all her little finery aside, she assured her uncle that she did not care, that her work could wait, that she had forgotten Helen’s frock, and would rather do it.

As she spoke, with the tears just trembling in her voice, with her pretty hands putting the lace, and ribbons, and net hurriedly on one side, with her head bent down so that no one might see she was crying, Mr Aggland suddenly caught Captain Stondon

looking earnestly at her with an expression in his face which made the farmer's heart stand still.

The man loved her! and if winter's snows had covered the green wheat in May, Mr Aggland could not have been more shocked or more surprised.

For this he was staying among the hills—for this he was putting up with such poor accommodation as the farm afforded—for this he was complimentary to Mrs Aggland—for this he had a pleasant word for every man, woman, and child about the place.

For this—How could he have been so blind? how could he have been such a fool? What was Mrs Aggland's scolding in comparison to such a discovery? As to sit and talk without making a fool of himself till he had leisure to think over the matter, it was not to be attempted.

“Perhaps your aunt will give you a holiday to-night, Phemie?” he said; “and let us have some music.”

It was Mr Aggland who spoke; but his voice sounded so strange and altered, that every one in the room turned and looked at him with involuntary surprise. Even his wife was astonished into saying that if Phemie had done the socks, the other things could “let be;” while Captain Stondon, reading in his host's face something of what was passing within, woke at the same moment to a vague kind of comprehension that he had dug up his heart from the dead woman's grave, that he had swerved from the old allegiance at last, and that he was as hopelessly in love with a pair of bright eyes, with a glory of auburn hair, with a young, young girl, as the most foolish lad of nineteen.

Well! well! a man may catch a fever at any age. There is no law in the Statute Book, as far as I am aware, which forbids or prevents his doing so.

Meantime Duncan fetched in his father's violin, and Duncan's brother, Donald, together with Helen Aggland and John and Prissy King, came trooping into the room laden with music-books. By degrees a younger Aggland and two more Kings straggled out of the kitchen into the parlour, and if the other

children had not been satisfactorily tucked up in bed, they would have toddled down-stairs also to hear "the singing."

When a man's natural language chances to be music, like Mr Aggland's, the household generally is apt to hear a little more melody than proves agreeable. At the Hill Farm, however, everybody's language seemed to be music. Peggy crooned Scotch ballads all day long in the kitchen; Mrs Aggland's shrill treble was to be heard uplifted in "The Maid of Llangollen," "He was a Knight of low degree," and other songs of the same style and period. Duncan for everlasting was shouting out, "Sing, sing, sing—who sings?" which performance he occasionally varied with "The Pilgrim Fathers," while the lesser fry chirped out snatches of old airs, mixing up hymns and Jacobite tunes in the strangest way imaginable. Mr Aggland himself generally went through his daily duties to the tune of "The Hundredth Psalm," and swore at his refractory labourers between the bars.

"All people that on earth" was, accordingly, what he selected to lead off with when he had screwed up his violin, and his wife kindly took the treble, which would perhaps have sounded all the better had she not occasionally interrupted her performance to box some of the children's ears, to "drat their noise," and to wonder if any woman ever was so plagued as she. With the tears wiped off her cheeks, with her lovely eyes bright as ever, Phemie, stitching away at Helen's frock, sometimes interposed a sweet second, sometimes, when her sense of the ludicrous was touched, looked mischievously across at Captain Stondon, and made him smile and turn away his head in spite of himself.

"What the devil are you about, Prissy!" was one of Mr Aggland's most usual sentences in the middle of a hymn; and when every now and then he hit Duncan a rap over the head for singing a false note, the punishment tested the officer's gravity severely.

It would have been a curious scene that for any stranger to look in on. By the fire sat Mrs Aggland, with her cap a little awry, with the corners of her eyes drawn down, with her mouth wide open, with her head on one side. Excepting Mr Aggland,

no one, I think, ever pulled such absurdly ugly faces while singing as the mistress of the Hill Farm; but the master eclipsed her; every hair on his head quivered as he sang; not a muscle remained still as he shook, and quavered, and indulged in extempore roulades. The way he swung himself about, the manner in which he swayed from side to side, the perfect desperation with which he sang, the earnestness with which he cursed,—these things all tended to make Phemie misbehave herself, all conduced to fits of coughing and to suspicious attention to Helen's frock.

"Eeh, Lord save us!" Peggy was ejaculating in the kitchen; "Maister 'ull burst his pipes, surely. He ought to bring roun' the forty-foot ladder if he wants to get up to that. My certy, he is at it again!" And Peggy absolutely paused in her work to listen.

A little back from the fire sat Captain Stondon, with a batch of the children round him, thinking of the long ago past, of the pleasant, yet fleeting, present. For his years he was a young-looking man; he carried his fifty-five summers slightly, and stooped no more under them than if fifteen had been subtracted from their number. India had not aged him. There was still about him something of the same dash and *bonhomme* which had won friends and gained love for the young lieutenant of, say, thirty years before. His brown hair was as yet unmixed with grey, his light-blue eyes had not lost their keenness of vision, their honesty of expression. If there was nothing romantic about his appearance, there was something which yet made any one with whom he came in contact feel instinctively that he was true; if he was not handsome, he was not plain. He looked like what he was, an English squire, of good birth, in easy circumstances, strong, hearty, middle-aged. He had grown younger since he came to the Hill Farm. Perhaps the children climbing up his knees, perhaps the total rest, perhaps the long idle days spent in watching Davy stand on his hind legs smoking; in seeing Duncan getting bare-back on unbroken colts, and gallop them round the fields; in laughing at the tosses the younger fry got while riding a favourite ram and an ill-conditioned calf up and down the paddock;

and in wandering over the hills to Strammer Tarn, had contributed to this result: but in any case the fact was undeniable, Captain Stondon had retrograded in years; and if all went on well, he bade fair to retrograde a few more. He would have liked the singing to continue for ever, so that he might look at Phemie's white hands, and snowy neck, and pretty face, without let or hindrance. But all earthly things must come to an end; and after Mr Aggland had indulged the company with the serenade from "Don Pasquale" solo, and the assembled congregation had sung the "Evening Hymn," in no one line of which Phemie could join, for fear of laughing out aloud at her uncle, the concert would have concluded, but for this.

"Johnny," whispered Captain Stondon to one of the young Kings while the "Evening Hymn" was still in progress, "get your cousin to sing something alone to the guitar, and I will send you down the strongest knife I can find in London—one with four blades. Ask her yourself, you know."

Whereupon the young imp struck his closed mouth with his hand, and the moment Mr Aggland put aside the violin began tormenting Phemie for one song—only one—only—only—only—

Which request Captain Stondon seconded of course, and Duncan then joined in, telling their guest he should hear Phemie singing "Alice Gray."

"You just ought," he added, a sentence that of course raised the officer's curiosity to fever pitch.

"I may never hear it," he pleaded, "if you do not sing it to-night, for I shall probably have to leave early in the week;" and thus urged, Phemie, blushing a good deal, took the guitar, and after tuning it began—

"She's all my fancy painted her,
She's lovely, she's divine;
But her heart it is another's,
And it never can be mine.
Yet loved I as man never loved,
A love without decay—
Oh! my heart, my heart is breaking
For the love of Alice Gray."

I dare say there are few who read these pages that know anything of the old ballads which were sung by the grandmothers of the present generation. New words and new music have succeeded to the simple airs and the homely verses that yet had strength enough in them to make many a man's heart throb faster as he heard; and it is very rarely—once in a dozen years or so—that any one strikes the well-remembered chords and wakes the old harmony once more. Half a lifetime had gone over Captain Stondon's head since the ballad Phemie Keller sung had sounded in his ears before; but the years seemed to fade away from his memory as he listened, and he was young again, sitting back in a crowded drawing-room, that he might hide the tears he could not help shedding. Ah me! ah me! that men's hearts should keep so young, whilst their bodies grow so old—that the pains of youth should stay with us when the hopeful buoyancy of youth is gone—that a touch should make the blood flow out fast as ever, when there is no sap left behind to enable the bare tree to put forth green leaves and bright buds of promise—that tears should well up into the eyes when the capacity for smiling has left the lips—that we should live through all the fever and trouble, and fret and worry, we thought left so far behind, at the tone of a voice, at the sound of an air.

The man's heart had not broken then; was it to be broken now?

Had he kept the toy, defaced and battered though it might be, all these years, to the end that a girl should destroy it at last? Was it only the olden memories that made him pause for a moment ere he thanked Phemie for her song? Was it not rather that a new Alice Gray had crossed his path, more fair, more divine, than the Alice Gray of old? A young, fresh, ingenuous Alice, with the truest eyes, the most exquisite hair, the most heavenly voice, man had ever conceived of? If he should love this Alice, would his heart not break? With nothing before, with everything behind him, what would the hereafter of his life prove, if he had to leave that sweet face amid the Cumberland hills while he went back again into the dreary, lonely world

solitary and objectless. He would win her love, he would make her love him. Surely his position, his wealth, his personal appearance, his manners, were far above anything Miss Keller was likely to meet with at the Hill Farm. He would be so good to her and hers; he would be so tender with her, so thoughtful, that for very gratitude she must learn to love him. He would take her away, he would show her foreign countries, he would surround her with every luxury. She should walk "in silk attire." Rich and rare should be the gems wherewith he would deck her; life to her should be as a fairy tale; money and lands would be of value to him at last; everything he possessed—name, station, wealth—should be put to a use for her—for this Cinderella, whom he meant to convert into a princess, if it pleased her to let him do so. All the old tales, all the old ballads, came into his head the wrong way at the same moment, for alas! *he* was the rich suitor, and not the young penniless wooer; it was *he* who was thinking of offering the "rigs of land, the sheep and the kye, the gowd and the siller," which never ought to be owned by fortunate lovers. He was reading the poems of all times with an inverted meaning, and he might have gone to bed that night happy, and dreamed the sweet dreams of the long and long ago, but for Mr Aggland.

"Phemie," said that gentleman, with a certain viciousness of manner, "since you have sung about one of the Grays for Duncan, will you sing about another for me? 'Auld Robin,' my dear."

What were the officer's thoughts after that, as he lay awake counting the weary hours that seemed to him walking slowly and lingeringly, like living things, backwards and forwards, over the eternal hills?

My reader, I scarcely know; but one thing is certain, that they were only a degree more bitter than those indulged in by Phemie's uncle, who, with eyes wide open, watched through the darkness his air-castle vanishing away.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL THE DIFFERENCE.

“You are right,” said Mr Aggland. “Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits ;” but the sentence did not flow glibly off his tongue, and the farmer stood for a moment after he had answered Captain Stondon, looking with his outward eyes it is true down the fair valley of Tordale, but trying with his mental vision to penetrate into the future which had suddenly become so misty and uncertain.

It was early in the week following that Saturday night when knowledge had come to two at least of the party at the Hill Farm. Captain Stondon was going to spend a few days at the Rectory before turning his back on Cumberland, and ere leaving the man who had been his friend in such sore need, he was trying to show his gratitude for the past, and to secure Mr Aggland’s services in the future—a double purpose which fettered his speech a little, and placed at once a certain embarrassment between himself and his host.

He was pleading to be allowed to do something for Duncan ; to be permitted to hold out a helping hand at this the turning point of his whole life.

“He has abilities,” remarked Captain Stondon. “Why should he not have an opportunity of turning them to account ? He has brains ; why keep him here, where he will never have a chance of making a fortune out of them ? Let the boy go away and see the world. He will learn more in six months outside these mount-

ains than he could learn in as many years under their shadow."

And in reply Mr Aggland remarked, as already stated: "You are right. Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits. And yet—" he proceeded after a moment's pause, "judging from my own experience, I think it better for people who must content themselves with an humble sphere never to be lifted above it. It is happier to be independent than rich; it is a fine thing to rise in the world, but it is a cursed thing to be patronized. My opinion is, that a man worth calling a man ought to be able to say he owes all he owns, all he has enjoyed, to no other man living,—only to God and himself."

"But God makes men his instruments," suggested Captain Stondon.

"He may; but I doubt it," replied Mr Aggland; "at least, I think we have no right to say the instruments we deliberately choose for ourselves were put in our way by the Almighty. Look at me. Should not I have been a happier man had no one ever said to me, 'Come out of your station, and be a gentleman, Aggland?' A gentleman, 'good lack, a gentleman?' and the farmer drew his hand up and down the sleeve of his threadbare coat, and looked at his patched shoes, at his coarse grey stockings, at his well-worn trousers, contemptuously as he spoke.

"Should you dislike telling me your story?" asked Captain Stondon, after a moment's hesitation. "Pardon me if I seem impertinent; but your boy's case might be anything rather than analogous to your own."

"You are right again," was the reply, "since no two lives are ever precisely analogous, and yet each man who precedes us leaves his warning signal behind, showing where possible danger is lurking. Now, my life was cursed by patronage; and you offer patronage to my lad. You see my argument? My story, certainly. I will tell thee tales—

"Of woful ages long ago betid:"

I will tell you the 'lamentable fall of me,' albeit it may be—

"A tale told by an idiot,
Signifying nothing."

“Let me be the judge of that,” answered Captain Stondon, smiling in spite of himself; “let me hear your experience first, and then we can talk of Duncan’s future afterwards.”

“I must begin at the beginning, I suppose,” said Mr Aggland. “If you are not weary, shall we walk along the hill path while we talk? Where was I? oh, at my own birth, which happened on the sixth of April, eighteen hundred and one; you can reckon that up, sir, hereafter, and find how old a man I am.”

The blow was not intended, but Captain Stondon winced. He had made his *début* on this world’s stage on the fourteenth of June, seventeen hundred and ninety, and it did not take him long to calculate how much older than Mr Aggland that fact made him. Meantime the farmer proceeded:—

“I was not born of prosperous parents; I was, on the contrary, born in ‘poverty’s low barren vale,’ which is not nearly so desirable a vale to inhabit as poets usually imply. My father was a country schoolmaster, one who might have sat to Goldsmith for his picture. He loved children, he loved teaching, he loved learning; but neither teaching, learning, nor children brought him much money. I can see him now,” went on Mr Aggland; “see him sitting just where the sunbeams had cleared a space out for themselves in the middle of the dusty floor. The boys and girls are all quiet at their sums; he is holding a slate, and explaining the Rule of Three to a child who stands beside him. That child was myself. I never knew him to be other than patient and gentle with me, for I was the youngest of a large family, the Benjamin of his age to him.”

Mr Aggland paused. For a moment the Cumberland hills faded from his eyes, and the old home, left so long before, yet remembered so distinctly, arose out of the years, and stood by the roadside, with the elder-tree shading it, with the duck-pond in front of it, with the half-acre of garden all a-glow with flowers surrounding it. He could see the sycamore under which he had lain whilst conning his Virgil and labouring through Ovid; and then the whole vision passed away, and he was looking at the reality of his life on a fine October morning, with Skillansear and Hel-

beck towering to the sky, and the man whose life he had saved amongst those very rocks and crags walking beside him, waiting for him to proceed.

“He knew more than is usual with persons of his class,” went on Mr Aggland, “and he taught me to love learning as he did—to love it for its own sake, not for the sake of any money it might bring, of any advantage that might accrue from it. What he meant me to be, whether a schoolmaster, like himself, or a clerk, or a labourer, I do not know, for at sixteen I had the misfortune to meet with a rich gentleman who took an interest in me. It happened in this way. My father had a brother living in a little seaport in Wales. He was a tailor, and pretty well to do, and he used to make us welcome to spend a week with him every summer, as the holidays came round. It was the last day of our stay, and I was hanging about the shore loth to leave the sea, for I loved it, when all at once there was a cry and a shout, and I saw a boy who had been bathing washed away by a wave and disappear. I guessed in a minute how it was; the lad had gone out beyond his depth, and could not swim. There were places where the sea deepened suddenly, and he had dropped on one of them. I did not know who he was, and if I had it would have made no difference; one life is as valuable as another I think now, and I suppose I thought the same then, if I thought at all. One boy is as good as another, whether he be the son of a king or the son of a peasant. I did not know who he was, and God is witness that, not knowing, I risked my life to save him willingly.”

“And you did save him?” asked Captain Stondon.

“I ran a race with the sea for him,” answered Mr Aggland, a flush overspreading his hollow cheeks; “I fought for him, I got mad with the waves for trying to beat me out. Though it is thirty years since—thirty years within a trifle—I can remember, as if it was but yesterday, looking out over the waves seaward, and thinking I could follow him to Ireland, if need were, sooner than the waters should beat me. He went down twice. As he rose the third time I had him. I stretched my arm out over a

wave and caught him. I could not have brought him back to land ; but looking over the water, *not* towards Ireland this time, I saw help coming ; and I kept him up till we were both pulled into the boat that had pushed off after me. I liked the sea up to that minute, sir ; I have hated it ever since. I could not put into words what I thought about it as I struggled to keep him and myself afloat till the boat came. I have never had a bad illness since, when that minute has not been reproduced for my benefit. I suppose it was fear came over me ; but I seemed to be in the power of some cruel enemy, with whom I could not reason, against whom I could not struggle ; I felt as if I was alone in the world out there—alone with the waters round and about me. I remember trying to hold on by the waves, and then after that there was a blank.”

“Did they recover both of you?” asked Captain Stondon.

“Yes—but they had hard work bringing the boy to life again. He was a small delicate lad, though two years older than myself ; a motherless lad, an only son—the heir to a great property. His name was Worton ; and from the time he opened his eyes that day when I fought for him with the sea, till the hour when I closed the lids over them in Ischia, he never could bear me to leave him. And I never did leave him.

“Mr Worton, who had seen the whole of the accident, was grateful, more grateful than there was any necessity for, and he offered to take me and bring me up with his own boy and provide for me, and allow my father a small annuity.

“If we had asked half his fortune, I think he would have given it to us, when he heard his son speak again. He need not have been so liberal as he was, and I have often wished since he had let us alone ; but it seemed a fine thing to us then, and I went back with them to Worton Court as Master Reginald’s friend—companion—what you will.

“We led an awfully idle life. All Mr Worton’s time was devoted to thinking what would best please his son ; all Master Reginald’s time was taken up trying to keep himself out of the grave. As Burns says, ‘he met every face with a greeting like

that of Balak to Balaam : "Come, curse me that East wind, and come, defy me the North." It was such a labour to him to live, that I have often wondered since he did not wish to

"Set up his everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From his world-wearied flesh.'

But he desired nothing of the kind. He enjoyed existence as much as I have ever known any one. He used to like lying on the sofa in the winter time ; lying on the grass in the summer. He liked being read to, he liked to hear music ; he was fond of travelling by very slow stages, in a very easy carriage ; he enjoyed society, and he loved me.

"We loved one another," went on Mr Aggland, after a pause. "We were so mixed as meeting streams, for he was I, I he.' The day came when they tried to separate us, tried to make me believe he would be better without me—tried to make him believe I was no fit companion for him ; but we could not part till death took him, and then I stood in the world alone. They had made me what I was. Reginald had a tutor, but we never learnt any thing—never were expected to learn. All my life had been for eight years spent in keeping him alive ; for eight years I did nothing but that ; for eight years I read, but never studied. I amused him, but never worked myself. I stood between him and a woman who wanted to become his stepmother ; and at the end of that time, at twenty-four years of age, I was cast adrift, with a fair library of books, and fifty pounds in my pocket. The poor fellow had left me all his mother's small property, four thousand pounds ; but there were such things said of me by that cruel woman, and Reginald's deluded father, that I flung the legacy to them, and, shaking the dust from my feet, left the house for ever. Mr Worton would have had me back. He offered me money, he offered me any apology I chose to ask. He offered to 'advance my views ;' but I cursed him and his patronage too, cursed the day he took me from my own station, and gave me a taste for luxuries I could never command.

"You have had the best years of my life,' I finished ; 'you

have unfitted me for work ; you have made me as useless as if I had been born a gentleman. You let them try to turn your son's heart against me ; and when they failed in that, you allow them to saddle his legacy with such slanders as force me, for my own credit's sake, to go out into the world a beggar, rather than be beholden to the bounty of my dead friend. And all for what ? All because a woman wants to marry you ; all because you want an heir to Worton Court—an heir that I hope, and pray, and believe will never be born to you. For God is just, and He will not forget Reginald, and He will not forget me."

"Hard words," said his auditor.

"They were too hard," answered Mr Aggland,—“too hard to speak to a misguided, childish old man. I thought about them afterwards, till I could bear the recollection no longer, and wrote to apologize, to retract. Madam returned the letter, with a note, stating that ‘Mr Worton appreciated my present regret as highly as my former services ; and concluding want of money had procured him the honour of my communication, inclosed me a cheque for a hundred pounds, the acknowledgment of which she begged might end the correspondence.’ I sent back the cheque, and have since fought out my fight alone. What I have done during the years which have come and gone between this time and that could scarcely interest you. There are few things I have not tried my hand at ; I have prospered in life, and was able moreover to keep my father without letting him take another sixpence from Mr Worton ; but it was hard work beginning existence, as one may say, with soft hands—no profession, no useful learning—at four-and-twenty. Now, sir, you know why I do not desire patronage for my son—why I had rather see him earning his bread by the sweat of his brow than eating it, as I did, at a rich man's table. Going over my own story has made me see clearly that which is best for him ; and I decline your offer, sir, though I thank you most heartily for it.”

There was an awkward silence after this. Captain Stondon looked across at Skillanscar, and along the defile to the Broken Stone bridge, ere he began to say, in a voice so low that it almost

seemed as though he were telling some secret which he feared being overheard—

“I have not been quite frank with you, Mr Aggland. I wish to do something for Duncan, but I want much more earnestly to do something for myself. Will you aid me in the matter? May I count on your help?”

“What is it? What help do you need?” And the two men stopped and faced each other, seeing nothing for the moment but the shadowy future, which was coming towards them both as a reality and a substance, with giant strides across the hills.

“Can you not guess?” asked Captain Stondon.

“I would rather be certain,” answered Mr Aggland, drily.

“Well, then, it is this,” said Captain Stondon, plunging desperately into his confession. “I want to marry your niece. I love her. I will try to make her happy; I will—”

“Stop a moment,” interrupted Mr Aggland, and he sat him down on a stone by the side of the path, and turned his face away from his companion, while he watched the hopes and the plans of his later life frustrated, the last fragment of his fancy castle levelled with the ground. If Phemie married this man she was lost to him and his. No matter how well Duncan got on in the years to come, Phemie might never be wife to him; there would be no cozy farm-house among the hills, to which he could wend his steps when the summer glory was lying on tree and grass and heather; there would be no ingle nook in the dark winter days to come, where he might be always sure of being greeted with looks of love and words of welcome. The doors of the modest house he had imagined for the pair were shut violently in his face. But for Phemie! while he stood without in the cold there were other doors opened for her to pass through: she might be rich, she might become a great lady. Had he any right to stand between her and such a future? Dare he condemn her to seclusion certainly, to poverty possibly? Could he tell her to go afoot through life, whilst there was a carriage waiting to take her easily and pleasantly along the highways of a world, where struggles for daily bread and anxieties for the morrow were unknown?

Should he, for any selfish feeling—for any dread of losing her—for any personal consideration—stand between her and the prospect her beauty had opened out for her? Mr Aggland thought he would try to be disinterested both ways: he thought he would try to forget, on the one hand, that if Captain Stondon married Phemie he should lose her, and he determined, on the other, that he would not sell the girl for any benefit likely to accrue to him or his from her change of position. He would think of Phemie, and Phemie alone. He would try to do his duty by her, and listen to all Captain Stondon had to say, quietly and dispassionately. Having made up his mind to which prudent course, Mr Aggland turned to his companion, and said:—

“I was beginning to fear this; you perhaps think I ought to have seen it before, but I did not. Not even a suspicion crossed my mind until Saturday night, and I have been trying ever since to get rid of that suspicion. I mean nothing ungracious, sir; but I wish anybody else rather than myself had picked you up from there—” and Mr Aggland flung a stone down the path to the exact spot where Davy discovered the traveller; “and I wish it had pleased you to fall in love with any other girl in Cumberland sooner than with Phemie Keller.”

“You need not distress yourself about the matter,” answered the officer: “tell me to go, and I will go. Though it would have been better for me had you left me to die on the hill-side, still, tell me to give up all hopes of future happiness, all chance of domestic contentment, and I will do it. I will pay you for my life with my happiness, and though the bargain be a hard one, hold to it honestly.”

“I believe you would,” said Mr Aggland, looking with a certain admiration at the man who made this offer. “I believe you would. I believe you to be honest and honourable, generous and true, and that makes it all the harder for me to say what I want to say. I am between two stools—I am on the horns of a dilemma—

‘I am a heavy stone
Roll’d up a hill by a weak child: I move
A little up, and tumble back again.’”

“Let me speak first, then,” suggested Captain Stondon, seating himself as he spoke on a piece of rock close by Mr Aggland. “Let me tell you I have not run into temptation wittingly—that I have not remained in your house, eaten your bread, partaken of your hospitality, with any deliberate intention of frustrating your wishes, and taking your niece from you. Knowledge has come upon me as it has come upon you, suddenly; all I ask is for you to consider my proposal well before you give me any answer. I know what you have desired; I know you want Miss Keller to become your son’s wife. I see you have set your heart on this match; but I entreat you not to prejudice her mind against me on this account. I implore you not to influence her against me because you wish her to marry him.”

Then Mr Aggland tossed back his hair,—his hair which was like the mane of a wild horse,—and said, “‘Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?’ Do you think I am ‘moulded of such coarse metal’ as all that comes to? Do you imagine I have no love for anything but myself—that, though I have reared her as my own child—though I do not deny that the idea of her leaving me, of her marrying you, is ‘like the tyrannous breathing of the north,’ which ‘shakes all our buds from growing,’—that I cannot still desire her happiness, and try for her sake—for the sake of the dead and gone—to see clearly? I see two things: I see you can give her wealth and position; but—”

“But what?” asked Captain Stondon, as the farmer paused.

“She is little more than a child,” said Mr Aggland, hesitatingly, “and you are middle-aged.”

“A man can love in middle age as well as in his earliest youth,” answered Captain Stondon.

“True; but can a girl love that man?” asked the other. “I could not think of any one of Phemie’s age except as a daughter, and I should say that you are as old as I am.”

“If he only knew,” thought Captain Stondon.

“It is too like May and December for my taste,” Mr Aggland went on, firmly. “She is in the very earliest springtime of life; she has got her April and May—her glorious summer-tide—all

before her ; and you, like myself, are travelling on towards the frosts and snows of winter. Is it a right thing, I ask you? I put it dispassionately—is it right?”

“Love takes no account of years,” replied the officer.

“On the one side. I am talking of the other side. Phemie is but little over sixteen, and you are, say five-and-forty. Look at that, sir; thirty years—half a life-time—between you. Only think of it—thirty years at the wrong end; bad enough between thirty and sixty, but downright madness between twenty and fifty. And she will not be even twenty for more than three years to come! She is too young, sir, far and away too young.”

“The difference is on the right side,” replied Captain Stondon. “Does not your favourite Shakespeare advise—

‘Let still the woman take
An elder than herself?’”

“Yes; but I am not aware that Shakespeare advises a woman in any case to marry her father,” retorted Mr Aggland.

“She is older than Duncan, and you would have had her marry him,” persisted Captain Stondon. “You would give her to him without a regret; you would shut her within the walls of this mountain prison for ever, and never sigh over such a waste of grace and beauty. You could see her working about her husband’s house—working like a servant—and never wish she had been born to a different lot.”

“You are wrong in some of your statements,” answered Mr Aggland; “yet she might be happy among these hills; and, if she were happy, I do not know that I ought to desire anything more for her. The Queen on her throne can be but that. If the peasant be happy, he is as prosperous a man as the peer; for happiness is the acme of earthly bliss. It is the *Bathmendi* of the Persian tale which we wander all over the world to find, while it lies awaiting us in some sequestered nook like *Tordale*.”

Leaning his elbow on his knees, supporting his chin on his hand, Mr Aggland looked thoughtfully and sorrowfully down the defile as he spoke.

All truth contains an echo of sadness ; and it is for this reason, I suppose, because it is sad as well as solemn, that a man never speaks it either to his own heart or to his fellow without feeling graver for the utterance.

Some thought of this kind passed through Captain Stondon's mind even while he answered—

“Your argument will bear turning. A peer may be as happy as a peasant ; the wife of a rich man as happy as the wife of a poor. If I have found my Bathmendi in Tordale, there is surely no reason why I should not carry it back with me to Marshlands. God knows I have waited long and travelled far. Do not send me out again into the world—desolate.”

And growing eloquent in the very extremity of his fear that he should be cast forth from this earthly heaven into which he had strayed all unwittingly, Captain Stondon told the story of his life—of his cold, cheerless, lonely life—to his attentive auditor. He told of the years he had lived unloved ; he spoke of the romantic affection of his boyhood—of the attachment he had cherished—of the end which had come to it, and to all the dreams of his youth. He told how he had never thought to love again—never thought to marry, or settle down, or hear the prattle of children, or look for an heir to all the broad acres of Marshlands. As a man he appealed to a man. There was nothing he said with which Mr Aggland could not sympathize ; and, as he proceeded, the farmer began to see more and more that the match would be a good one for Phemie ; that if she could but love him, she had every chance of happiness.

A just man and a true, a faithful man and a forbearing ; a man whose heart was as young as a boy's, who would be a husband, a lover, a friend, all in one ; who would feel for the girlish thing he was taking from among the mountains to the bustle and stir of the world ; who would take thought for her inexperience ; who would stand by her in trouble ; who would be staunch till death ; who did not consider love a light thing, or woman a toy, but who would take Phemie as a sacred trust, for the care of which he should have to answer before the throne of God.

And further—for it would be but half telling a story to keep back any of the truth—Mr Aggland could not be blind to the fact, that, in a worldly point of view, Captain Stondon was a most excellent *parti*. He had thought his guest well off, but he had never known *how* well off he was, till the officer spoke at length of his position, of the value of Marshlands, of the nature of the settlements he could make; of the extent of the property his son—if he had one—would inherit.

“I see,” he said, at last, “that, putting aside the one obstacle, it would be a wonderful match for Phemie to make. Though she is well born, she has no fortune, and a pretty face is a poor substitute for a dowry anywhere. I know she will never get such an offer again, and if you can win her, wear her. Take her from us, for you can do better for her, I fear, than we can. The children will break their hearts to be parted from her, but that cannot be helped.”

“Why should they be parted?” asked Captain Stondon.

“Because, though Phemie has walked with us long,” answered Mr Aggland, “we have come to the cross-roads now, and her way lies different from ours. That is, it will lie different if she elect to go with you.”

And, having uttered this sentence, which he spoke mournfully, the farmer rose to go back along the mountain path, cherishing no hope in his mind that Phemie would refuse her wealthy suitor, feeling a conviction that the girl would soon be leaving Tordale—leaving the old familiar scenes far behind her for ever.

But he did not interfere—he did not advise; there were plenty of people to tell her what a great match she might make, what a grand lady she might become, without his opening his lips on the subject. Gradually the neighbours began to talk. The young surgeon from Grassenfel twitted Phemie when he met her in the valley about having grown proud and distant. He supposed it was that fine gentleman lover of hers who had made her turn up her nose at humble suitors like himself. Then Mr Conbyr threw out some hints in a decorous, clerical kind of manner, which showed that he evidently thought Miss Keller an amazingly lucky

young person ; not long after that, Duncan grew sulky, and Mrs Aggland deferential ; and Peggy, ay, even Peggy McNab, began to sound Captain Stondon's praises in her darling's ears.

Phemie had her senses. Phemie could not be blind—she knew what was coming ; and when at last it did come, and she took counsel with her uncle, the pair cried in each other's arms, and then decided that Phemie should think the matter over, and give Captain Stondon an answer when she had thought it out quietly, and alone.

Sitting up in her little bed that night, with the ghostly white draperies looking still more white and ghostly in the moonlight, her head on Peggy's shoulder, her tears falling on Peggy's bosom, Phemie talked about Captain Stondon and his offer till she grew sick and weary. I think if Peggy had remained firm to the creed in which she was answerable for having brought her nurseling up, Phemie would scarcely have relinquished her dream husband without a greater struggle ; but, as it was, Peggy turned traitor, and, in the face of reality, scouted the vision she had so often conjured up.

"I dare say he is very good," finished Phemie, "and I do like him very well ; but he is not in the least like the lord you promised should come for me in a coach-and-four whenever I grew tall enough to be married."

"That was na' to be expectit," answered Peggy McNab, oracularly ; and who may say but that Peggy's observation was strictly true ? Perhaps its very truth made the remark all the more irritating to Phemie, who, laying her head on her pillow, cried herself to sleep, feeling that between the romance of her life and the reality there was indeed all the difference !

CHAPTER IX.

RETROSPECTIVE.

DURING the greater part of the next day Phemie mended stockings as if her life depended on the rapidity with which she worked. She would not eat—she would not talk—she would not play with the children—but she would stitch on hour after hour, never lifting her eyes except to look out at the rain, which was pelting down in torrents.

Every one in the house knew as a matter of course that Phemie was making her choice; even the youngest child contemplated her with a vague kind of wonder, dimly conscious that Phemie was thinking of something in which it could have no part or lot—something which separated her from the remainder of the household for the time being, which rendered it necessary for all conversation held in her presence to be unnatural and constrained, and which forced Daniel Aggland, junior—the baby above mentioned—to sit down on the carpet and stare at Phemie for a full half-hour without winking.

There it sat, holding its shoeless foot with its right hand, while sucking the thumb of its left—there it sat, the child looking at the girl to whom the woman's question, marriage, had come to be solved so soon, until, having exhausted its wonderment, it began to take offence at Phemie's unusual silence, and at last burst out into a paroxysm of indignant screams.

Then Phemie laid aside her work and comforted it. She had grown so accustomed to nursing that, young though she was, she

could hush and quiet a child's distress as cleverly as any matron in the county. She had such a sweet voice, that instinctively the baby ceased crying to listen to its tones. She had such a beautiful face, that the little hands unclenched naturally in order to stroke it. She had such divine hair, that infant eyes instinctively opened wide to watch the light flickering and rippling over the braids.

She had such a way of gathering a child to her, that the tiny creature could not choose but lie still, nestling close to her heart. Dear Phemie Keller! pretty, vain, gay, fanciful, dreamy Phemie—thinking of you as you walked up and down that little sitting-room, hushing the child into quietness, it seems to me that Captain Stondon might well be excused for forgetting his own age and your youth, and remembering only the beauty which he saw, and the true, faithful nature that he had penetration enough to know you possessed.

“Poor baby Danny,” muttered Mrs Aggland *sotto voce*, as she watched the girl soothing the child's distress; “you won't have her long to soo over you and humour you at every turn; you'll be a poor forsaken baby soon, for mother won't have time to be waiting upon you as Phemie has done.”

All of which Phemie heard, as Mrs Aggland intended she should; truth being that Mrs Aggland had a burning desire to know for certain what she was thinking about.

“It is the most unnatural thing I ever heard of,” said the mistress of the Hill Farm to Peggy M'Nab. “Instead of taking counsel with one and another, and being uplifted at the notion of being made a grand lady of for life, she sits like a statue mending them old stockings, not opening her lips to a soul, not even talking about her wedding clothes. Anybody might think it was sentence of death that had come instead of an offer of marriage.”

“Marriage is an unco' serious thing,” answered Peggy M'Nab.

“You may say that, Peggy,” replied Mrs Aggland; “not that you can know much about the matter from your own experience; but still it is not so serious a thing as a funeral; and Phemie sits

there with as solemn a face as if she was at a burying, sighing every now and then as though her heart was like to burst."

"Maybe she's no on for taking him," suggested Peggy; "though he's weel enough, weel favoured and kindly spoken, he's no young, mistress. He's nearer a match for you or me, nor for such a bairn as Phemie."

"As for that, Peggy M'Nab," said Mrs Aggland, "I will thank you to keep your distance, and not talk of your age and mine in the same sentence, when anybody with half an eye can see you might be my mother twice over."

"I would have had to begin young, then," remarked Peggy, parenthetically.

"And with regard to Captain Stondon," went on Mrs Aggland, unheeding the interruption, "what does the few years' difference between him and Phemie signify? Won't she have everything she wants? Won't she have money, and leisure, and dress, and servants, and carriages and horses, and goodness only can tell what besides? And don't you know those are just the things Phemie has been hankering after all her life?" Is she not the making of a fine lady?"

"She is bonny enough for one at any rate," put in Peggy.

"Some may think her so. I know I think her conceity enough for anything; and if she wants all this—if she wishes to be made a princess just at once, why need she look so miserable now it is all put in her way—by the act of Providence, as one may say? Does she think she will ever get such a chance again? Does she think it snows, and hails, and rains husbands on the hills? Does she think a poor country girl can pick and choose like some great heiress? Does she imagine all the lords and dukes in the country are coming down to Cumberland to make her a peeress out of hand? If she thinks that, Peggy M'Nab, she is mistaken, and so I tell you."

Nobody knew better than Peggy that Phemie was mistaken. Nobody knew better than the old Scotch woman that there is deal of difference between a fairy tale and everyday life; between the lover of a winter evening's story and the suitor who, in the broad

daylight, comes in his proper flesh and blood to ask for the fair maiden's hand. Since the suitor had come across the hills—since such astonishing good fortune had fallen to Phemie's lot as to secure a real live gentleman for her lover—Peggy M'Nab had seen light. It was very well to keep back the farmers' sons, and the young tradesmen who sometimes came from the neighbouring towns to see their parents at Tordale; but to reject Captain Stondon—to repulse this middle-aged Robin Gray, when there was not a Jamie at all in the question, Peggy saw would be midsummer madness. Was not he, as she often said, a "braw man," tall and erect, and gentleman-looking, and of gentle bluid into the bargain? Had not he given her, Peggy, as much money in one handful as she earned for wages in the course of a year? Was not he quiet spoken? not a ranting, shouting devil like the young surgeon from Grassenfel, who alternately cursed Peggy for a fool, and slapped her on the back, saying she was a great old girl for all that. He did not drink spirits raw, like Mr Fagg. He did not come into the house like a company of dragoons. You never heard him say a wry word about his food; whatever was set before him he eat, let it be loaf-bread or oatmeal, haggis or a joint. Was it not better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave? Spite of the fairy tales, and the lord's son, and the carriage and four, was not Captain Stondon's offer better than any reality Peggy had ever thought likely to come in her nurseling's way? Vague visions are one thing—tangible success is another; and there is no use in denying that the tangible success which had come to Phemie Keller astonished every person who knew that young lady, except, indeed, the young lady herself, who, having pacified the child at last, laid it down in its mother's lap, and then gathering up her work, went off to her own room, where, having locked her door, she drew a chair up to the window, and sat down to look out upon the valley of Tordale, whilst she thought of her own present—of her own future.

She was but a young thing after all, dear reader, to be thinking about the whole of her life to come—but a young, ignorant girl, to be brought in a moment face to face with that which was to

determine the weal or the woe of every future hour ; and as she gazed down the valley her tears fell faster than the driving rain, and she leaned her head against the window-frame and cried as though her heart were breaking, at the choice she was called upon to make so suddenly.

It is not much to read about this man's mistake, about that woman's error ; the book is closed, the tale forgotten, and the reader goes on his own path contentedly. Even when soul talking to soul some one tells his neighbour where and how he lost himself—how he went wrong—where he dug deep graves—where he laid down his heart in the coffin beside some frail human body, the listener, sympathizing though he may be, is apt to overlook what loss all this wrong and suffering involved.

Do you know when he has finished what it all meant ? As he turns away, do you understand what he has been talking about ? It was his life, man ; and he had but one. But one, good God ! and that is what none of these happy, prosperous people can be made to comprehend. He has spoiled his horn ; he has not made his spoon. Other people have lives to live out and make the most of, but he has marred his : it may not signify much to you, my friend, but it signifies everything to him, because he cannot go back and begin *de novo* ; it has been all loss, and in this world there may never come a profit to compensate for that which he has left behind.

Some idea of this kind, very vague and very shadowy, passed through Phemie's mind as she sat at the window looking through blinding tears at the familiar landscape, at the mountains that had been her friends for years. It might not be very much she was considering ; but it was her all, nevertheless. Her little investment in the world's great lottery might be a mere bagatelle ; but it was the whole of her capital, notwithstanding.

It was her life ; it was what I have been trying to talk about ; it was everything she possessed of value on earth, that she sat thinking of as the evening darkness gathered down upon Tordale church, upon the wet graves where the dead, who had lived out their lives before she was born, were sleeping quietly ; upon

the waterfall ; upon the trees ; upon the distant valley ; upon the parsonage house, in the dining-room whereof Captain Stondon was standing at that very moment, thinking, in the flickering firelight, of her.

As the seed-time is to the harvest ; as the acorn is to the oak ; as the blossom is to the fruit ; so was this vague thought to Phemie Keller, in comparison to what the same thought grew to, clear and tangible, in the after years, which were then all before her. It was instinct ; it was an uncertain glimmering of an eternal truth. With the same shadowy indistinctness—with the same unreasoning terror as that of a child coming in contact for the first time with death—did Phemie Keller look out for the first time from her little bed-chamber on life.

Hitherto, though I have spoken of the promise of her beauty, I have said little of herself, and less of the kind of existence hers had been from childhood, until Captain Stondon met her in Tordale church. She is thinking of her past as she sits in the gathering darkness ; thinking as she leans her head against the window-frame, and listens to the wind howling among the mountains, and the rain beating over the beautiful valley below—at one and the same moment of when she will be a woman, and of when she was a child. She is wondering, if she leaves Tordale, with what eyes she will look upon it again ; what she will have to pass through, ere, in years to come, she returns to look upon it once more ; and as she wonders, her memory casts back to the days that are gone, and she is a child in the old manse by the sea-shore, listening to the roar of the ever-restless ocean, lying in her bed with the waves singing her lullaby, wandering on the beach and building up palaces on the sand—palaces ornamented with shells, and set out with sea-weed that the next flood-tide destroyed !

What more did she see ? what more did memory give back to her, as the waves cast up drift on the shore ? Out of the past there came again to her the self she had been, the child she could never be more.

A child with a clear white skin, through which the veins appeared blue and distinct—a delicate child with a faint colour in

her cheeks, with golden hair, who was mostly dressed in white, who had dainty muslin frocks, who had soft lace edging her short sleeves, who was her grandfather's pet, who was the life and soul of the manse ; with her old-fashioned talk ; with her loving, clinging, twining, cheery, tender ways. A child who, being always with grown-up people, learned to think long before her proper time—a child who had never lain to sleep when a storm was raging without praying God to bring those who were on sea safe to land—a young thing who had seen women wringing their hands and mourning for the dead—who, having lost both father and mother herself, could understand the meaning of the word orphan, and cry with the fatherless children as they talked about the parents who might never again come home.

Right and wrong ! She had learnt what both words signified in early days in that old manse by the sea-shore. From the time she could toddle, she had been wont to shake her head gravely at temptation, and to draw back her fingers from desired objects, lisping to herself, " Musn't ; grandpa's father in heaven wouldn't be pleased," and then she would mount on a chair, and sitting cross-legged upon it, argue out the rest of the question to her own satisfaction.

There never was a better child than Phemie ! Save for the way she cried when the wind was high and the sea rough ; save for the trick she had of stripping herself half naked in order to clothe any beggar brat who might happen to be complaining of the cold ; save for huffy fits she took when her grandfather was too busy to notice her ; save for the unaccountable and unanswerable questions she was in the habit of propounding suddenly—Phemie—little Phemie, I mean, had not a fault.

The most terrible battle she and the household at the manse ever fought was over the body of a dead kitten, which she kept from decent burial for a whole day, and which was at length taken from her arms only when she had cried herself to sleep over the loss of her pet. To grandfather and servants, to the fishermen and their wives, to the shepherds on the moors, to the children

by the roadside, Phemie Keller—little soft-hearted Phemie—was an object of the tenderest interest and affection.

The courtship of her father and mother was talked of by the side of many a winter fire. The young things—boy and girl—who had fallen in love at first sight, who had met secretly by the seashore, who had been seen by the shepherds walking hand in hand together among the heather, who had wanted the old minister to marry them, and who had bound themselves together as man and wife before a couple of witnesses when he refused to let them wed unless the consent of the lover's family were first obtained, who had gone away out into the world together—all the story was repeated over and over whenever Phemie's name was mentioned in the lonely cottages scattered here and there through the thinly-peopled district.

The love-story with its sorrowful end; the love-story, finis to which was written on a moss-covered headstone in the quiet kirkyard close by! They had known her a girl, and she came back to them a widow—came back, “wi’ her wee bit bairn, Phemie, to dee.”

Was it not natural that a certain romance should be associated with Phemie in the minds of those who could remember her parents so well? Was it to be wondered at if they made, perhaps, too much of the child; if they speculated as to her future lot foolishly?

Anyhow, Phemie was loved, and petted; and never a princess ruled more absolutely over her subjects than did the young child rule over the household at the manse. It was always who could please Phemie most, who could make her look prettiest, who could get sitting by her till she went to sleep, who could make time to take the child on her lap, and tell her the stories she liked best to hear.

All the old tales of fairies and brownies, of second sight, of witches and warlocks, were familiar to Phemie as her A B C. Old ballads were recited to her, old songs were sung to her, till her head was as full of romantic narrative as it could hold.

There was not a blast that blew over the hills but touched an answering note in the child's heart. The poetry lying there always uttered some responsive tone in answer to the elements—sunshine and shower, storm and calm, the wind whistling across the moors or sobbing through the fir-trees, the snow covering the earth, or the spring flowers decking the fields—all these things had a double meaning for Phemie; like a face reflected from glass to glass, every object in nature was projected into the child's heart from the heart of some one else who had basked in the summer glory and braved the winter tempest before she was thought of.

Then came Death to the manse once more; and this time he took the old minister from among his people to the kirkyard, within sound of the mourning and murmuring sea. Thoughtful hearts tried to keep Phemie from seeing him in his coffin, but Phemie's thoughtfulness exceeded theirs.

Her love made her cunning; and then the episode of the kitten was repeated with the grief intensified, with the despair more terrible.

She was taken away to a friend's house, and kept there till the funeral was over. All the day they watched her; but at night, in the dead of the winter time, she seized her opportunity and tracked her way across the moors to the manse, sobbing through the darkness as she toiled along.

At the manse they watched her again, and again she eluded their vigilance, and stole out to the lonely kirkyard, where she was found tearing up the wet mould with her little hands; scratching at the newly-made grave like a dog.

After that, grievous sickness—sickness almost unto death, and then removal by slow stages to the house of the only living relative willing to receive her—Mrs Aggland, her mother's sister. The Agglands had children of their own; but yet at the Hill Farm it was the old story enacted once again by fresh performers. Her aunt could not be too kind to her. Mr Aggland might punish his own daughter, but he never dreamt of saying a cross word to Phemie Keller. She was privileged: by reason of her desolateness, by reason of her story, by reason of her sensitive heart, that

reproof and harshness would have broken, Phemie had *carte blanche* to do as she liked, and if she did not grow up indolent and selfish, it was simply because there are some natures that cannot be made indolent or selfish by kindness and indulgence.

And yet it may fairly be questioned whether Phemie would ever have developed into a useful character but for the death of her aunt. Whilst Mrs Aggland lived the girl had always some one to think for her ; see to her ; love her. When once her aunt died, out of very gratitude, for very pity, Phemie was forced to think for others ; see to others ; and give love, and care, and affection back.

“It was sic a sair sicht to see the puir maister frettin’ after his wife,” as Peggy M’Nab asserted, that by common consent Peggy M’Nab and Phemie Keller joined together to make him feel his loss in the trifles of every-day life as little as might be. Phemie was still a child, a mere child, but yet she could do something for the widower ; she could nurse the baby and keep its cries from troubling its father ; she could help Peggy in a thousand little ways ; she could amuse the little ones by repeating to them the stories she had heard told in broad Scotch, where the Scottish moors stretched away lone and desolate towards the north ; she could read to him ; she could work for him ; she could stand at the door looking for his return ; she could talk to him in the twilight ; and she could make the sight of her bright pretty face as welcome to the solitary man as the flowers in May.

After his second marriage Phemie proved more useful still. As she grew older she grew not merely cleverer, but wiser—wise to hold her tongue, wise to keep unpleasantness in the background, wise to do the work she had to do with a cheerful countenance and a brave heart, wise towards everybody but herself, for she dreamed dreams and built castles all the day long.

Aided and abetted therein by Peggy M’Nab, who was never weary of telling Phemie about her father, about the great family he belonged to, about the grand folks, somewhere or other, with whom Phemie could claim kith and kin.

If Mrs Aggland were cross, if Phemie wearied over her making

and mending, if the girl ever took to fretting about the days departed, straight away Peggy told her nursing "to whisht."

"Canna ye quet yer greetin'—canna ye tak patience for a bit? Dinna ye ken that if ye wunna thraw that bonnie face o' yours, some braw laird will come ben when ye hae leest thocht o' him, and mak ye a gentle for life? He'll come in the gloamin' over the hills speerin' for ane Phemie Keller, and he'll tak ye awa', my bairn—he'll tak ye frae thrawn words and cross looks, and frae yer auld daft nurse wha canna bear to see ye forfoughten."

And then Phemie would declare she was not fretting, and that no laird, not even the Duke of Argyll himself, should take her from Peggy M'Nab.

"Wherever I go ye shall go," Phemie was wont to declare; "and I'd like to take Duncan, and Helen, and the rest of uncle's children, and we could leave Mrs Aggland her children, and make him come with us. Where should we go, Peggy, and how should we go? Tell me all about it."

Thus exhorted, Peggy would conjure up quite a royal procession for Phemie's edification.

With her darling's lovely head resting in her lap, with the girl's soft white fingers stroking her hard brown hands, Peggy was wont to talk of a hero so handsome and good and clever as to border on the impossible; of estates and houses that might have made an auctioneer's fortune; of furniture that sounded like an inventory taken of the domestic goods and chattels of some establishment in fairyland; of horses that could never have been foaled on earth, so great was their speed, so extraordinary their beauty; the crowning gem of the whole programme being the carriage, which, I am afraid, Peggy would have described as precisely similar to the state chariot of the Lord Mayor of London, had she ever been so blest as to behold that functionary's progress on the 9th of November through the City streets.

It was for long a vexed question between Phemie and her nurse whether the Kellers or a distracted lover were to come for her.

Peggy held to the Kellers, but Phemie preferred the lover, who

was to right her wrongs, to take her from the cinders, and dance with her at the ball, and get her the property of her ancestors, and live happily with her for ever after. She did not want to owe anything to her father's family. She preferred the idea of some dark-haired, dark-eyed nobleman coming to the Hill Farm like a flash of lightning, and rescuing her from stocking-mending and cast-off clothes, after the fashion of a hero of romance.

Sometimes in her fancy she would be proud and distant, sometimes indifferent, sometimes cruel and unkind; but however she began the story, it had never but one end, and that end was not suicide and distraction, but a grand wedding, and joy, and confidence, and love all the days of their lives.

They would build a castle on the site of the Hill Farmhouse, and come and spend some portion of every summer at Tordale. Mr Conbyr should have his organ, and she would bestow such magnificent presents on the wives of the farmers she had known! She would even give Mrs Aggland a satin dress, and a brooch, and a bonnet, and everybody should be happy, and all should go joyous as a marriage bell.

As for the nobleman, he was to be something between Fergus M'Ivor, the lover of the poor Bride of Lammermoor, and Percy, as described in Otterbourne. Whichever of these desirable models he most resembled, there was yet one thing in which he never varied—his devoted affection for herself. Phemie experienced no pangs of jealousy: she had no mental misgivings about a previous attachment, about any former lady love. It was to be first love with him as well as with her; it was to be first love and last love with both. Heaven help her! though these dreams may sound worldly and calculating, they were nevertheless pure and innocent, and it was the shock of coming down from the contemplation of such a lover and such a fortune, to the flat level of accepting or rejecting a middle-aged and unromantic suitor that proved too much for Phemie's equanimity, and made her—sitting by the window looking down over Tordale valley—so sad and thoughtful.

For the touch of reality had done two things: it had wakened

her at once from a land of pleasant visions, to the certainties of existence; it showed her she had been asleep and dreaming; it proved to her she must wake and bestir herself.

She could not go on after this, picturing to herself the advent of an ideal lover. Like one arising from a long sweet slumber, she looked out over the plains of life, and saw her actual position for the first time.

She was born—not to be run after like a damsel of romance, but to darn stockings, and to be considered an amazingly fortunate girl if a rich prosaic man fell in love with and married her. She had overrated her goods; she had been like a man with a clever invention, who never thinks of making hundreds out of it, but always millions, until some one offers him, say a thousand pounds, with which all his friends consider he ought to believe himself overpaid.

So long as her little possessions were kept out of the market she placed a price on them far and away above their actual value; but now, when she saw the precise sum at which she was rated by other people, her spirits sank to zero.

If it were so wonderful a thing for this commonplace stranger to ask her to marry him, what chance was there of the lord coming across the hills to woo? Was it likely she should ever meet Lord Ronald Clanronald by Strammer Tarn? And if she did meet him, was it at all probable he would take her back with him to his house? Lizzie Lindsay had skirts of green satin, but Phemie Keller had only three dresses in the world, and none of them much to boast of!

Further, it was evident her uncle had laid her out to marry Duncan. He had mentioned it, and she had told him that might never be. Having told him so, what was she to do—stay on mending old clothes and dreaming her dreams—dreams that might never seem realities again—or go away and become a lady, as every one told her she might by speaking only one word?

Suppose, after all this to-do, after all this respect, after all this disturbance, she subsided again into the Phemie of six months previously, should she be able to lead the old life again patiently?

Could she endure Mrs Aggland's scolding, and the incessant work, work, slave, slave, drive, drive, after this chance of freedom? Suppose poverty came again: she had seen bad seasons at the Hill Farm, and felt the nipping of scarcity like the rest, and these bad seasons might return, and then, instead of being able to help, she would only prove an encumbrance.

If she accepted Captain Stondon, her hero would have to be turned with his face to the wall; but if she did not accept him, why, then, still the hero might never come, after all.

What should she do? "Oh, what shall I do?" sobbed Phemie, by way of a climax to her reverie; and, as if in answer to her question, Helen tapped at her cousin's door, and said:

"Captain Stondon is in the parlour, Phemie, and father says, will you come down and see him?"

"An' I hev brought ye up a candle, my bairn," added Peggy M'Nab; "redd up yer hair, and wash the tears aff yer face, for he'll no be pleased to see ye looking like a ghaist."

CHAPTER X.

YES OR NO.

THE grief must have been terrible, the anxiety intense, that could have made Phemie Keller indifferent to her personal appearance; and, accordingly, in spite of all her sorrow and indecision, the young lady took Peggy's advice kindly, and—followed it. She bathed her face, and then removed the traces of tears by breathing on her handkerchief and holding it to her eyes; she unfastened her hair, and let it fall down in thick luxuriant waves, which she combed and brushed caressingly.

She was very proud of her hair; her own beauty was a great pleasure to this mountain-reared maiden. Perhaps she would have been a more perfect character had she not taken such delight in her own loveliness; but then she would not have been Phemie Keller. She would not have been the girl who, full of innocent vanity, stood before her little glass, arranging her plaits and braids in the most becoming manner she could devise.

I have read a good many books, but I never recollect meeting in one of them with an account of a heroine who made herself look ugly in order to let down a rejected lover easily, nor among my own acquaintance have I ever known a woman forget, when discarding a suitor, to put on her best looks for the occasion.

It may be cruel, but is it not natural? Would you have Lesbia leave off her padding and stays, and her robe of gold, so that she might send the poor wretch away disenchanted? Would you have Nora Creina bind up her dishevelled locks, which are no doubt

amazingly becoming to her, though they do not suit Lesbia, and put on a stiff robe of state, instead of the picturesque costume which floats as wild as mountain breezes, when she trips across the lea to say No, sir, no? Would you have Hebe push back her hair from her charming face, and make herself look a fright? Would you have Miss, with the fine forehead and Roman nose, wear lackadaisical curls over her temples? Would you have Drusilla uncover her scraggy shoulders, or Lavinia veil her snow-white neck? Can you expect the dear creatures to send the man away, wondering at his own unutterable want of taste? Is it not most natural that they should wish him to depart in a frame of mind bordering on insanity, possessed by seven fierce devils of loveliness, who make his last state worse by far than his first.

And finally, although the success she had achieved might not be that precise kind of success which Phemie's little heart desired to compass, was it not natural that, having gained a certain worldly triumph, auburn hair and dark-blue eyes should want to look their best over the matter?

For all of which reasons, and more especially because the girl's vanity was as genuine as her grief, Phemie Keller brushed and smoothed and braided her hair as daintily as though she had been going down-stairs to meet the hero of her dreams.

All women cannot go to the queen's drawing-room, though they may all wish to do so; but, spite of that, they put on their best dresses, and adopt the newest style of head decoration, when invited to a select tea-party at the squire's just outside the village.

Even for Mr Fagg's benefit, even to gladden Mr Conbyr's failing sight, Phemie would have made the best of herself, and as it was—so it was—this innocent, unsophisticated beauty took as much pains in arraying herself for the campaign as though she had been born and bred amongst those ancient ladies who wore tires on their heads and pillows to their arms, and went mincingly, making a tinkling as they went.

On the whole, the result was satisfactory. At sweet sixteen tears are not altogether unbecoming. Rain in the summer-time produces a different effect on the landscape to rain in the winter;

and, in like manner, it is one thing when tears wet the sweet buds of youth, and hang heavy on the roses of girlhood; and quite another when they roll heavily down the worn cheeks of middle age, and mingle with the snows of later life.

All the sweeter did Phemie Keller look for the shower so lately fallen. There was a certain languor about her eyes, a certain pallor in her cheeks, which made her beauty irresistible; and as she turned to leave the room, the girl felt perfectly satisfied with her own appearance, and equally certain that Captain Stondon would be satisfied with it too.

And yet, spite of this conviction, there was a sick, faint feeling about Phemie's heart while she went slowly along the passage to decide her fate. How fearfully prosaic! how horribly matter-of-fact! how terribly real seemed this question which she was called upon to decide! There was no haze of love—there was no wild attachment—no passionate hero worship. She had never listened for his step with hand laid on heart to still its throbbings; his voice had never sent the blood rushing to cheek and brow; she had never thought of him through the day, and dreamed of him by night; she had never walked with him hand-in-hand among the flowers of that enchanted garden which is the only Eden man ever now enters upon earth; the whispers of love were not in her ear, urging her footsteps on. It was a hard, cold bargain, and though Phemie did not, could not reason all this out for herself, as I have done for you, reader, still she instinctively hung back, and delayed the evil moment as long as possible.

“I am going down now, uncle,” she said, opening the door of Mr Aggland's private sanctum, a room filled with books, ornamented with fire-arms, littered with fishing-tackle, into which none of the household were privileged to enter excepting Phemie herself. “I am going down now,” and she stood in the doorway, looking as if she never wished to go down, but wanted to stay there for ever; while Mr Aggland, who was busy among the pipes of the organ referred to on one occasion by Mr Conbyr, lifted his head, and bade her come in.

“I do not tell you to do anything, Phemie,” he said; “remem-

ber that," and he laid his hand on her shoulder while he spoke. "So far as I see, you need not even make up your own mind just at present. Do not be in a hurry to say either yea or nay. 'Hasty marriage seldom proveth well,' Shakespeare says, as you know, and further—

'What is wedlock forcèd, but a hell,
An age of discord and perpetual strife?'

For which reason, do not let any one over-persuade you in this matter.

'For marriage is a matter of more worth
Than to be dealt in by attorneyship.'

"I know as much about my mind now as I shall ever know," answered Phemie. "I have been thinking, thinking all day, till I am sick of thinking. Advise me, uncle," she added, with sudden vehemence; "tell me what I ought to do."

"Seneca says—" began Mr Aggland.

"Oh! never mind what Seneca says," interrupted Phemie; "I want to hear what you say."

"Well, then, my opinion is exactly his," persisted her uncle; "that no man should presume to give advice to others who has not first given good counsel to himself."

"You are playing with me," she said, pettishly. "I want advice, and you give me old saws instead: I want help, and you will not hold out a finger towards me."

"Because I cannot," he answered. "You are coming for advice to a man who, never having followed any rule of reason in his own life, is incompetent to show the wisest course to another. I have been led by impulse for so long that I believe I have forgotten there is such a thing as prudence. All my life long I have lacked 'good sense;'

'Which only is the gift of heaven;
And though no science, fairly worth the seven.'

It was but the other day I was reading what William Finlay wrote about himself, and I thought then that the picture might have been drawn from me."

And Mr Aggland hummed—

“ ‘Whilst others have been busy bustling
 After wealth and fame,
 And wisely adding house to house,
 And Baillie to their name ;
 I, like a thoughtless prodigal,
 Have wasted precious time,
 And followed lying vanities,
 To string them up in rhyme.’ ”

“ Uncle, if you asked me for anything I would give it to you,” said Phemie, reproachfully.

“ And so would I give you anything but advice,” he answered.

“ Anything except what I want,” she said—“ anything but that ;” and at the words Mr Aggland rose up, startled.

“ Phemie, child,” he exclaimed, “ do you know what it is you are asking from me ? do you think what it is you want me to decide ? It is your future ; it is the whole of that which I once owned, but which is now behind me for ever ; and I have made such a wretched thing of life, that I cannot tell you what to do. I am no judge, my dear ; I am no judge.”

“ But I have nobody else,” she said, piteously, “ and I cannot keep him waiting all night, and I do not know what to say, and—and my heart is breaking.” At which point Phemie’s composure gave way, and she covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

“ Damn marriage !” was Mr Aggland’s remark, and he uttered it in all sincerity. “ I wish we were in heaven, Phemie, where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage ; where there are no bad crops, and no anxieties concerning the future. I cannot advise you whether or no to take Captain Stondon’s offer ; but I do advise you to hear what he has got to say about the matter. He is a good man, and a true :

‘ Nature might stand up
 And say to all the world, this was a man.’

You may find some one whom you could love better, Phemie, but you would never find anybody better. And, because I believe

this, I bid you go and listen to him first, and afterwards, if you like, we will talk together."

And with this safe counsel, having dismissed his niece, Mr Aggland turned him to his work again, muttering Otway's opinion, "'The worst thing an old man can be is a lover.'"

It was not the worst thing imaginable, however, for Captain Stondon; it was well for him to have an object given to his objectless life; well for him to have some one to think of beside himself; well for him to have at last a definite hope in existence: and sitting all alone by the fire, the officer was dreaming some pleasant dreams, and thinking himself far from unfortunate, when Phemie turned the handle of the door and entered shyly.

But as she did so—as she came slowly out of the darkness into the light, something like a shadow seemed to come out of the darkness more swiftly than she and stand between them. It was not a doubt, and yet Captain Stondon felt himself remain irresolute for a moment; it was not fear, and yet he had experienced the same sensation before entering a battle from which he had been afterwards carried wounded: it was a cloud thrown for a moment over a landscape, fair to see, lovely to contemplate; it was one of those intangible messengers of evil who, fleet of foot, rush through our hearts in the midst of our joy, bidding us prepare for the sorrows that are following more slowly after into our lives.

It just came between them for a moment and departed, and next instant Captain Stondon was holding the girl's hands in his, and praying her forgiveness for his over-haste. In one sentence he told her he had not been able to rest at the vicarage; that he could not sit patiently waiting to hear his fate: in the next, he begged her to believe he was in no hurry; that he would not hasten her decision; that whenever she chose to give him an answer, would be the time he should like best to hear it.

"All this day," he went on, "I have been thinking of you. I have been longing to be at the Hill Farm once more. I have been wishing for the sound of your voice. I know I ought not to have come here this evening; but I could not live without

seeing you. Do not say anything to me if you would rather not. Send me away again now, and I will go through the darkness and the rain, content to have looked in your face once more."

It was needful for him to do all the talking, for Phemie never opened her lips. She never helped him in the least, but stood with one hand resting on the stone chimney-piece, looking intently into the fire. If she had been born deaf and dumb, she could not have made less sign, and yet still all the time she was struggling to find words to tell him what was passing through her heart; she was trying to discover what she was feeling, so that she might show him honestly all that was in her mind.

He might not be a hero, but he loved her; he might not have black hair and piercing eyes, but he was not beyond the pale of humanity on that account. All the strength of feeling—all the power of affection he had never, since his earliest youth, lavished on any human being, he was now wasting upon her, as the sea lays its treasures upon some bare and thankless strand: and even as the waves of that sea, meeting some tiny stream, force back the waters of the rivulet and prevent it mingling with the ocean, so, the very force and vehemence of this man's passion stopped Phemie's utterance and made her shrink back into herself.

She felt as one standing out unsheltered in a hurricane—she felt powerless to speak—to lift up her voice and protest against marrying him solely because he wished to marry her. She felt what many an older woman has felt—that she had got into a mess, out of which it was impossible to extricate herself. Through no wish—through no striving—through no desire of her own—this man had fallen in love with her, and she would never have the courage to bid him go: she could do nothing but what she did do—lift her lovely, pleading eyes to his and burst into tears.

Then he knew—then the shadow fell between them again—then he paused before he took the girl gently to him and soothed her grief, and calmed her agitation as though he had been her father. He had deceived himself; he had thought this young thing could love him; he had thought, because he was still able to feel affection, that the power of winning the heart of a creature

in her teens was left also. He had remembered his lands and his houses, his gold and his silver ; but he had forgotten what mere gewgaws these things seem in the eyes of a girl unless she has some one dearer to her than aught else on earth—to hold and to spend with her.

He had deceived himself, and he awakened to the knowledge with a pang, and then straight away he fell to deceiving himself again, and thought that if once he could get her to say yes—if once he could induce her to marry him—he would earn her love ; he would purchase it by his tenderness, by his forbearance, by his devotion.

Anything rather than give her up—anything sooner than lose auburn hair and blue eyes for ever—any trouble—any sorrow—any pain—if trouble, sorrow, and pain could hinder his going out again into the wide world without Phemie Keller by his side.

And never had Phemie seemed so charming to him as she did at that moment ; never in her gayest mood had he loved her so much as he did when she stood there passive, letting him stroke her hair, and draw her hands away from her tear-stained face, as though she had been a child.

Everything which strikes us as most beautiful in girlhood adorned Phemie Keller then : innocence, timidity, dependence, guilelessness—the man could have knelt down and worshipped her. She was so young, so fresh, so lovely, so different from anything he had ever seen before, that Captain Stondon felt his pulses grow still as he looked at her—felt the spell of her purity and beauty laid upon him soothingly.

He could not give her up ; he told her so more calmly than he had spoken any sentence yet. He knew that in many respects he was not the lover to win a young girl's fancy, but he would prove none the worse husband for that.

She should have as long a time as she liked to think the matter over ; he would not hurry her. The winds of heaven should not breathe upon her too roughly if she married him. They would travel. He would take her to Paris and Rome ; they would go to Switzerland and Spain. She should see all the places of which

she had read. He would make her uncle's position more comfortable.

Duncan should be sent to school, and Helen also; and Helen should come and spend her vacations at Marshlands. As for Phemie, if his love, if his care, if his wealth, if his devotion could keep trouble from crossing her path, life should to her be but as a long pleasant summer's day; and then Captain Stondon went on to tell her how he had never loved but once before, and of what a desert his life had been since.

"But you can make it a heaven upon earth now, if you will," he said; "you can make me either the happiest or the most miserable of mortals."

Yet still she never spoke.

"Am I to go away without one word?" he said. "Will you not say anything to me before I return to the vicarage?"

But Phemie never answered.

"Am I to take silence as consent so far?" he went on.

In answer to which question the girl remained resolutely mute.

"May I think that you are not averse to me?" he persisted; but the sweet lips never opened, the lovely face never was turned towards him.

"Do not send me away without even a smile," he said at last. "Well, well, I will not tease you," and he made a feint of turning to leave the room.

Then all at once Phemie found words, and cried—

"Do not go, Captain Stondon; I want to speak to you. I have something to say—do not go!"

"Nobody will advise me," went on the girl, passionately: "if I was to inquire of any person I know what I ought to do, they would tell me what I could tell them; that you have done me a great honour; that it is a wonderful thing for a gentleman like you to have asked a girl like me. I went to my uncle, and he bade me come to you; and I do come to you, sir. What am I to do? oh! what am I to do?"

It was his turn to be silent now, and he stood looking at Phemie, at her clasped hands, at her beseeching attitude, at her

eyes which were swimming with tears, for a minute before he answered—

“My poor child, how can I tell you what to do? I, to whom ‘yes’ will be life, and ‘no’ death to every plan, and hope, and desire of my future existence. All I can say is, do not marry me if you think it will not be for your happiness to do so; and, above all, do not marry me if you care for any one else.”

He put such a constraint upon himself as he said this, that Phemie, though she caught their sense, could scarcely hear his words.

She did not know anything of the storm which was sweeping through his heart; but she had a vague idea that he was fighting some kind of battle when he went on—

“I love you so well that you will be safe in making me your friend. If any one else is fond of you, if you are fond of any other person, tell me, and I must try to be disinterested—try to see my duty and do it. Have you any attachment—any preference? Answer me frankly, dear, for God’s sake, for it may save us both much misery hereafter.”

The pretty head drooped lower, and the flushed cheeks grew redder; but the sweet lips parted for all that, and Phemie whispered—“No.”

“You are certain?” he said, and he raised her lovely face, so that he might see the story it had to tell.

This time Phemie lifted her eyes to his shyly, yet trustingly, while she replied—

“I am quite sure sir—quite.”

That was a comfort, at any rate: terrible jealousy of Mr Fagg—grave doubts concerning one or two young men he had met in the valley—suspicions of some secret lover, whose very existence was unknown to any one but Phemie—had all conspired together to make the officer’s life a weariness to him during the last few minutes; but there was no mistaking Phemie’s face and Phemie’s manner. She had no clandestine attachment—no attachment of any kind—not even for him.

There was the misery—there was the next difficulty he had

to face, but Captain Stondon did face it for all that, and said—

“I am afraid that you do not care for me?”

“I do not know, sir.” What an aggravating chit it was with its uncertain answers—with its frightened manners and averted face!

“Do you dislike me, Phemie?”

“No, sir.”

It was on the tip of Captain Stondon’s tongue to say, “Then what do you do?” but he refrained, and proceeded: “Could you learn to love me?”

“I do not know;” and the officer struck his heel impatiently against the floor at her reply.

What was the use of catechising her thus? What is the use of asking a child who does not know its A B C questions about reading, writing, and arithmetic? And was not all the alphabet of love a terra incognita to Phemie Keller? Like a baby, she knew fairy tales; but she was ignorant of her letters. Practical love was a thing of which she knew as little as a chubby five-years-old knows of Hebrew. The right master to teach her had never crossed her path; and though Captain Stondon was perfectly up in the subject himself, he lacked the power to impart information to her.

She might marry him—she might be fond enough of him—she might bear him sons and daughters; but she could never feel for the husband she was bound to—love, such we mean when we talk about “The dream of Life’s young day.”

It was natural, however, that Captain Stondon should blind himself to this fact—natural that, loving her so much, he should forget everything except that she was free—that it was possible for him to gain her—that he might hope to see her mistress of Marshlands yet.

He might win this young thing for his wife; and as he thought of this—thought it was only her youth which made her answers vague—her inexperience which caused her uncertainty—his impatience vanished, and sweet visions arose of an angel walking

side by side with him upon the earth. He saw her flitting from room to room in the great house that had always hitherto seemed to him so deserted; on the lawn, in the gardens, he beheld blue eyes and auburn hair—pleasant pictures of home-life—home-life, such as he had often read about in books, were before his eyes; that which he had dreamed of so many, many years before was all coming true at last. She did not dislike him: for the rest—“She did not know.” He would be satisfied with that for the present; and instead of pressing the unsatisfactory part of the subject, he would talk to Phemie about what she could understand, viz. her position as Mrs Stondon, in comparison to her position as Miss Keller.

Wherein Captain Stondon was wise. Phemie possessed as much common sense as her cousins. Setting the lord out of the question, and putting the Kellers along with the lord, she knew exactly how she was situated to a T; and if the officer did put the actual state of matters in plain English before her, Phemie had quite sufficient knowledge to understand that all he said contained neither more nor less than the truth.

Mr Aggland was not rich. If he died—and Phemie had seen enough of death to convince her disease might visit the Hill Farm any day—the girl would have no home, no friends, no money. Or if sickness came—sickness and bad seasons—how were the family to be supported?

Again, if all went well, did she think she could be content to spend all her life in Cumberland? Would she not like to go abroad, to mix in society, to have plenty of money with which to help her relations, and to repay some portion of what had been done for her?

As a man of the world, Captain Stondon could not but know that the match would be a capital one for Phemie; and though he would have given all he possessed ten times over cheerfully to get her for his own, he still placed his social advantages in their best light before her.

And Phemie listened, and Phemie thought, and the longer she

listened and the more she thought the stronger grew the idea that she should marry this man—that she would be somehow throwing away her best chance if she refused to take him.

She did not like saying Yes ; and yet she was afraid the day might come when she would rue saying No. He was very good—he was very patient—he was very kind—he was very generous—why should she not be happy ?

If an infant be crying its eyes out, a skilful nurse has but to dangle a bunch of beads before it, and straightway the tears are dried, the sobs cease, and with a crowd of delight feeble little hands are stretched out to seize the glittering prize.

Somewhat after the same fashion Phemie Keller had been crying for that which she could not get ; and now, partly because she was weary of weeping, and greatly because the world's vanities looked tempting as Captain Stondon presented them for her contemplation, she gradually forgot to shed any more tears, and began to listen with interest to what he was saying.

He told her about Marshlands—about its fine timber, about its old-fashioned rooms, its endless corridors, its lovely gardens.

Carriages, horses, visitors, servants—all these things, which are doubtless as valueless to you, my reader, as the string of beads are to the adult, looked very tempting to Phemie Keller.

She had not been used to such vanities, and people who have not known luxuries are apt to overrate the happiness of their possession. By degrees she began to ask questions, and to listen with interest to his answers ; almost imperceptibly she came to see that, though Captain Stondon might not be a lord, he was a grand personage—a wealthy gentleman for all that. He was doing her an honour, and a man has travelled a long way towards success when he makes a woman feel this.

“He could get many a great lady to marry him,” thought Phemie, and she felt grateful to him for choosing her. He would give her money to buy toys for the children—a microscope or a telescope for her uncle, and a gown for Peggy M‘Nab.

She would have to darn no more stockings, but he would very probably let her get as much Berlin wool and canvas as would

enable her to work a sofa-pillow like one there was down at the Vicarage. She should go to London, and perhaps see the Queen. Altogether, she did not feel so very miserable after he had been talking to her for half-an-hour, and though she was still resolute not to say Yes in a hurry, she promised to speak to her uncle.

Of course Captain Stendon knew by this time that her consent was a mere question of time. His wooing might be tedious, but it could not be difficult; and as he took his way down the valley he found himself thinking about the marriage service, and picturing to himself how exquisite Phemie would look as a bride.

Ere a week was over she had promised, reluctantly possibly, but still faithfully, to become his wife some day; and the officer went about in a seventh heaven of ecstasy, whilst Mr Aggland sat gravely looking on, and Duncan sang in a broad Scotch dialect, which was fortunately unintelligible to the lover, though Phemie understood it all too well—

“ He wandered hame wearie—the nicht it was drearie,
And thowless he tint his gate 'mang the deep snaw;
The owlet was screamin', while Johnnie cried, ‘ Womea
Wad marry auld Nick if he'd keep them aye braw.’ ”

CHAPTER XL

SATISFIED.

HAVING won Phemie Keller, the next thing Captain Stondon desired was to wed her. It might have made the heart of many a match-making mother ache with envy to hear how the man hammered on at that one string.

It was the refrain of every sentence. Mr Aggland and he never separated without the subject being mooted by this fortunate lover. Vainly did the farmer assert that the girl was too young, that there was time enough, that nobody was going to run away with her. Captain Stondon would listen to no objections. Christmas was coming on, and he must get back to Norfolk immediately, and he wanted to have something definite decided on before he went away.

To all of which Mr Aggland listened gravely ere he replied—

“Then I tell you what, Captain Stondon: let me go to Norfolk with you, and there we will talk about the future. You must not think,” proceeded Mr Aggland, hastily, “that because I say this I am ‘a kind of burr—I shall stick.’ I do not mean to intrude. I have no intention of forcing myself upon you. Once let me see the place where Phemie is going to, the home in which she is to live, and you need never fear sign or token of me again.”

“But I hope and trust that I shall,” answered Captain Stondon: “I do not want to separate Phemie from her friends. I have no wish to do anything of the kind. You surely have not

thought me so forgetful—so ungrateful as all that comes to?” cried the officer, growing quite vehement over the matter.

But Mr Aggland shook his head and answered, “I do not think you either ungrateful or forgetful, only I know that, when once you and Phemie are married, the less she and you are troubled with any of us the better it will be for her. It is never a pleasant thing for a woman to be constantly reminded whence she has been transplanted, and Phemie is young enough to take kindly to a new soil and root herself firmly in it. Further, sir; though I was once humble companion to a gentleman’s son, I hope I never wore

‘The rags of any great man’s looks, nor fed
Upon their after meals.’

And because I am so sure of my own mind in this matter—so positive that I do not want Phemie to feel any one belonging to her a burden, I have no scruple in asking you to let me go to Norfolk. I shall be able to give her away with a lighter heart when I have once looked on the house that is to be her home.”

Doubtless Mr Aggland was right; but Captain Stondon, with his heart full of generous projects, with a vivid memory of all he owed to the farmer’s care and kindness, felt that this constant assertion of independence—this everlasting refusal to come up and stand on the same level with himself—was irritating in the extreme.

It is so hard to have one’s best intention doabted—to see people thinking they are wiser and better than everybody else on earth—to have good gifts tossed back in one’s face, that Captain Stondon often felt inclined to tell Mr Aggland that independence may be carried far too far; that there is an extreme point at which every virtue touches a vice; and that the most dangerous pride is, after all, the pride that “apes humility.”

But as often as he felt inclined he refrained. He remembered that, to a man like Mr Aggland, poverty was the most severe trial to which his character could have been subjected; and he recollected likewise that, if an ungenial climate had made the fruit of his life somewhat bitter, it had not rendered it unwholesome.

Besides, he, Captain Stondon, was so happy that he could afford to be tolerant of the short-comings of others ; and accordingly he answered, good-humouredly—

“You will know me better some day, Aggland. Meantime, come to Norfolk, and we can arrange about settlements and other matters when once we get there.”

“One thing more,” said Mr Aggland. “I pay my own expenses.”

“Agreed,” replied Captain Stondon, laughing ; “so long as you do not ask me to send you in a bill for board and lodging at Marshlands, you can pay what you like.”

And so the matter was settled ; and for letting Mr Aggland have his own way the officer received his reward.

Never had the Hill Farm been made pleasanter to him than it was during the week which intervened between the time the journey was proposed and the hour they started.

Every one seemed now to feel that matters were finally settled, and that there was, therefore, nothing more to be done except to put on holiday faces, and make matters agreeable for Phemie and Captain Stondon.

What if the boys did tease their cousin ? It only made a little more life about the Farm. What if Johnny King had the audacity to answer Captain Stondon’s question as to whether Mr Aggland was at home with a wink and a shrug, and a hand pointed over his shoulder, and

“No, he is not ; but Phemie is in there ; and father says she is all you want at the Hill Farm !” The officer only boxed the young monkey’s ears, and went on his way with a light step, whilst Phemie’s whole time was taken up in expostulating and remonstrating.

“Uncle, are they to torment me ? Uncle, is Duncan to say the things he does ? Is he to go about the house singing, ‘Woo’d, and married, and a’?’—more particularly when Captain Stondon is here. It is enough to put a person from being married at all.”

“The lassie is glaikit wi’ pride,” remarked Duncan, from a safe distance.

“The Lord has been very good to her to put such a chance in her way,” added Mrs Aggland, sanctimoniously.

“Blest if I don’t think Phemie is right, and that it is enough to prevent her marrying at all, hearing so much about it,” said Mr Aggland ; but for all that the boys would tease, and Mrs Aggland would talk concerning the wedding-clothes, and Peggy M’Nab would spend hours tracing out a brilliant future for her darling. On the whole, that future was by no means one to be scoffed at by a country girl whose entire fortune was under a couple of hundred pounds, and whose well-born relations refused to recognize her. It was very pleasant to become in a moment a person of importance—very charming to be the sun round which the whole household revolved—very delightful to have Mrs Aggland alternately fawning upon her and making envious speeches.

Already Phemie was beginning to feel the beneficial change in her position, and from the height she had attained she was able clearly to see the inferiority of the station from which Captain Stondon had raised her. Distant, and more distant still, grew the heroes of her romantic visions. They were real men to her no more ; and she could even smile to herself as she repeated a verse of Carrick’s “Rose of the Canongate,” a song she had learned in the old manse by the sea-shore :—

“She dream’d of lords, of knights, of squires,
And men of high degree ;
But lords were scarce and knights were shy,
So ne’er a joe had she.”

Perhaps a letter Mr Aggland received from her aunt, Miss Keller, in answer to one he wrote informing the Keller family of Captain Stondon’s proposals, and Phemie’s acceptance of them, had a little to do with this desirable change in her sentiments. “Miss Keller presented her compliments to Mr Aggland, and on behalf of herself and her brother, General Keller, begged to inform Mr A. that they were happy to hear the young person referred to in his letter was likely to be comfortably provided for. At the same time, as Lieutenant Keller’s unhappy marriage had severed all ties of relationship between them, General and Miss

Keller trusted that Mr Aggland would not think it necessary to enter into any further correspondence, as it was impossible for either General or Miss Keller to recognize in any way the child of such a degrading and ill-assorted union."

"Never mind, my darling," said Captain Stondon, when Phemie showed him this gracious epistle. "You can do without them, I hope;" and the girl was grateful for the tone in which the words were spoken, and thought more and more that things were not so bad as they seemed at first, and that she had great cause for thankfulness.

She had to keep a guard on her lips and refrain from wishing for anything, for so surely as she said she would fancy this, or something else, so surely it was purchased for her. If she had expressed a desire for the moon Captain Stondon would straightway have set to work thinking how he might best procure it; and Phemie could often have bitten a piece off her tongue after she had exclaimed—

"I should like this. I wish I had that."

"It seems as if I were always taking—taking, and I cannot bear it," she said once, piteously; and Mr Aggland coming to the rescue, said he could not bear it either.

"The girl will forget how to say any other word than 'thank you,'" he added; "you are making a perfect parrot of her. Give her what you like when once she is your wife, but hold your hand now;" and Captain Stondon agreed to do what they asked him on condition that the Norfolk journey was undertaken without delay.

"When once she is my wife she shall not need to wish," he said; from which speech it will be seen that Phemie's future husband had laid himself out to spoil her completely, if he could; and meantime he made so much of her—was so patient, so good, and kind, that Phemie, poor child, cried when he went away, and caused the man to fall more rapturously in love with her than ever.

If the weather had been better the journey to London could have left nothing to be desired; but as it was, with the snow on

the ground, Captain Stondon acknowledged to himself that, but for Mr Aggland, he should have found the way between Carlisle and Euston Square of the longest.

Having Mr Aggland, the time passed rapidly enough. They talked a good deal, they slept a good deal; and by-and-by, when they both awoke about Stafford, Mr Aggland roused himself thoroughly and began to show his companion what really was in him.

He told tales of his own long-ago: his boyhood's scrapes, his manhood's chances, the various adventures he had met with in the course of an irregular rambling life. The excitement of travelling, the sight of so many strange faces, the change and variety of going back after years to London, seemed to make a different creature of the individual who had always hitherto seemed to Captain Stondon a clever, eccentric "wild man of the hills."

"If he would but shave himself and get his hair cut, and buy a respectable suit of clothes, he might pass anywhere," thought the officer; but he would as soon have dreamed of suggesting any alteration in his attire to the Commander-in-Chief as to Mr Aggland, for which reason, though every one they met stared at the man as they might at a maniac, Captain Stondon appeared perfectly unconscious of the fact; and for any remark he made, Phemie's uncle might have been "got up" like the greatest dandy that ever walked down Bond Street.

Only—he told the cabman to drive to an hotel in the City instead of to the "Burlington," where he usually stopped, alleging as his reason that he wanted to be near the Shoreditch Station, so as to get on to Norfolk betimes the next morning.

When the next morning came, however, Mr Aggland asked whether his companion would object to putting off their journey for a few hours.

"I see," he said, "there is an afternoon train which arrives at Disley about nine o'clock in the evening. If that would suit you equally well, I should prefer it."

"I have no objection," answered Captain Stondon. "I must

telegraph down, though, for them to meet us at the nine train, for otherwise I do not see exactly how we should ever get over from Disley to Marshlands."

"Thank you," said Mr Aggland; "and would you—would you—mind my leaving you alone for a short time?"

The man actually coloured as he asked this, and after he had departed Captain Stondon fell to wondering where his companion could be gone—on what secret mission he could have departed by himself.

"He surely has not seen some pretty woman and fallen in love with her," soliloquized the officer; and then his thoughts went back to the pretty girl he had fallen in love with in Cumberland, and whom he hoped to have all to himself when next he passed through London.

How little he expected, when he was in town before, ever to marry—ever to see anybody again for whom he could care in the least; and now he was lying on a sofa in one of the sitting-rooms in the Castle and Falcon, building all kinds of beautiful edifices, while the City traffic thundered along Aldersgate Street, till finally, with its very monotony, it lulled him to sleep.

How long he slept he did not know, but at last he awoke with a start, and found a stranger sitting opposite to the sofa he occupied—a stranger, yet not a stranger—a person who was unknown to him, and yet whose face seemed familiar. Captain Stondon raised himself on his elbow to inquire who his visitor might be, but in the same moment recognized him, and exclaimed—

"Good heavens, Aggland! what have you been doing to yourself? I could not, for the life of me, think who you were."

And indeed it was no marvel that Captain Stondon had been mystified; for Mr Aggland who entered the Castle and Falcon at one o'clock was certainly remarkably unlike the Mr Aggland who walked out of it at eleven. He had gone to a hair-dresser's, he had gone to a tailor, and the consequence was that he came back another person. Hitherto his head had looked like the wings of an old raven that is moulting; now dexterous hands had brushed and smoothed his hair till it seemed really to be human hair, and

not the mane of a wild colt. His moustache had been as the bristles of a well-worn hearth-broom; and heaven only knows through what torments of fixatrice he had passed in order to get it into decent trim. His whiskers had resembled nothing so much as long, bare, straggling branches of the hop plant; but the barber's skill having pruned away all the impoverishing suckers, the original hair on his cheeks remained trim and neat as could have been desired.

At his clothes Captain Stondon stared in amazement. About the legs and shoulders, about his feet and arms, Mr Aggland was now as other men.

Excepting that he still wore his shirt-collar turned down—a fashion which in those days was not in vogue—the farmer looked quite like ordinary mortals. He had compassed that metamorphosis which Captain Stondon so earnestly desired to see; and having compassed this end, it is only fair to add that Mr Aggland looked desperately ashamed of himself.

But he had thought it right to give heed to such vanities for Phemie's sake; and a sense of duty consequently supported him through his trial.

“I did not care to go to your place looking an old guy,” he explained, awkwardly enough; “and as I should have had, sooner or later, to buy a few things for the wedding, I have bought them sooner instead of later—that is all.”

“You do my place too much honour,” answered Captain Stondon; but he wished, even as he said it, that he could be quite sure Mr Aggland had not guessed what was passing through his mind as they journeyed southward together.

He had forgotten what keen vision living among the hills insures; he had not thought of the quick sensitiveness which catches at an idea from a look, a movement, a chance glance.

However, Mr Aggland was all the more presentable for the change in his attire, and as he proceeded to say, how he had thought the day might come when somebody in Norfolk would know he was Phemie's uncle, and that therefore—and to do such credit as he could to Captain Stondon—he wanted to make the

best of himself, the officer was quite touched by the man's unselfish thoughtfulness, by the love and affection which had compelled him to make an exertion that a weaker nature would have been ashamed to confess.

Everything he saw about the farmer made him regret more and more that his life had proved so hard an one for himself, so profitless an one for others; and this feeling made him treat his new friend in a manner which induced Mr Aggland afterwards to declare to Phemie—

“If I had been a king, child, he could not have made more of me.”

Nor was Mr Aggland, who had seen some fine estates in his lifetime, less impressed with the stateliness of Marshlands than with the courtesy of its owner.

The house was “far and away grander than Worton Court,” he told his niece, and if Mr Aggland had entertained any doubts on the subject of Captain Stondon's social standing, his visit to Marshlands completely undeceived him.

He passed a week there—a whole week, though he had declared he “couldna, shouldna, darra stay for more than a couple of days;” and many a long talk had he and Captain Stondon, sitting over the library fire, whilst dessert remained untouched beside them, and each forgot to pass the decanter which contained some of that “inimitable '24 port.”

It was great promotion for Phemie. The longer Mr Aggland stayed at Marshlands, and the more he saw of the master of Marshlands, the more unreal the whole affair seemed; and he went meekly back to Cumberland, feeling that neither he nor his could ever have made the girl half so happy as it was in both the power and the will of this rich gentleman to do.

The marriage was to take place in the spring, and Captain Stondon wanted to provide Phemie's trousseau; but on this point Mr Aggland was firm.

“There is no use in the child bringing her two or three halfpence in her hand to you,” he said, not without a certain sadness; “and so we may just as well spend her little fortune on the only

thing she is ever likely to have to provide for herself. She shall not disgrace any of us, I promise you that ; and till she is your wife I would rather she was not indebted to you for anything."

As usual, there was so much sense in what Mr Aggland said, that Captain Stondon had to yield the point ; and the consequence was that the farmer returned from London with such a quantity of luggage as caused his wife to stand aghast.

"Oh! Peggy ; oh! Peggy," cried Phemie Keller. "Those boxes are like something out of fairyland : there are silks and laces, and muslins and ribbons, and the most enchanting kid shoes, and kid 'gloves, Peggy—French gloves, like Lady Wauthrope's. And whatever more I want, uncle says is to be ordered from Liverpool ; but I shall never wear all those things out. I could not do it if I were to live for a thousand years. Come and look at them, and then tell me if you believe I am Phemie Keller. It is something like what we used to talk about, Peggy. Do you remember how we used to talk?"

"Ay, bairn, I mind it weel." The time Miss Phemie dreamed her dreams was not so very far remote but that any one could recollect it. "And it seems to me, when I'm thinking ower it a', that the Yerl has come across the hills to tak' my darling frae me."

"But you shall come too. I asked him about it, and he said, 'Yes, of course ;' so you must get a trousseau, Peggy, and travel with us wherever we go."

"Ye dinna want an auld fule like me to wait on ye," answered Peggy ; "an' if ye did, I'd rather stay i' the house I ken sae weel, wi' the maister who has been aye sae gude to me, than gang roamin' about the warld. But when ye are a great lady, mind I always said this would come to pass ; for if he is not an yerl he is as rich as one, I'll be bound."

"And I am sure he is kinder to me than any duke in the land could be," agreed Phemie ; but Phemie sighed for all that—a deep sigh—for the vanished hopes, for the dream here that could return to her no more!

CHAPTER XII.

FOR LIFE.

SPRING came to the sweet valley of Tordale—came with its flowers and sunshine—its showers—its springing grass—its budding trees—its balmy winds—its wealth of promise—across the hills and up the ravine.

By the dark green of the yarrow under foot—by the anemones and hyacinths blooming beneath the trees—by the soft cushions of lady's-fingers—by the scent of the clover in the meadows—by the ragged-robin trailing through the hedges—by the saxifrage growing beside the waterfall—by the ferns daintily unfolding their leaves—by the delicate colour of the moss covering the boulders—you could tell as you passed by that Spring had come, and was decking herself in robes of coolest verdure, to greet the richer beauty of the summer.

When the young lambs were dotted about on the mountain-sides—when marsh-marigolds and gowans were to be gathered in handfuls—when the streams and rills were dancing over the stones and making sweet melody as they sped along, thankful the winter snows were melted, the winter frosts thawed—Phemie Keller was married.

Ere ever the wild roses put forth buds—ere ever the honey-suckle climbing among thorn and briar and bramble began to scent the air with its delicious fragrance—in the spring-time of her young life—in the first bloom and blush of her rare loveliness—Phemie became a wife.

In the midst of the congregation Captain Stondon met her a stranger—from the midst of the congregation he took her for himself.

Had he ever wanted to be rid of his bargain—to back out of the engagement entered into, where the Cumberland hills frowned down on Tordale Church—he would have found it no easy matter to do so, for the whole parish might have been summoned as witnesses on Phemie's behalf.

The shepherds left their sheep to the tender mercies of the coolies—the farmers put on their best suits and plodded up the valley to Tordale Church—the eggs were not collected—the milk was not churned—the children did not go to school on that fine spring morning when Phemie Keller was married.

Had privacy been desired, privacy would have been in Tordale simply impossible; and as no secret was made of the day or the hour, as everybody had known for weeks previously when the ceremony was to take place, the church was literally crammed.

Many a one who had never gone to hear Mr Conbyr preach went to hear him read the words that made the bride and bridegroom one—went to see the grand gentleman, who was popularly supposed to have so much money that he did not know what to do with it, taking to wife Daniel Aggland's niece—bonnie Phemie, who, for all her great fortune, for all her fine clothes, looked pale and frightened, or, as one of the spectators remarked, "flate."

"There is a most serious deal of difference," he added, shaking his head solemnly; "she's but a bairn, with her glintin' hair, and her soft blue eyes, and her jimp waist that I could 'most span with my one hand. She's but a bairn, while he"—and the man took a long look at Captain Stondon, who was standing bare-headed, with the sunshine streaming full upon him—"Go'nows *how* old he is."

I should like to be able to sketch that interior for you, my reader. I should like to show you the men and women and the children who filled the church, and looked with grave, interested faces at the group standing before the altar. I should like to paint for you the way the sunbeams fell on Phemie's hair, turn-

ing each thread to gold—how they showed her pale pure face to every soul in the church—how in her white dress she looked more lovely than ever.

The Agglands were there, all of them—all Phemie's relations, excepting the Kellers—all her friends—all her acquaintances—all who knew anything about her—were gathered together on that bright spring morning; but Captain Stondon had no one belonging to him present on the occasion. Even his best man was no fine gentleman from London, but merely a stray curate from Grassenfel, who could not have seemed more uncomfortable had he been going to be married himself.

Already Captain Stondon had found that the position of his wife's family in the social scale placed him in an awkward dilemma. There are always certain embarrassments entailed by differences of rank which are felt by Love the moment he walks out of doors with the lady of his choice.

The world cares for Mammon, though Cupid may not. Society is apt to make merry over the ways and manners of those who are not the *crème de la crème*, while the happy pair are absorbed in one another. The wedding at Tordale would have shocked the sensitive nerves of Captain Stondon's intimates; and, accordingly, prudently and sensibly he refrained from making himself a laughing-stock among his friends.

When we are at Rome we do as Rome does. When we are in the world we conform to its usages; and though Captain Stondon was marrying out of the world, he still meant to return to the world and take his bride thither with him.

The absence of all hypercritical guests was best for both Phemie and her uncle. They had admitted as much to one another; and yet the fact of none of the bridegroom's friends being present hurt them, and showed them clearly, as if the future had been spread out before their eyes, that from all old associations—from all old friends—from all old habits—Phemie Keller was passing swiftly away.

As the shadow fades from the hill-side, leaving no trace of where it has rested, so auburn hair and blue eyes was passing

away from the old familiar life—from the rugged mountain scenery—from the drip of the waterfall—from the calm peacefulness—from the sweet monotony of that remote valley for ever.

She might come back again, but never the Phemie she had been; never again might she look out on life as she had done from the windows of her dream castle; she might never more gaze upon the mountains with the same eyes; she might never speak with the same thoughts and wishes swelling in her heart.

She was going out to be another Phemie; in a different rank; with different aims, and hopes, and objects; with a difficult part to play; with a difficult path to follow: no wonder that as the farmers' wives saw the tears filling her eyes, and rolling down her cheeks, they said, with an intuitive, unreasoning pity, "God help her; and she so young!"

So young; that was the string everybody harped on. It never seemed to have occurred to them before that she was barely more than a child, till they came to see her pledging her whole future—all the long, long years she had in all human probability before her—away.

Many a one present had not liked Phemie over much in days gone by. They had thought her conceited, fanciful, stuck up; but now that she was being made a lady of—now that the whole country-side had been bidden to a marriage feast at the Hill Farm, and that the girl, in her sorrow and trouble at leaving everything behind her, had gone to bid even the veriest virago in Tordale good-bye—her shortcomings were forgotten, and nothing but her youth and beauty remembered.

Her fine clothes, that she had been so proud to exhibit, were never thought of; the grand match she was making, and of which some present had been very jealous, faded out of recollection; and for the time being her young face, her girlish figure, filled every heart with a vague pity. Something was wanting in that bridal group, and the spectators felt the want as they looked at the child giving herself to this man so long as he lived or as she lived.

There was not a person present—unless, indeed, it might be Mr Aggland—who could have defined his or her sensations; but,

nevertheless, every one felt the absence of that intangible something which Phemie Keller might never now become acquainted with, sinlessly, through all the years to come.

That was it—for better, for worse—she was resigning all hope, all chance of happy love; love with its bliss and agony; love with its doubts and distractions; love without which no life, be it otherwise ever so symmetrical, can be perfect. Attachment—affection—a calm, even, unruffled existence, is better, some tell you, than the hot and the cold, the fever and the collapse, the mad pulse and the shivering agony. It may be so. God knows what is best for us: God knew what was best for Phemie Keller.

And yet as the “keld” comes darkling upon the surface of the Cumberland lakes, without cloud, without wind, without shadow, without reason that we can trace, so in the middle of the sunshine, in the middle of the prosperity, a “keld” seemed to gather on the waters of Phemie’s life; those clear waters that were as yet unruffled by passion, untroubled by regret.

For she was, as they all said, young. She was such a child that her composure was disturbed by Davie, who had thought it incumbent upon him to come and see the ceremony, like his neighbours.

A wise dog, he followed the wedding party from the Hill Farm at a distance, and had slunk into the church in an unassuming, undemonstrative manner, with his tail between his legs, doubtless hoping by this manœuvre to escape observation.

But Mrs Aggland, ever lynx-eyed, spied him out, and bade Duncan take him home; an order which Duncan disputed in so loud a whisper that the controversy attracted the attention of one of the shepherds, who secured the dog, and placed him between his legs, from which position Davie surveyed the ceremony with sorrowful eyes.

When the company began to disperse Davie walked out with the first, but waited, like a Christian, in the church porch for Phemie.

He knew as well as anybody there that she was going from him. Many a pleasant mile they had walked together over the

hills ; many a score times she had called him to follow her to Strammer Tarn ; many a morning they had run down the hill-side and across the valley when the sun was looking at them over Helbeck in the glad summer, or in the dreary winter, when Phemie looked back gleefully to see her footprints in the snow. They had climbed together ; they had rested among the heather ; she had twined wild flowers round his neck, an attention he had not then appreciated ; she had loved him and been good to him ; and now it was all over, and Davie knew it, and because he knew it he did not jump upon her, or fawn, or gambol, or bark as she came out.

He only wagged his dilapidated tail from side to side, and licked her hand, and looked up in her face, and said farewell as plainly as a dumb brute can.

At which performance Phemie—Phemie Keller no longer—broke out crying, to the dismay of Captain Stondon, who hurried her through the churchyard and down the steps, inwardly anathematizing Davie in particular, and the lookers-on in general.

“It’s all along of you,” remarked Mrs Aggland, giving Duncan a shake. “If you had taken the dog back, as I told you, she would have been all right. Was ever woman plagued as I am by a set of disobedient, headstrong boys?”

“Well, you wouldn’t have liked to go home yourself,” retorted Duncan ; whilst Mr Aggland, with a troubled look in his face, muttered as he walked along, leading Helen by the hand—

“An auld head set on shouthers young,
The like was never seen ;
For bairnies will be bairnies aye,
As they hae ever been.”

But he was thinking of something else all the while. He was thinking about Phemie ; thinking, as he had never thought before, of the future she was going out to meet.

“Keep up, Phemie ; be brave,” he found an opportunity of whispering to her, and the girl dried her tears, and smiled her best, and laughed when her husband broke the bride-cake over her head, after the fashion of the country, while the young men

and the young women contended for the very crumbs eagerly.

Then Captain Stondon was happy again. He forgave Duncan and he forgave the inhabitants of Tordale, and he made himself so agreeable while Phemie was getting ready for her departure, that the bride's youth and the bride herself were forgotten, and everybody joined in praises of the officer, and wishes for his health, happiness, and prosperity.

The guests were going to keep up the feast till night, or at least as long as their heads remained tolerably steady, but the bride and bridegroom had to start early in the afternoon to catch the train at Carlisle, from which place Phemie had elected to go to Scotland to spend her honeymoon.

After that Captain Stondon proposed travelling on the Continent, and the girl did not know when she should see her uncle or Cumberland again.

"I hope you will be happy, Phemie," he said; "I believe you will."

"I think I shall, uncle," she answered; but the tears were in her eyes as she spoke.

"I have something to say to you before you go," he began; "something that came into my mind as I followed you home from church."

"What is it?" she asked. "What is it?" she repeated, seeing that he paused and hesitated.

"If I was sending Duncan out into the world," he said, "I should warn him that it is a sinful world; that though it may not be hard to keep straight in a lonely place like this, it is not so easy to be good with temptations surrounding us on every side—"

"Yes, uncle," agreed Phemie.

"Burns says," proceeded Mr Aggland, "that—"

'Gentlemen an' ladies worst,
Wi' ev'ndown want o' wark are curst.'

Now you are going to be a lady, Phemie, and a lady out in the world, and I do not want you to lose your head in consequence;

I do not want you to live an objectless, useless, idle life. Chaucer tells us truly that—

‘An ydil man is like an hous that hath norne walls,
The deviles may enter on every syde;’

and an idle woman’s position is quite as bad, Phemie, quite.”

“But I shall not be idle,” she pleaded.

“You will not have to work,” he answered, “and that with many is synonymous with idleness. You are going to you know not what, my child,” he went on; “you are going into a strange world, where there are strange fashions, strange creeds, strange ideas of morality. Phemie, you will keep yourself straight; you won’t forget what I have tried to teach you; you won’t forget what your grandfather taught you; you won’t forget this world is not all, and that its fashions and its pleasures pass swiftly away?”

“I will try to be good, uncle.”

“You will have servants under you,” he continued. “Don’t be hard with them, Phemie; don’t be thoughtless. Remember they have souls to be saved as well as you. You have beauty. It is an article much prized where you are going. Don’t be too vain of it. Remember God gave it to you—a gift not to be abused. Never forget that, unless allied to something better, it is but—

‘A doubtful good, a gloss, a glass, a flower,
Lost, faded, broken, dead within an hour.’

You will be rich; when you are so, ‘be not exalted,’ as Cleobulus pithily puts it. Solomon says, ‘riches are not for ever;’ remember that; and also that for the use you make of them while you have them you will be held accountable. I would have you emulate those—

‘Great souls, who, touch’d with warmth divine,
Give gold a price, and teach its beams to shine;
All hoarded pleasures they repute a load,
Nor think their wealth their own, till well bestowed.’

But you are going into a world so new and strange that all old counsels, all old teachings, seem inapplicable to it.”

And Mr Aggland dropped his hand despairingly on Phemie's shoulder as he concluded.

"I will try to remember," she said.

"I would have you—

' Strive in youth
To save your age from care,'"

continued her uncle. "I would have you keep every Christian grace, every womanly virtue. I do not wish to see you a fashionable lady. Do not at first be too confident, but proceed—

' Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread.'

And yet I would not have you over-fearful, or cowardly, because I know 'that what begins in fear usually ends in folly.' I want you to keep a balance, Phemie, between bigotry and irreligion—between virtue and prudery—between hard work and idleness—between confidence and presumption."

"I wish I had not to go away at all, uncle," was her comment on this string of advice.

"If you had not to go away I should not have to warn you," he answered. "And now good-bye, and don't forget me, Phemie; don't quite forget me, if you can help it."

He was parting from the girl he had loved like his own daughter; parting from her who was going forth on an untried, uncertain road; and if the tears did come into his eyes, if his voice did tremble for a moment, I hope those who read these pages will not think him the less a man for all that.

As for Phemie, seeing him in such trouble, she kept her own trouble back bravely. She would not cry; she would not unfit herself for saying what she knew was the truth, that she could never forget him, nor forget the Hill Farm; and she took his hand and kissed it ere he could prevent her, while she whispered—

"The mother may forget the child
That smiles sac sweetly on her knee,
But I'll remember thee, Glencairn,
And a' that thou hast done for me."

And then she broke down—then she threw herself into his arms and lay sobbing there till Helen came to remind her time was getting on, and that railway trains wait for no one.

“You must go now, Phemie,” said her uncle; “do not think me unkind for hurrying you away—

‘I have too grieved a heart to take a tedious leave.’

There now. Let’s not unnerve each other,” and he put her gently back from him. “And now for my last words. Remember that you are but an—

‘Unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpractised.
Happy in this—you are not yet so old
But you may learn.’

Be a good wife to the man who has chosen you, and whom you have chosen. ‘Do him good, and not evil, all the days of your life.’ Now, Phemie, now—now,” and he unclasped the arms she had thrown round him once again, and bade her say what other farewells she had to say, as it was high time they were off to Carlisle.

“I shall come back again,” Phemie said to each and all. “I shall come back again, Duncan. I will indeed, Helen. Be sure I won’t stay long away, Peggy.”

But Peggy M’Nab refused to be comforted. She went into her kitchen after the happy pair drove away, and covered her head with her apron, and sobbed aloud.

“Don’t cry, Peggy!—don’t, don’t!” exclaimed Helen, with the tears streaming down her own cheeks; “don’t cry; she will come back to us; you heard her say yourself that she would.”

“Alake, Miss Helen,” answered Peggy, from behind her curtain of blue check, “the child that I carried in my arms—that I nursed in my lap—I have not seen this mony a year, unless, maybe, by an odd time in a dream; and your cousin Phemie, who has just gane awa’, neither you nor me will ever set eyes on again till our deein’ day.”

At which assurance Helen lifted up her voice and wept aloud, for she did not understand the exact meaning of the hard truth

contained in Peggy's pathetic words. And if she had, would she have wept the less? Would she have ceased lamenting? Would it have been any consolation to her to know that another Phemie might come back, but that the Phemie who had danced over the heather, and sat by Strammer Tarn, and assisted in all household duties; who had been gay and sad, happy and sorrowful, could return to the Hill Farm—to the peace and quiet of the valley below—to the rugged mountains—to the murmuring waterfall—never more—ah, never!

CHAPTER XIII.

DISAPPOINTED.

MONTAGUE STONDON, Esquire, barrister-at-law, heir presumptive to Marshlands, fifteenth, or twentieth, or thirtieth cousin, or something equally near of kin to the man who had just taken unto himself a wife, lived in Chapel Street, Grosvenor Place, in a house which commanded in front a cheerful view of the other side of the way, and at the back looked out over Tattersall's to St George's Hospital.

It was not a large house, it was not a convenient one, it was far and away too expensive for Mr Stondon's means ; but it was sufficiently genteel, it was within five minutes of the Row, it was close to the Green Park, it touched elbows with Belgrave Square, and altogether suited the barrister as well as any house is ever likely to suit any man who is overwhelmed with debt, and who, having the tastes of a millionaire, is often at his wits' end to know where to raise twenty pounds.

If you are not bidden to a banquet, I cannot see the precise pleasure that accrues from beholding others partaking of it. If you have not the means to visit with his Grace the Duke, it is beyond my capacity to understand why you should pay fabulous rents for the mere enjoyment of living near his Grace, and seeing her Grace's carriage pass your door ; but Montague Stondon felt that there was a satisfaction in residing within call of nobility, and that their footmen, their equipages, their crests, and coats of arms conferred a certain importance on him. The earth would

not be a very cheerful dwelling-place if it were beyond reach of the sun's rays, and in the opinion of Montague Stondon the sun never rose except about Belgrave Square and those other regions affected by the nobility and gentry of England.

When he rode out on his hired horse, he could be in the midst of rank and fashion immediately ; he could take his fine whiskers into the Park and air them there, while he gnawed the handle of his riding-whip, and wondered how the deuce he was to carry on for a year or two longer.

When Mrs Stondon, a faded fashionable woman, who had brought her husband some fortune, "received," she liked to think that the carriages of her visitors and the carriages of the great people hard by touched wheels in the street.

It was nice to lie on the sofa and listen to the thundering double knocks powdered footman were giving in the neighbouring square ; it would have been impossible to have ordered goods home if home had chanced to be outside the radius of fashion ; it would have done Basil harm at school had his parents not lived in a genteel quarter ; it would have been fatal to him at college had the parental letters been dated from any locality less desirable than Chapel Street.

Fashion—even the flimsiest and falsest kind of fashion—was a good to be purchased at any price, at any risk. They had been used to it—they had been accustomed to terrible dinner parties, to crowded assemblies, to boxes at the Opera, to all the hundred weary pleasures which so many Londoners consider necessary to their very existence ; and the consequence was that, as they could not relinquish any of their usual indulgences, they got more and more involved while the years went by, and less and less able to extricate themselves from their embarrassments.

But for the hope of Marshlands, but for the idea that some day they should have money in plenty, life would scarcely have been supportable. As it was, they went on their way, trusting that news would soon come of Captain Stondon's death, and of their own accession to fortune.

"What right has a man like that to own such a property?"

demanded Mrs Montague Stondon. "He might just as well give it to us for all the enjoyment he takes out of it. I am positive he cannot spend more than five hundred a year!" and the lady sighed at the idea of Marshlands belonging to a person who could so limit his personal expenditure.

As for his profession, Montague Stondon made very little of it. If he possessed any natural abilities he never used them. If there was money to be earned at the Bar, scarcely any of it found its way into his pocket. He was good company, but he was not much of an opinion. He could shoot better than he could plead; he liked lounging in his own drawing-room, cantering up the Row, criticising the latest beauty, far more than sitting in his chambers or cross-examining witnesses.

His manners would have brought him business, his address made him a favourite with the judges; but his intense dislike for work, his inordinate love of pleasure, rendered his career a failure, his whole existence but a race after amusement, a longing for dead men's shoes, a staving-off of duns, an incessant struggle with debt and poverty.

It is astonishing how miserably poor, people living in a respectable manner, inhabiting a house in a desirable neighbourhood, keeping several servants, eating of the best, sleeping on the softest, may really be. The sempstress living in Bethnal Green had not more anxiety for the morrow, more care for the day, than Montague Stondon, Esq., of Chapel Street, Grosvenor Place, who was over head and ears in debt, and who spent that portion of his life which he passed in the bosom of his family in alternately cursing his luck and praying for the death of his relative.

"If that fellow do not soon go home," he remarked one morning to his wife, "I shall have to figure in the 'Gazette;' we cannot carry on much longer as we are doing now!" and he flung down letter after letter containing requests for debts recently incurred, more pressing demands for bills of longer standing, and threats of law from creditors whose large stock of patience was at last fairly exhausted. "I am sure I do not know what we are to do unless we can retrench."

“Retrench!” repeated Mrs Stondon, raising her light eyebrows at the very idea. “How are we to do that? If you can show me how it is possible for us to retrench,” she proceeded, with quite a show of energy, “I am willing to begin.” And the lady went on opening her letters, while Montague Stondon took refuge behind the “Times,” muttering, as he did so,

“Willing or not, there will soon have to be something done, I see that plainly.”

Meantime Mrs Stondon read her letters. They were, as a rule, the customary letters which ladies write to ladies, crossed as if note-paper had been ten guineas a quire and postage three shillings the half ounce; but occasionally there intervened a short curt note from some indignant milliner, or a pathetic entreaty for money from a struggling dressmaker.

These Mrs Stondon dropped as though they had burnt her fingers; but to the small gossip, the petty tittle-tattle, the long rambling epistles of her friendly correspondents, she devoted herself with praiseworthy earnestness.

“Mary Monk is going to be married,”—these were the pieces of information to which she treated her husband—“a very nice match, Mrs Monk says. Three thousand a year, and a most lovely place in Derbyshire. So devotedly attached to her, and so fond of all her family. Well, Mrs Monk is fortunate—she has got rid of four out of the seven now. Julia Enon has another boy, so there will be no want of heirs there; and Sir John Martingale has proposed for and been accepted by a widow who has a hundred thousand pounds fortune. Caroline wants us to go and stay with her for a month before she leaves for the Continent, and Mrs Leigh hopes we will not forget them this summer. What a pleasant world this would be if one had plenty of money!” sighed Mrs Stondon, laying down Mrs Leigh’s letter and taking up another.

“I wonder who this is from?” she said, turning it over; “post-mark Grassenfel—who do we know in Grassenfel, Montague?”

“That is the place where Henry was laid-up at,” answered her

husband, his interest excited in a moment. "I wish to heaven he had broke his neck there!"

"Hush! you should not say such things," expostulated his wife.

"Only think them, I suppose," was his reply. "Well, what have you got? What have you got, I say?" and he snatched the enclosure out of his wife's hand, and read—

"CAPTAIN STONDON,—MRS STONDON."

"Damn him!" said Mr Montague Stondon, when he had taken in what it all meant. "Damn her—damn them both!"

And having concluded this little commination service, he looked at his wife, and his wife looked at him; and then they looked with one accord at the bills and letters strewing the breakfast table.

"It is a cursed shame!" broke out Mr Stondon, and his brown eyes seemed to grow black with rage as he spoke; "a man ought to be locked up for doing such a thing—at his time of life, too! He must be mad—he has no right to be at large!"

"Some designing creature, doubtless," wept Mrs Stondon.

"That cuts Basil out for ever," said Mr Stondon, with another oath.

"She may not have any children," observed his wife, clutching at the only straw within reach.

"Won't she?" answered the barrister, "won't she? by George! She'll have scores of them, and Basil may go and enlist as soon as he likes, for none of us will ever touch a penny of the Marshlands rents now."

"I wonder who she is, Montague? Look in the 'Times' and see if it is there."

And it was there.

"At Tordale, by the Rev. Edward Conbyr, Vicar—Henry Gower Stondon, Esq., late Captain in the —th Hussars, to Euphemia, only daughter of the late Ernest Keller, Esq., and niece of General Keller, Roundwood, Sussex."

"How the deuce did he meet one of the Roundwood Kellers at Grassenfel?" demanded Mr Stondon, and his wife said feebly that she really did not know.

"Depend upon it," went on the barrister, "there is something queer about the business, otherwise he never would have kept it so quiet. There is a screw loose somewhere, but that won't do us any good. He might just as well have broken his neck." And Montague Stondon, aged a dozen years in as many minutes, tossed over his bills with the air of a man who did not know which way to turn for assistance. "It will bring them all down upon me," he said; and he began swearing once again, when his wife suggested that perhaps Captain Stondon would help him over his difficulties and do something for Basil.

"You do not know what you are talking about," was his reply; "you do not know how much we owe. It would not take a shilling less than ten thousand pounds to put us straight, and you do not expect him to give us that, I suppose, with a wife in the present, and a tribe of children coming?"

"She may not have any family," repeated Mrs Stondon.

"I tell you she will," answered her husband. "Women always have children when you don't want them to have any; and even if she have not, what good will that be to us? She will take care of him now, and he will live for—God only knows how long." And Mr Montague Stondon thrust the ends of his whiskers into his mouth, and chewed them savagely, while he wrought out this problem to his own dissatisfaction.

For a minute some vague idea of setting to work even at the eleventh hour—of struggling for wealth, position, ease—crossed the barrister's mind.

What was the good of such a life, after all? Where was the pleasure of running into debt? What did the opinion of the world signify? What did it matter whether he met fifty fashionable people in the course of the day, who were as perfectly indifferent to him as he was to them? Was this weary game worth the price of the candle which he was burning down and down, day after day, and week after week? Could he do nothing to

retrieve the past? or was it too late for everything but debt, and duns, and discontent?

“If he had any family pride, I would go into trade to spite him,” said the barrister at last. “I would take a shop and put on an apron, and paint Montague Stondon, grocer, up in the High Street of Disley, as fast as I would walk into the Park; but he would only say he hoped I should do a good business, and offer to pay my rent for the first year, and tell me to send over half a dozen pounds of tea to Marshlands. Hang him!” finished Mr Stondon, with fervour. “I wish he was being tried for his life at the Old Bailey, and that I was for the Crown. He should die if he had fifty lives; he should swing from a gallows as high as Haman’s, if I had any voice in the matter.”

“My dear Montague!” entreated Mrs Stondon.

“He might just as well and better have died in India,” proceeded her husband; “nobody would have missed him, and I should then have succeeded to Marshlands. When a man goes out to India, he is expected to stay there, and he has no right to come back to stand in the way of his relations. I wish I was twenty years younger, I would show Captain Stondon how a man may get on without Marshlands: but Basil shall work. He shall not lead the life I have done. If I could but get rid of these cursed liabilities, I would think about him.”

“Perhaps Captain Stondon would do something,” suggested the lady.

“He only paid for his education when he was single,” retorted the barrister; “do you think he will do more now he is married?” And Mrs Stondon had to take refuge in her private opinion, which was that the very first time she had a chance she would “humble herself,” as she expressed it, to her kinsman, and ask him to help Mr Stondon, and to push on her son.

“Only give me an opportunity,” thought this wise lady, “and I will improve it.”

And without saying a word to her husband, the very day she heard of Captain Stondon’s arrival in town she called upon the bride, whom she offered to take with her to every possible and im-

possible place ; whom she kissed ; whom she flattered ; whom she treated as though Phemie had been one of the blood royal, or a countess in her own right.

Then she told Mr Stondon that he must call also, and Mr Stondon called.

"The girl is pretty," he said, on his return home, "and I do not think she has fooled him. It is her face that has done it ; and somehow or other, though how I can't imagine, it is a great match for her. She has no manners ; she has no confidence ; she is just an unfledged country wench whom he has fallen in love with on account of her beauty ;" and Montague Stondon cursed her beauty, and wished all women were born a hundred years old and as ugly as witches. "She will lead him a pretty dance before long," finished the barrister ; "why there must be forty years between them : he might be her grandfather. Do you know how they happened to meet with one another, and who made her marry him ? for, of course, she never did it of her own free will.

"I know nothing," answered Mrs Montague Stondon. "I have never seen her alone ; he will not trust her out of his sight. I said if he had any business to attend to, before he went abroad, I would try to amuse her ; but he said that he had no business, and that he thought 'Phemie,' as he calls her, would like best to go about with him. And if you believe me, Montague," went on the lady, "the girl said she did not want to go anywhere without him ; an ungrateful minx ! and I think she is fond of him ; positively, my dear, I think she is."

"So should I be, if he gave me Marshlands," answered Mr Stondon.

"Ah ! but I mean without Marshlands. I think she is one of those soft, pulpy, characterless girls who like anybody who is fond of them. Whatever he says she agrees with. She does nothing but blush and answer every question through him. 'I do not know what Captain Stondon intends to do.' 'Henry, where shall we be going to first?' 'Shall we return to England this year, Henry?' It is Henry this, and Henry that, and 'May I, Henry?' —perfectly disgusting, you know ; bad enough when the husband

is a boy, but simply ridiculous when he might be her great-grandfather."

"I must try to get something more out of her when they dine here," remarked Mr Stondon; "you have asked them, have you not?"

"Yes," answered Mrs Stondon, "and what is more, they are coming. I thought I never should have persuaded Captain Stondon, but he ultimately yielded. I suppose the bride knows nothing of *les convenances* and that he is afraid of her making some *faux pas*."

"Poor little soul!" ejaculated the barrister.

"Little simpleton," remarked his wife.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON VIEW.

WHEN Mrs Montague Stondon invited her relations to dine with them in "a quiet way," she assured Captain Stondon that she would not ask more than a couple, or so, of friends to meet them.

"It will be only a family party," she declared, and then forthwith she wrote notes to about five-and-twenty people, of whom the one-half had pleasure in accepting.

"I could not get through the dinner with that pair alone," she informed her husband; "and if we have one or two, we may as well have a dozen. It is no more trouble, and it is no more expense; and although Captain Stondon talks so much about not caring for society, I know he would not like to spend an evening *tête-à-tête* with us. That is the way with all those kind of men. They do not know what they want! If the bride acquits herself creditably he will be as proud as a peacock, and it shall not be my fault if she do not."

"Nor mine," added Mr Stondon, for all which kind intentions Phemie would have been duly grateful had she only known of them.

As it was, she dreaded that visit as she had never dreaded anything before in her life, and the hints and instructions which Captain Stondon thought it necessary to give only made her original confusion worse. He told her she must not do this, and that she must do something else. He fidgeted about her dress; he would not let her maid arrange her hair, but sent for

an individual with elaborate whiskers, who made her head ache, and sent her out unable to bend her neck.

“I do not think going to Court could be much worse than this!” sighed Phemie, as she fitted on her gloves; but she felt comforted when her husband surveyed her proudly, and told her she was the prettiest creature he had ever seen.

“Am I really pretty, Henry?” asked the girl, who had begun to question her own good looks, and to value her personal possessions at a much more modest rate than formerly.

“Are you really what?” he retorted, holding her at arm’s length from him, and proudly surveying her from head to foot. “Are you really what?—oh, vanity! vanity!” and then Phemie laughed and blushed to hear again and again that she was beautiful.

But no consciousness of beauty could have made that dinner-party other than a wretched ordeal to the young wife. The faces of twelve strangers whom she had never seen previously, swam before her. Thirty eyes were always, as she imagined, riveted on her. If Mr Stondon would only have let her alone; if he had only not tried to make her talk; if the servants could only have believed that she was not famishing, and that she did not want a glass of wine every other minute; if the light had not been so strong; if the room had not been so close; if everything had been different, Phemie thought she could have managed better: as it was, she envied Mrs Stondon, she envied the servants, she envied every person and any person who knew what was what, and she envied, beyond all other persons, a young lady who, owing to there being seven on a side, sat next to her, and whose composure filled Phemie with the most intense admiration, not to say awe.

If she had upset her wine, if she had spilled her soup, if she had taken mint sauce with duck, if she had kept the whole table waiting, if she had answered without being spoken to, if she had dropped her fork, if she had appropriated her neighbour’s bread, that wonderful woman would have shown no more sign of embarrassment than if she had done everything decently and in order.

Talking to a gentleman on her right hand, she let a morsel of

chicken fall from her fork, and the misadventure made Phemie feel as though she had committed some sin herself.

"That was a great disappointment," remarked the culprit to her, with a charming smile, and then straightway she observed to her other neighbour, "which shows people should not try to do two things at once."

"If I could learn to be like her," thought Phemie, jealously, "I should not mind paying a thousand pounds, supposing I had the money."

Have patience, child, have patience—Rome was not built in a day. If the gift be so valuable, rest content, for it will come to you yet; if ease of manner and indifference to the opinions of others be possessions worth coveting, rest satisfied, for in the years now before you all diffidence will vanish and fade away, and you shall care no more for speaking to a countess than you ever did to a farmer's wife in Tordale.

But be not over-eager, *ma mignonne*, for the human being has yet to be created who shall retain a child's heart under a woman's manner. Is it worth the price, Phemie? Is the external ease and grace and self-possession a fair exchange for the internal suffering and loss that must first be incurred? In this world do we get anything cheaply? On this side heaven can we secure any prize without paying dearly for it? It is better to be embarrassed at a dinner-party than to sit nursing care o' nights. It is better that society should have our worst than that we should be miserable when the guests are gone and the doors closed. The day may come when you will look back to the blushing, timid, ignorant Phemie, three parts through her teens, and wish you could steal her back from the past to have and to hold for ever—wish unavailingly, for along the road you will then have travelled there is no return, and the Phemie you can dimly remember—the Phemie who was married while yet almost a child in Tordale Church, may return to you in the flesh, only when the rivers flow back to their springs, when the grain ripens in December, and the flowers and the trees bloom and look green among winter frosts and snows.

Nevertheless Phemie envied her companion, and wished with all her heart that the calumet of peace she and the Captain had come to smoke in Chapel Street had not assumed the form of a dinner-party.

How could she guess that care was sitting beside her hostess likewise?—how could she imagine, looking at the plate, the glass, the china, the servants, the wines, the fruits, that Mrs Stondon had not found it easy to arrange her materials? that there was a terrible to-morrow, and a more terrible morrow after, coming to the smiling woman at the head of the table? How could she foresee the end which came to Montague Stondon, to his debts, to his embarrassments, to his dinners, to his hopes, to his schemes? When he took her under his especial protection later on in the evening, and began “drawing her out,” she, looking at his fine figure, at his handsome face, never realized how stiff and stark would be the one, how fixed and ghastly the other, ere she set foot in England again.

If she could have turned over a few pages and read to the point where “the end” was written across his life, she would have been tolerant and sorrowful; as it was, she saw merely his brown eyes searching through her, she heard only his soft voice asking her questions, which were full of torture to her.

“She liked flowers, he was certain;” so he took her to see the conservatory, which was always full of bloom, let who would go without money. “You must not compare our plants with those you are accustomed to at Roundwood,” he went on; “General Keller’s gardens are famous all over Sussex, I am told.”

Phemie kept silence for a moment. She did not know whether Captain Stondon would like her to say she and the Kellers were far apart as the poles; and, on the other hand, she felt it would not be truthful for her to let Mr Stondon think she had ever seen her father’s birthplace.

She had not lived all the most impressionable part of her life, however, with Mr Aggland for nothing, and accordingly she answered timidly, though with the tell-tale colour that offended Mrs Stondon flushing her face—

"I think your flowers beautiful, and I have never been at Roundwood."

"Then you have a pleasure more to come," replied Mr Stondon. "I suppose it is stale news to you that your aunt is in town. I saw her in the Park yesterday."

Phemie's thoughts flew back to the cruel letter with which her aunt had severed all ties between them ; and forgetting everything except that and the contemptuous repulse her mother had received from the Keller family, she retorted hotly—

"That she did not know anything about Miss Keller, and did not want to know. She had never seen her, and she hoped she never should see her ;" after which statement, feeling she had committed herself, the girl grew scarlet, and stooping down over the flowers, commenced admiring them insanely.

"What does your mamma say to the idea of your staying away from her for so long a time?" asked Mr Stondon, smiling. She was such a foolish little fish, and he was so skilful an angler (this was what he thought), that there was no use in wasting valuable bait upon her.

"I have not any mamma," replied Phemie. "She has been dead ever since I can remember, I was going to say ; but I can remember her, so that would not be true. She has been dead ever so many years—ever so many ;" and the bride bent her head again, and Montague Stondon knew it was to hide the tears that were brimming in her eyes.

He was beginning to like her. If she had been anybody else than his relation's wife he would have commenced a flirtation. She had divine hair, she had sweet eyes, she had a delicious voice, with the faintest, slightest Northern accent to make it earnest and pathetic. She was soft and pulpy, as Mrs Montague Stondon said ; but then men are not usually averse to even an exaggeration of feminine perfections.

She was astonishingly pretty, and young, and impulsive. The kind of girl it was possible to fancy kissing a man out of gratitude if he had done her a great service ; a charming girl, with the tenderest expression, with the whitest skin, with the

frankest manner, with the most extraordinary want of self-confidence.

"I do not blame him," thought Montague Stondon; "though she may have a dozen brats, and I lose Marshlands, I do not blame him."

"I did not mean to pain you," he said gently. "I knew you had lost your father, but I did not think you had lost your mother too; forgive me." And he looked so penitent that Phemie could not choose but say—

"I have nothing to forgive, only it always makes me sorry to talk about my mother. She was so pretty, and she died so young."

Phemie was pretty too; would she die young? Mr Stondon, looking into her face, would have helped that selfish question presenting itself if he could; but if Phemie was nice, Marshlands was nicer; and though he did not blame Captain Stondon for marrying her, it was impossible for him to avoid speculating on what might yet be if she were to die.

"It would kill him," considered the barrister. "How mercenary poverty makes a man; how good people who have plenty of money ought to be!" And then he said out loud, with a smile, "that he felt certain she had found some one to take her mother's place."

"I have always found more fathers than mothers," answered Phemie; and for all he tried hard to avoid laughing, Mr Stondon was obliged to do so outright, while Phemie, her little hand resting on his arm, stood wondering what she could have said to amuse him, wondering if she had made any mistake—done anything wrong.

"My grandfather took care of me first," she explained, "and then my uncle, and—don't you think Captain Stondon may be wondering where I am, and wanting me?" added Phemie, conscious she was getting into deep water, and feebly struggling back to land.

"Do you mean your grandfather, Mr Keller?" suggested Mr Stondon, as he led her towards the drawing-room.

"No," answered Phemie, impatiently. "If the Kellers had brought me up, I should have seen Roundwood; but I had nothing to do with them; I lived with my mother's father, a clergyman, till he died, and after that with my uncle in Cumberland."

"Is he a clergyman, too?" demanded her host.

"No—he is—he is—" and Phemie, knowing that Mr Stondon's eyes were fixed upon her, grew first hot and then cold, and then angry with herself for fearing to say out openly in that genteel London house how her honest uncle got his living honestly.¹

With a bitter pang of shame she remembered his kindness, and contrasted it with her cowardice. In a moment it swept through her mind that it was like disowning him not to stand up and do battle, if need were, for the man who had been as a father to her.

"He is a farmer," she finished, with a defiant uplifting of her beautiful head. "He is a farmer;" and the evening light fell softly on her face as she spoke.

The same light was lying across Tordale then; the shadows were creeping up Helbeck; they were darkling down on the valley. Almost unconsciously Phemie, as she saw the expression which came over Mr Stondon's face, turned and looked back at Tordale with the eyes of her heart, and as she looked she wished she was standing beside the waterfall, or among the flowers in her uncle's little garden, that she knew were giving out their fullest sweetness in that quiet evening hour.

"Shall we have to stay here long?" she asked her husband when she could escape from Mr Stondon, and get over to the other side of the room. "I am *so* tired."

And she looked so tired that Captain Stondon observed, pityingly, "Poor child!" before he proceeded to say that Mrs Stondon was most anxious to hear her sing. "You must make allowances for her," he added, turning to that lady; "she has lived all her life in the country, and been unable to receive proper instruction."

Whereupon Mrs Montague Stondon declared she was quite

certain she should be charmed; and, indeed, to do her justice, she had made up her mind to go into ecstasies if Phemie only screamed like a ballad-singer in the street.

Had not Captain Stondon promised to take care Basil was not disappointed in his long-talked-of trip to Norway, and did not she feel certain he would give her husband a few hundreds to stay the wolves for a time, at any rate?

Altogether, Mrs Montague Stondon had done her work better than the barrister. If she could have imagined the mess he had got into with Phemie she would have shaken him, weak and languid though she professed to be. Had she known how thoroughly the bride disliked him, how perfectly she understood Mr Stondon thought her "a thing in the way," she would scarcely have addressed herself so amiably to her guest.

"What style of music do you prefer? Did you bring any of your songs with you? No! well perhaps some of mine will suit your voice." And Mrs Stondon began turning over the pieces that lay on the piano.

"What, none of them?" exclaimed the barrister's wife in despair. "What, none of them? Can you not recollect anything? Not one tiny ballad?" and Mrs Montague Stondon grew quite pathetic about the matter.

"The difficulty is that Phemie does not accompany herself," said Captain Stondon at this juncture.

"Perhaps," suggested the lady who had excited Phemie's envy at dinner, "perhaps I can smooth away that difficulty, if Mrs Stondon will only tell me what she would like best to sing;" and she pulled off her gloves, and spread out her skirts, and sat down to the piano, and ran over the notes, triumphantly glancing up at poor, fluttering, confused Phemie the while, with a look which said—"Why are you not as I am? There is nothing to frighten you."

"What shall it be?" she asked, playing with chords and scales and chromatic passages carelessly as she spoke. "Some one mentioned ballads. Was it Scotch ballads—'Joek o' Hazeldean,' for instance?" and she just swept Phemie's face with her dark eyes

ere she bent them on some music Captain Stondon placed before her.

"I know that," the bride remarked in a low voice.

"'You'll remember me,'" answered the lady. "Sing it then by all means." And thus commanded, Phemie began.

But she never ended. She broke down hopelessly, ignominiously. She got frightened; she got confused. The strange room, the strange faces, the unaccustomed accompaniment, the novelty of her position, the very sound of her own voice alarmed her. She did her best; she fought against her embarrassment; she struggled on; she sang a false note; she made a desperate effort to recover herself; then she wavered and went wrong past redemption.

"It was all my fault," remarked her accompanist, cheerfully; "try the last verse."

"I cannot, I cannot, indeed," said Phemie, almost crying, not daring to look round, mortified, angry, and ashamed. "I shall never try to sing again. I cannot sing before any one. I shall never try."

"Oh yes, you will," laughed her new friend. "You will go abroad; you will have lessons; you will gain courage; you will cease to be diffident; you will learn to be confident; and finally, you will return to England, and sing 'Then you'll remember' to me as often as I like to ask you. Seriously, you have a splendid voice, and if it were not breaking a commandment I should covet it."

Looking at the speaker, Phemie straightway did break the commandment, and envied her: envied her beauty, her figure, her ease, and grace.

What curls she had!—what a magnificent neck!—what a lovely dress!—what a way of putting things!

She was like a picture out of one of Heath's "Books of Beauty." She was like a heroine of romance—with her long lashes—with her round arms—with her flowing hair—with her smile half gay, half pensive. Everything Phemie had ever dreamed of as most lovely in her sex was there for her to fall

down before and worship, if she would ; but instead of worshipping she envied—silly child—a woman who was not half so charming as herself. Is not auburn hair as beautiful as raven curls?—have not men sighed for a glance from blue eyes as well as from black?—has not seventeen its attractions—its young spring freshness—its soft loveliness—though it cannot possess the easy grace, the finished manner of five-and-twenty? And did not five-and-twenty, with all her social advantages, look with a kind of speculative interest—with a vague regret at seventeen, who thought breaking down in a song the most terrible misfortune that could happen to her, and who wanted to get away and cry over her mishap.

If she could only ever hope to acquire a tenth portion of Miss Derno's self-possession she would be satisfied. If she could only talk as she talked—answer questions without a change of colour—play whatever she was requested to play—Phemie thought she should have nothing more to ask from heaven. And she sat and considered these things in the corner of a distant sofa where Mrs Montague Stondon had placed her, while that lady looked her new relative over as she might have done a piece of handsome silk in a draper's shop.

All at once Phemie came back from her musings, or, rather, having followed them out to a definite point, she looked up abruptly, and said,

“Can you tell me how old Miss Derno is?”

Now there was a question to be put suddenly to a well-bred hostess!—and by a girl, too, whom she had decided did not possess a second idea.

“Why do you ask?” inquired Mrs Montague Stondon, with one of her sweetest smiles.

“Because I want to know,” answered Phemie, simply.

“How very singular!” exclaimed her hostess ; “how very odd! How deliciously straightforward you are! Miss Derno cannot be more than five-and-twenty, though she looks nearly thirty. Now, will you tell me why you wanted to know?”

"Only that I might see how many years older she is than I," replied Phemie.

"A great many, I imagine," laughed Mrs Stondon.

"She is half my lifetime older," said the girl, earnestly.

"I dare say she is; but what then?"

"Why, only that one may do ever so much in half a lifetime."

"I know some one who might do anything she chose," answered Mrs Montague Stondon, and Phemie coloured at the very roots of her hair at having her own thoughts put into such exceedingly plain English.

"Eight years!—what might she not do in eight years?" That was what she began pondering and considering. She could learn—she could gain knowledge—she could work hard—she could acquire such information as might make the man who had married her proud of her instead of ashamed.

For Phemie felt confident he must be ashamed of her. It might have been all very well at Tordale, but in London, and amongst all these grand people (as the girl in her innocence considered them), he must be ashamed of the wife he had chosen.

She felt her heart beat faster and the blood rush up into her face as she recalled a glance that she had seen exchanged between a pair of ladies when she broke down in her song so hopelessly. A raising of the eyebrows, a mere curl of the lips, the slightest shrug of the shoulders, told Phemie their thoughts as clearly as though they had spoken them outright.

And it was so hard—so hard because she knew she had a better voice than Miss Derno—and singing was her sole accomplishment, and Captain Stondon had been proud of it! He would never ask her to sing again; he would be afraid. He would—

"So you really are going to leave London in two days," said Miss Derno at this juncture, breaking in suddenly on her reverie. "How I envy you! How I wish I was going through Switzerland, and to Rome, and to Naples, instead of down to a lonely country house on the borders of civilization, where we get letters

about once a week, and see a stranger only when a vessel is wrecked on the coast!"

"I lived in a place as quiet as that," answered Phemie, "and liked it."

"Possibly; but you will like it no more. You could never go back and like it again. Solitude may be very charming, but society is more charming still. The world may be very hollow, but it is made up of our fellow-creatures for all that; and we cannot live without our fellow-creatures, bad as they are, for the simple reason that we are gregarious animals, and that angelic company is not obtainable on earth. Added to which," finished Miss Derno, "I think angels would be a little dull."

"I wish," said Phemie, "you were going abroad too. I should like it so much."

"So should I," answered Miss Derno, "but duty calls me to the ends of the earth, and I obey the summons. When you are in Paris, Vienna, or in any one of the hundred towns Captain Stondon says he intends taking you to see, think of me killing time—or, rather, being killed by time—in a place fifteen miles from everything—from letters—from papers—from books—from a doctor—from a station. There is no necessary of life near us excepting the churchyard, and we have no society unless a curate who wears thick boots and spectacles, and his lame wife and about twenty-seven children, can be called desirable neighbours."

"What do you do all day?" asked her auditor.

"We sleep a great deal, and we eat every hour or so, and we watch the vessels passing, through a telescope; and we wonder where they are going. Then we drive; and I ride, and walk; and some one or other of the curate's children is always getting maimed; and when the doctor has happily to be sent for, he calls at the great house, and brings us news of the outer world—of the latest suicide, of the most interesting murder. But there is my aunt preparing for departure. I must say good-bye. *Au revoir.*"

"I am afraid it will not be *au revoir*," said Phemie. "We are to be away for so long a time that it is not likely we shall see each other again ever."

Miss Derno laughed. "There is no 'for ever' in society. Everybody meets every one sooner or later; and, recollect, when we do meet you are to sing 'You'll remember' without a mistake. If we were to be parted for twenty years the first thing I should say to you would be, 'That song, Mrs Stondon.' So do not forget."

And she pressed Phemie's hand in hers, and was gone before the girl could answer.

CHAPTER XV.

FIVE YEARS LATER.

FIVE years after Mrs Montague Stondon's little party in Chapel Street the 3.55 express was tearing along the Eastern Counties line to Disley under the glare of the afternoon sun.

"It was the hottest day that summer," so every passenger said, and so every passenger had abundant reason for thinking. The dust was intolerable—the heat unendurable; if you kept the windows down you were choked, blinded, and generally driven distracted with dust, grit, smoke, and small gravel; if you pulled the windows up, you had dust still, and were roasted, baked, and boiled into the bargain.

When passengers got in, at the few stations where the train paused for such refreshment as could be afforded to it by water for its boiler, and oil for its wheels, each man and each woman seemed to bring a fire with him or her into the carriage. If they had been furnaces, instead of flesh and blood, they could not have added more to the discomfort of their neighbours than was the case.

The soda-water and sherry, the lemonade, the ginger-beer, which suffering humanity demanded at Cambridge as an alleviation of its miseries, might have been poured from a boiling kettle, and then the bell rang, and the passengers took their seats, and the train steamed out of the station, and plunged into the open country once again, routing up the gravel, and scattering stones and dust as it rushed along.

To heat and to dust there were, however, two travellers who seemed indifferent. Those two were Captain Stondon and his wife. After five years of moving from place to place, of seeing foreign countries, of living in hotels, in hired palaces, in Swiss *châlets* and French *châteaux*, they were returning by the 3.55 express to take up their head-quarters at Marshlands, and reside there for good.

With his back to the engine, with his hat off, with the warm breeze tossing his hair about and filling it full of dust, with his feet on the opposite seat, with the 'Times' lying beside him, Captain Stondon slept the sleep of the just, happily oblivious of the heat, and unconscious that Pheemie was sitting in a direct draught.

She had taken off her bonnet, and drawn the blue silk curtain so as to shelter her eyes from the full glare of the sun, and while the train strained and throbbed along the rails, she looked out over the country through which they were passing.

Should you know her? Scarcely. The hair is the same that the summer sun shone down on in Tordale, but it is not the young hair that first entangled Captain Stondon's fancy. There is no part of us that ages like the hair. Look at a child's hair—a boy's—a man's. Watch the wind stirring each of them, and you will see what I mean. Every year as it passes by lays its hands on our heads, and takes something of freshness and of beauty from them. What is it? you ask. I do not know. But as we see that the leaves in August are not the same as they were in April, so we can perceive that the hair of a lad of nineteen is different from what it will be at four-and-twenty. It is young, like himself, at nineteen, and each year that comes and goes will make it, like himself, older.

Well, then, that glory of auburn hair had lost something of its beauty, or rather, perhaps, its beauty was different, just as Pheemie's own loveliness was different.

She had been a girl then; she was a woman now—a woman in danger of becoming cold and worldly through mere prosperity and absence of trouble—a woman who disbelieved in broken hearts,

in passionate love—who looked down from immeasurable heights of superiority on what she called boy and girl affection, and who thought of the dreams of her earlier life, when by chance they recurred to her memory, as she might of a foolish fairy tale, or of any other ridiculous fancy of her childish days.

A change had come over her! and Phemie acknowledged to herself that she was changed, as she looked out at the English scenery, which seemed so strange and unfamiliar to her eyes.

Through Middlesex, and Hertford, and Essex the train dashed on: the line passed first over the roofs of houses—over streets—over roads, and then the engine, settling into express-pace, sped away northward, beside the Lea, within sight of the prettily-wooded heights of Clapton, across the market-gardens at Tottenham, and so on, past Edmonton, and Waltham, and Broxbourne, and Elsenham to Audley End, through the grounds of which it dashed remorselessly, as though there was no park there people wanted to look at—no house they wished to see.

Then into the flat lands of Cambridgeshire, where each field seemed more level than the last, where willows grew in abundance, where the line ran beside swamps and osier beds, where there was nothing tall except the poplar trees, nothing to break the monotony of the scenery except church and cathedral towers.

After Cambridgeshire, Norfolk—great stretches of country, bare and bleak, that the fancy could roam out over as a man can take a walk: a country like Ireland, where you can dig peat and burn it, where you can walk miles without hedge or ditch or fence, where three hours from London you can imagine yourself at the world's end, from whence the express steamed rapidly on to the rich abbeylands surrounding Wymondham.

And as she looked, she thought—thought of the five years that had come and gone—come and gone since she travelled from Wymondham to London before. Shall I tell you of her life, my reader, during those five years, before we go on to reach the end?

To be a kind mistress, a faithful steward, to occupy herself in good works, to keep herself from vanity and idleness, were, I think, all the admonitions Mr Agglard gave his niece when he

parted from her among the Cumberland mountains—excellent in their way, doubtless, but useless for the sufficient reason that Mrs Stondon had no household to order, no wealth to squander, no opportunity of assisting others, no temptation to be over-proud either of her beauty or her position.

He might as well have told a man without a stomach to be careful of what he ate ; but then Mr Aggland had expected things to be different, and so, for that matter, had Phemie herself.

She thought that after the Scottish tour, after a few months on the Continent, she and her husband would return to Marshlands, and enter on that home life which is, I suppose, at some time or other, the temporal heaven of most women's imaginations.

She pictured to herself (in a vague, girlish way, of course) the great rooms filled with company, the manner in which she would manage her establishment, the visits she would pay to the poor, the hours she would devote to study, and behold, as the dream here and the dream future had faded out of her past life, so, when she was married, the dream of usefulness and the dream of a settled home faded more swiftly still, out of her present.

Captain Stondon did not much like England. Moreover, he desired that before his wife entered into English society she should combine every possible accomplishment, every grace of manner, every known knowledge of *les convenances*, to her other charms.

As a matter of course, Phemie was ignorant of the world, ignorant of its usages, ignorant of what was expected from her as the mistress of Marshlands ; and equally, perhaps, as a matter of course, Captain Stondon desired that she should become acquainted with the importance of her own position, with the world, with its usages, before he introduced her to society ; and he was confirmed in this desire by Phemie's discomfiture at Montague Stondon's.

The girl was mountain bred, and had never been out to a party in her life.

Every man has his own idea of wisdom, and Captain Stondon's idea of the correct thing under the circumstances was to take his wife abroad, and keep her there.

In which idea he chanced to be wrong. Phemie would have

learned more of the conventionalities of society in a week at home than she could possibly acquire during a twelvemonths' residence on the Continent.

She was young enough to be moulded when he married her ; she was old enough to be a little "eccentric" when she returned to England for good.

Those who have been bred and brought up in society think, and think wrongly, that it is a difficult matter for a willing pupil to acquire its accent.

It lays such a store by trifles, that it forgets what trifles its usages really are, how soon they are learnt. It forgets that habit is second nature, and that if habits can be formed early, they become second nature itself.

Captain Stondon forgot this, at any rate, and took Phemie abroad in consequence.

He had found a gem among the Cumberland hills, and he wanted to have it ground and polished before he presented it to English society.

He did not wish a speck to appear on its surface, a flaw to be even hinted at. The more valuable he perceived it to be, the more anxious he became that the world should not see it till no defect could be perceived, till no exception could be taken to the jewel he had discovered for himself, and discovering, had wed.

Captain Stondon, like most men who marry below their own station, desired that his wife should be educated late rather than never ; but unlike the majority of his sex, his desires in this respect were fulfilled, not disappointed.

With the whole force and strength of her nature, Phemie devoted herself to learning. She had opportunities, and she embraced them ; she had every advantage of masters that money could procure, and money never was better spent, than on so industrious and clever a pupil.

How she practised, how she studied, how she observed, no one ever knew fully except by the result.

Was it easy ? It was like going to school after marriage ; but

nevertheless, with all her heart and with all her soul, Phemie tried to improve herself.

Was it happiness? Well, not exactly. But, then, Phemie looked beyond the drudgery to the reward; beyond the singing lessons to the time when she could show off her accomplishments in society. As the painter works for months in solitude, as the danseuse practises her most difficult steps for hours and days together, as the writer toils to finish his work, as the poet polishes and polishes his most musical lines, all for one end, one purpose—fame; so Phemie read, and studied, and laboured, that she might some day or other acquire social distinction.

Then she tired of it. Then suddenly, like a racer that has strained every nerve, and racked every muscle to reach the winning post—strained and racked beyond his strength—falls exhausted at last, a reaction set in. She wearied of travel, she wearied of hotels, she wearied of change of scene, wearied with an eternal longing, with a terrible heart-sickness of home.

It was nature asserting itself. It was the old time, the better time calling for her to come back ere she went too far ever to return; it was a passion, it was a fever; and through the long nights Phemie would lie awake and cry not the less bitterly, because silently, for home—for home!

When the southern sun was glaring down upon the earth, she thought of the mountain breezes, of the shady nooks among the hills, of the cool tarns, of the trickling streams. As a man in the first stage of fever dreams deliriously of gushing fountains, of flowing waters, so Phemie, with that home sickness on her, dreamt from morning till night about Tordale, about her own little room—her own no longer; about the heather, and the moss, and the ferns; about the clouds floating above Helbeck; about the mists enveloping Skillensear.

Cumberland was rarely out of her mind; but when Cumberland faded away for a moment, it was only that Marshlands might take its place.

She had seen Marshlands, and whenever Tordale seemed too remote a spot to travel back to, whenever she wanted some nearer

resting-place for her fancy to alight on, she folded her wings there, and wandered up and down under the elms and the fir-trees, through the gardens and the park, till she grew weary of imagining, and longed to start for England on the instant.

She did not like to say all that was in her heart about the matter. Captain Stondon had so evidently little intention of returning home that Phemie held her peace till she could refrain no longer.

Then, as is always the case with such natures, the stream burst its bounds all at once.

“Take me home, Henry, take me home, or I shall die,” was her entreaty; and without a word of inquiry or remonstrance, Captain Stondon agreed that they should retrace their steps to England.

But they got no further than Paris. There the son Captain Stondon had been hoping for was born—dead. There the doctor said that if Phemie herself were to live, she must turn her face southward again; and with the old fever not cured, only subdued, Mrs Stondon agreed to spend another winter abroad.

“Life was not worth having on the terms,” she told her physician; but then, as that individual remarked, only in politer terms than I can possibly translate—

“Her life was not quite her own to throw away for a mere whim. Her husband—” And that was enough for Phemie. She was very grateful to Captain Stondon; she would not have pained him for the world; she was very fond of him; she thought she loved him; she did more, she was sure she loved him, and so was everybody who saw them together. Her life was his, and for him she turned her back on England, and within sight of the promised land journeyed once again to the country that was as a house of bondage unto her.

We have all felt home-sickness some time or other; we have all hungered for the sea, or the hills, or the sun, or the bracing mountain breezes, with that mental hunger which is worse than any physical suffering; we have all wanted something in the course of our lives which we could not get; we have stretched

out our hands unavailingly ; we have sobbed through the darkness ; we have pined, we have sickened ; but the passion has ended at last, and we have sat down finally contented with our lot.

That was what Phemie did at any rate. She could not have continued fretting, and lived ; but she ceased fretting and grew strong, and when, after all those years, she and her husband returned to England, there was no tumult in her breast about anything.

She had forgotten her dreams ; she had almost forgotten her past ; she had a kind and devoted husband ; she had never repented her marriage ; she had done well ; she had made a very good and a very happy thing of life, and she was travelling down to Marshlands to take her proper place in society, with no breath of sorrow dimming the bright cold mirror of her existence.

Her sympathies had fallen to sleep with five years' want of exercise ; her feelings had grown dull for very lack of sorrow ; her intellect was expanded, her heart narrowed. Scenery itself was not to her now what it had once been ; she looked on it as something which God had created for the benefit and amusement of the rich ; she did not understand people being tempted ; she did not comprehend people going wrong ; a very shocking thing had happened in her husband's family—a thing which society never mentioned before him, and Phemie, of course, had been scandalized by it ; but at the same time she could not comprehend how Montague Stondon could first forge another man's name, and then deliberately cut his own throat.

She had not liked Montague Stondon. He had placed her at a disadvantage ; but it was shocking to think of a man committing suicide, and she felt very sorry for his wife and only son.

At the same time she was unable to understand why Captain Stondon took the matter so much to heart. He was not to blame. He had advanced money over and over again, till he grew weary of doing so, and if Mr Montague Stondon liked to go and forge, how was her husband to know by intuition that he had done so ?

Was he to blame for declining to send £1000 to the barrister

by return of post? He would have done it had his relative told him the scrape he had got into, but he had not told him, and Captain Stondon refused to make the advance, and Montague Stondon cut his throat, and Captain Stondon paid the money after all.

Phemie thought about Mr Stondon's brown eyes and elaborate whiskers and expensive dinner, as the train swept through the flat lands surrounding Cambridge.

"How foolish they were to live beyond their means!" thought this wise young woman, and she would have said and thought the same about any other sin or shortcoming. That her fellow-creatures were but fallible; that flesh and blood is prone to error; that to most the right is difficult, the wrong easy; that the way to hell is broad, that the path to heaven is narrow;—these were things Phemie had yet to learn; these were the realities she was travelling home to meet; these were the lessons she had still to con out of books she had never yet opened. Intellect, study, knowledge of all abstract sciences, of what value are they if we remain ignorant of the living volumes around us—if we have no comprehension of the struggles and temptations, of the sins and the sorrows, of the agony and the remorse of the men and the women we meet day after day?

What shall we learn from Greek or from Roman, if the lines which have been traced by the hand of our God on the hearts of his creatures remain to us but as the writing on the wall? What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? we are asked in the book which cannot speak foolishly—"if," as John Bunyan says, "the things of this world lie too close to his heart; if the earth with its things has bound up his roots; if he is an earth-bound soul wrapped up in thick clay?" And, in like manner, it is surely not too much to affirm that all knowledge and all power, all accomplishments, all grace, all wealth, are useless, are merely as sounding brass and as tinkling cymbals, unless there is joined to them a comprehension of the infirmities, temptations, sufferings of humanity.

To all, prosperity is a trial and a snare; but it is a worse trial and

a worse snare to the young than to the old ; for which reason prosperity had not improved Mrs Stondon. She had lived a purely selfish existence. "Fortune had placed a bandage over her eyes." Driving in a carriage through the pleasantest roads of this world, she took no thought of those who were limping along its roughest paths, its flintiest ways, foot-sore and weary. Fate had been so good to her, it had appointed her lot beside such cool streams, that she grew hard, and the Phemie who went out of England was not the Phemie who came back to it five years later.

And yet she was not changed quite past recognition. The old sweetness, the old truthfulness, the old frankness, the old steadiness of principle underlay the superstructure of selfishness and coldness which a too happy life had reared.

Beneath the world's burning suns, the flowers of her spring-time had withered away ; but the roots of the plants that had borne those flowers were still deep in her heart, ready to bring forth leaves and buds and flowers again, and finally fruit if God saw fit ; and full though her existence might be of wealth and prosperity, still there was a vacant chamber which had never been unlocked by mortal hand, and which all the pomps and vanities, all the social successes, all the praises, all the popularity, all the flattery, and all the favour of this world would have been impotent to fill.

Sometimes when the twilight was stealing over the landscape—sometimes when the fleecy clouds chased each other across the sky—when she sat looking up at the great mountains, or from among myrtle bowers gazed out over the sea—sometimes when she remained very still and very quiet—when the rush of many feet was silent, when the sound of merriment died away, when she was alone with herself, alone with her lonely life, with her empty heart—I think she must have felt that there was a want in her existence—that she had somehow missed the mark—that God never intended the Phemie Keller who had danced across the hills to Strammer Tarn, who had nursed the children at the farm, who had cried if a person only looked crossly at her, who had been loved and cared for, who had been in such trouble at leaving the old

home faces behind her, to develop into Phemie Stondon, who, without a pulse throbbing faster at the anticipation, was travelling home to Marshlands to perform the duties of her station, or to neglect them, as matters should turn out.

Nevertheless, she was glad to get back to England. The idea of a settled abode was pleasant to her; she wanted to see her uncle, and Helen, and Duncan; she thought, with society, that she and Captain Stondon had staved away from their duties long enough; she quite believed that country gentlemen ought to reside for some portion of the year, at all events, on their properties; and further, she was tired of the Continent, tired of the heat, tired of the sun, tired of foreign languages, of strange tongues, of residences which were not homes.

There was another reason why Phemie desired to settle in England: she was tired of having Captain Stondon constantly at her elbow; but this, of course, was not the way she put it to herself.

He had those duties to perform I have made mention of before, and he ought to return to fulfil them. A man of property had scarcely a right to spend year after year in climbing mountains, in looking at old ruins, in making foreign friends, in spending money abroad. Phemie quite thought he ought to take up his abode at Marshlands, and was very glad when he said that he agreed with her.

Montague Stondon's death had been a shock to him. It reminded him of purposes unaccomplished in his own life, of negligence, of unfaithfulness, of good resolutions forgotten, of good intentions unfulfilled. He would return and do better for the future; and accordingly he returned, and, unmindful of heat and dust, slept on till the train reached Disley.

It was evening then, and while the carriage which met them at Disley rolled along the level sandy roads, Phemie looked eagerly and longingly for the woods surrounding Marshlands. She strained her eyes for them as she had not strained them to catch a first sight of famous cities far away, and yet when she beheld the firs and the elms reflected against the sky, when she saw the trees lifting their heads to heaven, when she caught the sunset

glory bathing the whole scene in a flood of crimson light, an indefinable feeling of sadness came over her, and her heart grew heavy to remember that the landscape and the woods were the same as they had been when she looked upon them soon after her marriage, but that she was changed--that she was going back another Phemie from the Phemie her husband had married, to her husband's house

CHAPTER XVI.

BASIL.

AFTER so long an absence, it would have seemed only natural for his tenantry to greet Captain Stondon's return with "three times three," with arches, with banners; and most probably Phemie's heart might have been gladdened by some ceremonial of this kind, had not Montague Stondon's suicide rendered all thoughts of rejoicing out of the question.

As it was, the pair came home through lonely roads to the park gates, where an old woman admitted them; and in the gathering evening twilight Phemie looked at the elms and the fir-trees till the loneliness oppressed her—till she felt thankful to escape at last from the avenue, and reach the house which she had never seen but once before.

It was one of those houses every man thinks he should like to own—large enough for any income—comfortable enough never to appear stately: a house that the sun's beams seemed always to fall on warmly: a house in which it was easy to fancy blazing fires in the winter—cool rooms in the summer: a house that the eye turned to look back upon as it might on a pleasant face: a house that was a home: a house that Phemie came to love passionately.

It was built of red brick, and ivy and creepers and roses twined up the sun-burnt walls, covering them with stem and branch and leaf and flower. The drawing-room was at the back of the house, and its windows overlooked the flower-garden that sloped away

from the hill on which the house was built to the flat lands below.

Many an English mansion is spoiled by its site. Marshlands was made by the eminence it occupied. Yet if the place had a fault, it was this: whichever way your glance turned, you could see nothing but Marshlands—its gardens, its fields, its park, its fountains, its avenues, its long belt of plantation: Marshlands was everywhere; and as a natural consequence, some people tired of Marshlands after a season; tired of the firs, the elms, the smooth-cut lawns, the deer, the shrubberies. Half the timber wanted clearing away, and views being thus obtained of the surrounding country; but on this latter point Marshlands was inexorable. You might walk till you were weary, but still you could see nothing save the park and great belts of plantation, clumps of firs, avenues of elms, hedgerows in which trees were growing as thick as blackberries.

The day arrived when Phemie felt those masses of foliage, those banks of branch and leaf, those never-ending plantations, those inexorable stately trees, oppress her soul. Mountain-reared, she longed for greater freedom—for a country over which her eye could wander free and unconfined: she longed for the hill-side, for the desolate sea-shore: but on the evening when she returned home again, after years spent in travelling from place to place, England—any part of it—seemed a possession gained, a good secured, and Mrs Stondon rejoiced to cross the threshold of Marshlands, and hear words of welcome spoken in her native tongue.

Like a child she wandered from room to room; like a child, too, after dinner, she insisted on going out and walking about the place by moonlight, compelling Captain Stondon, who would much have preferred remaining indoors, to accompany her along the garden paths, past the lakes, under the shadow of the elms, to a point where further progress seemed stopped by a plantation of fir-trees.

“I wonder,” remarked Phemie, as she paused to listen to the coming and going of the summer wind through the branches, “I wonder how you could stay away so long, with such a property

as this in England. Is not it worth all the palaces and châteaux abroad put together?"

"As a possession, perhaps," answered Captain Stondon; "as a residence, I am doubtful: that is, I am doubtful whether you will like it; if you do, I shall be content to live and die here—quite content."

But Captain Stondon sighed, even while he made this statement, and Phemie looked up at the branches overhead with an expression in her face which made it in the moonlight look almost disagreeable. She knew what Captain Stondon was thinking about. The children that had come to them, dead and dead—children that had come, not to make her a softer or a better woman, but merely, as it seemed, to develop the taint an over-prosperous life had infused into her character.

What shall I call this taint? Jealous selfishness—exacting egotism—a fretful impatience of anything which stood between herself and the affection and admiration of those around her. I should like to find one word to express what I mean; I wish I could discover some sentence that might embody at once what was so natural and yet so unpleasant. She was prosperous; why should she fret? why should he fret? Had she not had to fight for her own life because of those dead heirs? those heirs who had never existed.

She did not fret; why should he? Would he rather have had the children than her? Supposing she had died and they lived; would he have been satisfied then? Supposing they had lived and she lived too; would the sons have been greater than their mother? That was the set of questions that always made Phemie's face change when she saw Captain Stondon thinking about who should come after him. Had not he her while he was living; was not that enough for him? Mrs Stondon's creed had grown to be of this nature, at any rate. She was to be everything, and no other person ought to stand even near her. It was horribly unamiable, it was detestably selfish, and yet—and yet it was only because she was so solitary that she was so unwomanly. She gave nothing, and therefore she sought to receive all homage.

Her love was cold, and therefore she exacted love as though it had been a debt owing to her, and she insisting on payment to the uttermost farthing.

Her life had been too prosperous, too easy. She had not had to live on crumbs of affection, to beg for love with wistful eyes, as a dog begs for notice from its master. Every one seemed to think it was so good of her to be fond of Captain Stondon. Mistress Phemie herself was so young, so attractive, so altogether unique, that the world was rather apt to imply she had made a mistake in wedding her husband at all. She was pampered—I think that was the English of the matter; and she needed to find her level once again, before she could become a woman about whom it is altogether agreeable to write.

She did not look pleasant standing in the moonlight with that strange expression on her countenance; for in the moonlight her face seemed to belong to some one without a heart to feel, without a heart to be broken.

Could she have looked forward then, I wonder what change the moon would have seen come swiftly over her. Under the fir-trees she would have wept and sobbed; she would have fallen to the earth humbled and stricken; she would have turned to her husband with the pride and the vanity and the selfishness and the sarcasm beaten out of her lovely face, and prayed him to love her less, trust her less, give her less, so as to preserve her from the sorrow and the evil to come.

But as she stood there, she was simply what his pride and his devotion had made her. The Phemie he married among the hills—ignorant, childish, unsophisticated, had given place to another Phemie, to a self-possessed, lady-like, accomplished woman, who walked gracefully, who had a stately carriage, who wore her beauty like a queen. The half her lifetime she once spoke of had been best part lived out. Five years of the eight were gone, and this was the result. Had she not finished her task? Was not Captain Stondon proud of her as well as fond? Was he not satisfied with her in every respect? Did she not give him as much love as she had to give to any one? Had he been

of a jealous temperament, which he was not, her conduct must yet have seemed without spot or blemish.

Othello himself could have taken no exception to her. She was docile, she was grateful, she was easily pleased. She liked to visit, she liked to stay at home, she liked company, and yet she delighted in such rambles as that under the moonlight at Marshlands, when not a sound save the light breeze stirring among the trees broke the stillness.

Yes, if he had but children, Captain Stondon thought his life would be almost too happy, too round and perfect in its complete content. And if he sighed to think that there were no little feet pattering through the rooms and along the corridors, who may blame him? For a man owning a large property to be childless is to convert his freehold estate into a mere leasehold, terminable with his own life. He improves his lands for others; he sows that strangers may reap; the very backbone is taken out of his existence, and he loses interest in the place of which he is a tenant-at-will.

And yet Captain Stondon only repined at times at this want in the full measure of his happiness. He was in the main a good man and a just; and he needed no divine to tell him that if children were from the Lord, the lonely hearth was of Him likewise.

And for this reason, if Phemie continued to like Marshlands, he would wander no more. He would cure himself of the restless fever which had for so long weakened his energies, destroyed his usefulness; he would do his best to make her love her home, and enable her to be happy there. A great prize had fallen to him in the lottery of life, and he would be grateful for it. Under the fir-trees he vowed that vow to himself and to his God: under the fir-trees, when his heart brake in twain, he remembered that vow, and sobbed like a child to think that his love and his tenderness and his gratitude had all been as strength spent for nought.

And yet not so; the end of the battle is not here; the last of the witnesses are never called on earth; and when the great day

arrives, in which all human reckonings are to be finally settled we shall surely find that love and tenderness have never been lost, though to our eyes their streams of blessing may have seemed but as water wasted upon weed and rush and reed.

As for Phemie—naturally, as though she had been born in the purple—she took her rightful place at last as mistress of Marshlands.

She was enchanted to be back in England once again ; she was a wanderer on the face of the earth no longer ; she was a woman known to every one save those of her own kin and her own country no more.

She was coming home really to enjoy life ; to assume her proper position in society ; to show off her accomplishments ; to be admired for her beauty : to be spoiled, petted, ruined, if you will.

Visitors came ; visits were returned. Norfolk was glad to have Captain Stondon back on any terms. No matter whom he might have married—his wife was young ; his wife liked company ; his wife would give parties ; Marshlands had long wanted a mistress, and here was one whom any county might be proud to receive with open arms.

What if she had been poor ? Was she not a Keller ? Was she not half a century or so younger than Captain Stondon ? Was she not pretty and lady-like and accomplished ?—and, beyond all, when once the days of mourning for that disreputable vagabond Montague were accomplished, had she not promised fathers and mothers, and the dancing young men and the dancing young women, parties to their hearts' content ?

Altogether it was very delicious to fill the position she did ; and Phemie, as the days went by, felt more and more satisfied that she had made a very good thing of life, and that she had acted in a praiseworthy manner when she secured at one stroke a good kind husband and a fine estate.

She had benefited herself ; she was benefiting her family.

Duncan was with Messrs Hoyle and Hoyle, the great London engineers, and Helen was at school, and the pair spent their holi-

days at Marshlands that summer, when the Stondons returned to England ; and Mr Aggland came likewise, and passed a fortnight with his niece, during which time he arrived at the conclusion that Phemie was altered and not improved.

“She is not half so good as her husband,” thought the farmer. “I suppose too hot a sun is as bad as too keen a frost—prosperity seems to have withered up her buds, at any rate.” And then straightway Mr Aggland tried to find out what soft spots Phemie had left, what troubled her, what wishes she had, what aims, what objects.

Here he was puzzled : it was for the day and herself—for the pleasures and the joys and the vanities of the day, that Mrs Stondon existed.

“It is a bright life,” remarked her uncle ; “but, my dear, the winter must come to the happiest of us. Have you thought of that ?”

“It will be time enough to think of the winter when the autumn arrives,” she answered, gaily ; “besides, why should enjoying the bright days unfit one for enduring the dark ? Sometimes, uncle, I think you are sorry I am so happy.” And Phemie, standing on the terrace, with the evening sun streaming on her, pouted as she said this.

“Are you really happy, Phemie ?” he asked ; “happy in yourself ; contented and satisfied ; or is it all as the crackling of thorns under the pot, a blaze and a sparkle, and then out, leaving no heat, no light behind ?”

“I am perfectly happy,” she replied, gathering up the skirts of her light flowing muslin dress, and preparing to re-enter the house ; “and why you should think I am not happy, or why you should fancy I ought not to be happy, I cannot imagine.”

“You have had trouble, dear,” he said, hesitatingly ; “the children—” And at that point he stopped in his speech and Phemie stopped in her walk to deliver her sentiments on the subject.

“Can I bring them back again ?” she asked, almost fiercely. “Could I help their dying ?—did I kill them ? Why should I

spend my existence fretting over what is irremediable—over what I am not sure I should care to remedy if I could? Captain Stondon would like a son to inherit this place; but as it seems he is not to have a living son, there can be no use in his constantly thinking about it. Have we not Marshlands? Have we not every happiness, every comfort? Have we not wood and field and lake and water? If we had fifty sons, could we have more out of the place? Why should I sit down and be miserable because children whom I never knew, whom I never heard speak, who might as well never have been born, were not spared perhaps to grow up curses to us? Sometimes I think,” went on Phemie, with the tears starting into her eyes, “that you and Captain Stondon both would rather the boys had lived and I had died—anything for a son, any sacrifice for an heir.” And without waiting for an answer, Phemie swept into the drawing-room, leaving her uncle to think over what she had said.

“There is reason in it if there be not rhyme,” he muttered, as he walked up and down the terrace; “and yet there is something out of joint in Phemie’s life; there must be something wrong in any life that makes a woman talk like that. She was too young,” finished Mr Aggland, looking away down the garden towards the flat lands beyond; “she was too young, and she does not love the man she has married. God grant she may never find it out. It is better for her to be anything rather than dissatisfied. It is better for her to be a fine lady than a miserable woman.” And Mr Aggland still strained his eyes down the garden, thinking he would give all his worldly possessions to see once more the Phemie who had left him when she plighted her troth to Captain Stondon, and cried because Davie stood at the church porch to bid her his dumb farewell.

Yet there were still some things about his niece which touched Mr Aggland unspeakably. To him she never changed; she never forgot to ask after the poorest farmer in Tordale; she remembered where each flower grew, and would speak about the hyacinths and the anemones, about the heather and the thyme, as though

she had never seen the shores of the Mediterranean, or wandered through earth's loveliest scenes abroad.

She made no close friends. Among all her acquaintance she found no one to love as she had loved Helen ; she took no new pets ; she who had always chosen some lamb, or foal, or calf, or kitten for herself, never now stretched out her hand towards any animal caressingly.

"Would you care to have Davie?" asked her uncle, the day before his departure ; and for a moment Phemie looked pleased and wistful, but then the look faded out of her face, and she said :

"Davie would not be happy here. He is not handsome enough to be in the house, and he would miss the warm fireside and the children stroking him. I should like him, uncle, but he would not like this. When I can, I will go and see him and the Hill Farm and Tordale, but he had better stay in Tordale than come here."

Many a time, after he returned to Cumberland, Mr Aggland thought about this speech, and wondered whether Phemie wished she had stayed in Tordale too ; but he might have spared himself the trouble of speculating, for Phemie never for a moment repented her marriage ; she was perfectly content to be the mistress of Marshlands, to be flattered, courted, sought after ; and day by day, as he saw how she comported herself in her new position, as he heard her admired, and beheld how much she was liked, Captain Stondon grew more and more proud of the wife he had chosen, and allowed her to do more and more as she liked.

And what Phemie liked was to have plenty of society—to have balls and parties and picnics continually, and to balls and parties and picnics Captain Stondon (who was not so young-looking as when we first met him turning into the valley of Tordale) went about with her, content that she was satisfied—pleased with her pleasure. He would watch her dancing ; he would listen to her singing ; he loved to see her turn her face beaming with happiness towards him.

"I wonder was ever man so blessed?" he thought, one evening,

as he stood looking at Phemie from afar; and even while he thought this, a lady touched him with her fan, and said—

“I suppose you do not recollect me, Captain Stondon? but my memory is better. I must see whether your wife recognizes me.” And with a smile flung back to Captain Stondon, she crossed the room, and said to Phemie—

“I am going to ask you to do me a great favour, Mrs Stondon—it is six years after, and I want you to sing, ‘Then you’ll remember,’ for me.”

“Miss Derno!” exclaimed Phemie, and the two laughed outright. “Where did you come from? With whom are you staying?” asked Mrs Stondon.

“I am staying with the Hurlfords, and I come from wandering to and fro upon the earth—as you do also for that matter; and I am delighted to see you looking so well.”

And Miss Derno looked delighted, and held Phemie’s hand in hers while she spoke of the last time they had met, of the period which had elapsed since that night when—

“When I broke down,” finished Mrs Stondon, with as much readiness as could have been expected from Miss Derno herself. “I can do better than that now, and if you come over to Marshlands I shall be happy to prove the fact to you.”

“No time like time present,” remarked Miss Derno. “I am sorry to take you from among the dancers, but I claim a song as my right.” And she drew Phemie gently away towards the music-room, saying as they passed along,

“There is a pet of mine here to-night that I want you to take graciously to. I will introduce him when you have finished my song—that is, if you give me leave to do so. You must have noticed him, I think——a young man who danced with Miss Maria Hurlford?”

“I know,” answered Mrs Stondon: “dark-haired, dark-eyed, indolent-looking. He was talking to Captain Stondon when we left the other room. Who is he?”

“He is Montague Stondon’s son, Basil.”

Phemie was touching the keys of the piano as Miss Derno

spoke. When Miss Derno finished her sentence, Mrs Stondon took her hands off the notes and looked up at her companion quickly and strangely.

“What brings him here?” she asked. And the question sounded almost defiant.

“He is staying, like myself, with the Hurlfords.”

“Oh!” said Mistress Phemie, and straightway she began her song.

The room was empty of company when she commenced—ere she had finished it was full of people.

Whenever Mrs Stondon sang guests flocked round her as children might to a show. It was her gift—it was her talent, and she had cultivated her voice, and practised; she had laboured, and tried to become an accomplished vocalist, with such success that even Miss Derno stood astonished—stood with the tears in her eyes listening silently.

“Who is the sweet singer?” said some one in a low tone.

“Mrs Stondon,” whispered back Miss Derno. And Basil Stondon, for it was he who asked the question, drew back at her answer, and left the room.

“An amiable pair,” thought Miss Derno. “She is jealous of the possible possessor of Marshlands; he looks with unfavourable eyes on the present mistress of that desirable property.” And while other friends gathered round Mrs Stondon, praying her to sing again, to sing another song, and another still, Miss Derno vanished also, and followed Basil Stondon into the garden, where he was leaning over a stone balustrade, and looking disconsolately at the moon.

“How very stupid you must be, Basil,” said the lady, “to spoil your chances in this way. If you want to reach Captain Stondon you must reach him through his wife; and instead of waiting to be introduced to her you run away as if you were a schoolboy ordered up for punishment.”

“It is a punishment to me to see her at all,” answered the young man. “But for her my father might now be alive—but for her I might have been making some thousands a year, instead of going begging after government appointments.”

“Don't talk nonsense, Basil Stondon,” said Miss Derno, impatiently; “you would never have made thousands a year anywhere: you have not energy enough in you ever to have made money for yourself at all, you are only fit for a government clerk, you are too genteel and too lazy and too fine a gentleman ever to push your own way up. For which reasons take my advice: let bygones be bygones, and strive to get into Captain Stondon's good-will by conciliating his wife.”

“I have got his good-will already,” was the calm reply. “I went up to him diffidently; but he received me, so to speak, with open arms; he asked me to call at Marshlands to-morrow. He inquired what I was doing—he wanted to know why I had not come to him before—he remarked that something must be done for me—and he would have talked on for an hour had some General Sheen not broken in upon our conversation with original observations about the weather and the state of the crops.”

“Then you followed us into the music-room,” suggested Miss Derno.

“Then hearing some woman singing like an angel, I went to ascertain who had come down from heaven. When I saw the hair, however, my heart misgave me. As we know the devil by his cloven hoof, so I knew Mrs Stondon by her glory of auburn hair.”

“But it is beautiful hair, Basil; and because it is beautiful, and she is beautiful, and you admire all things that are beautiful, you must try to be friends with her. She is lovely enough to come up even to your standard, surely.”

“I do not admire fair women,” he answered, coldly. “I like sunshine better than moonlight. I like warmth better than ice.”

“You like talking folly,” retorted Miss Derno; “and if you persist in being so silly I shall withdraw the inestimable blessing of my friendship from you. Come and be introduced to Mrs Stondon like a rational being. Come and see—not your relative's wife—but merely a very beautiful and accomplished woman.”

“At some future time,” he said; “but to-night there is a dark mood on me, and I cannot face her. Can you not stay here?”

he pleaded, as his companion turned to go away; "you are the only person on earth who talks frankly to me. You are the only being whose voice I care to hear."

"Mr Basil Stondon, I am honoured," replied Miss Derno; and under the moonlight she made him a sweeping curtsey; "but society has its prejudices, and its prejudices we must study. You and I know we are not in love with one another, but the world might think we were, and for that reason I cannot remain with you talking about the best opera and the last new book." Having finished which frank statement, Miss Derno would have gone in, but that Mr Stondon caught her hand and kept her.

"Why cannot we love one another?" he asked. "Why do you say we know we do not love one another? I have never seen a woman equal to you. I have never felt the same attachment for any one as I have for you."

Then Miss Derno laughed.

"It is a blessing, Basil," she said, "that I am not a woman to take you at your word; it is a mercy, God knows it is, that I am not so anxious to be settled, as to snap at the possible heir of Marshlands; for you do not love me, and it would not be natural that you should love a woman so much older than yourself. Have we not gone over all this ground before? Have I not told you what I do not proclaim in the market-place, that my heart is dead, and that there is no man who could ever make it thrill with joy and love and pleasure and life again?" And as the woman—for she was all a woman at that moment—said this, a light seemed to come from that far away past—a light that illumined her features and softened them.

"I would I had been born sooner for your sake," whispered Basil, tenderly.

"I would that you had a little more sense for your own," she retorted. "Are there not girls enough in England that you should persist in making love to a woman for whom you do not care, and who had passed through a perfect sea of trouble while you were still busy with the multiplication table?"

"It is easy for you to laugh," he answered; "you who have

always some one to love you, who have so many friends ; but a lonely man like myself—a man lonely and poor, must love any one who is so good and true and beautiful as you : and if I must love afar off," added Mr Stondon, " why, I shall still love on."

" Love me as your friend, as your mother, sister, grandmother, what you please," answered Miss Derno, " but not as your love. Lonely and poor!" she went on ; " no man who can work ought ever to be poor—no human being can ever be called lonely who has his life all before him, and who has not left everything worth living for behind him by the way. Lonely and poor! Basil, you have talked sentiment to the moon long enough. Come in and say what is civil to the only woman who can now really better your condition. For *I* do not advise you to marry an heiress. I recommend you to let Captain Stondon advance your interest, if he will. And he will, I am sure of it. Come."

But Basil would not. He stayed behind in the moonlight, thinking of Miss Derno and Mrs Stondon and Marshlands—whilst ever and anon there came over him a vague instinctive feeling—very dreamy, very unpleasant, very indefinable—that he had that night said something, done something, seen something, which should influence every hour and moment of his future life.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NEXT HEIR.

THAT night, as they drove home, Captain Stondon talked about Basil Stondon to his wife, about the young man whom he had met with apparently accidentally, and who had never by word or sign or letter acknowledged the existence of his wealthy relative since his father's death.

"Poor fellow," said Captain Stondon, "it is very sad for him, upon my word it is." And he waited for Phemie to answer, but Phemie held her peace.

She was wiser in her generation than her husband; it might be that she was less amiable too; and she knew just as well as though she had been present at the enemy's council of war that Mr Basil Stondon's rencontre with his kinsman was anything rather than the result of chance.

She had not liked Mr Montague Stondon, she had not liked Mrs Montague Stondon, and it was not likely she should like the son who now stood—and it was this which broke on Mistress Phemie Stondon with a shock, as though the idea were quite new to her—in the position of heir to Marshlands.

The fact had never come home till that moment. He would inherit—he was young; he would come after Captain Stondon and own woods and lawns and lake and park, because she was childless. It was she who now held the place merely as a tenant on lease of one life, and that her husband's. If her son had lived, this man would, socially, be nowhere; as it was, Phemie perceived that socially he would take precedence of herself.

She had been philosophical on the subject so long as she did not comprehend how the want of children might some day affect her own happiness. Almost a child herself, she had not understood how the failure of direct heirs would ultimately affect her position.

She had been glad to get away from Mrs Aggland's babies, her youth had been spent in hushing refractory imps to sleep, in amusing cross infants, in learning to nurse cleverly and keep the brats from crying ; and it was therefore not altogether unnatural that Phemie should consider there was a reverse side to the pleasure of having a family, and, particularly when her life had twice trembled in the balance, rejoice rather than lament because no more children seemed likely to be born, to die.

Hitherto she had been rather vexed to see how much Captain Stondon desired a direct heir—now, Phemie, a child no longer, but a worldly, selfish woman if you will, found that there was rising up from the bottom of her heart an exceeding bitter cry of lamentation for the dead sons whose loss she had never greatly mourned before, for the children she had passed through the valley of the shadow of death to bring into the world, for nought.

Looking out into the moonlight, Phemie, to whom all strong passions had hitherto been strangers, found that her eyes were filling with angry tears. She disliked this Basil Stondon, to whom she had never yet spoken a word. She hated to hear her husband praising his appearance and his manners. She felt sure he and Miss Derno were in league together. "Her pet, indeed!" thought Phemie ; "I have no doubt they are engaged. Her pet! I daresay he is." And Phemie smiled to think she was no longer the girl whom Miss Derno had met six years before ; but a woman quite Miss Derno's match in penetration and knowledge of the world.

She had eaten her apple, and left primitive simplicity a long way behind her ; and Phemie felt glad to think that it was so. They could not impose on her now. Her eyes were opened, and she saw, as all such people do see, more evil than good upon the

earth. She had tasted of the tree of knowledge, and this was the result. It had been pleasant to the eye, it had seemed good for food, it had been a thing to be desired; and behold this was the end attained—selfishness and envy and uncharitableness.

A character to be disliked rather than admired; and yet have patience, reader, for there came a day of reckoning to Phemie Stondon, when she had to settle for every fault, for every shortcoming!

She was vain;—grievous suffering crushed all vanity out of her: she claimed love as a right, and thought little of all the tenderness that was lavished upon her—when the time arrived that the love of her own heart broke it,—Phemie remembered: she thought she stood firm, and it was only when she lay humbled in the dust that she acknowledged how weak is the strength of man; she was proud of her accomplishments, yet in the future she turned from their exhibition with loathing; she rejoiced in her own cleverness—she could not avoid knowing how much cleverer she was than her husband—than the man who had taken her from poverty and drudgery to make her the mistress of Marshlands;—is it too early now to tell of the hour when all her talents, all her attainments, all her gifts of beauty and manners, seemed to be but as sand, as earth, beside his truth, his forbearance, his devotion?

That night was the turning-point in the life-story of Phemie Keller—that night, when she sat beside her husband, listening while he told her how glad he felt at the prospect of being able to do anything for poor Montague's son, how much pleased he was that Basil had promised to call the next day at Marshlands.

“He really is a very fine young fellow,” finished Captain Stondon, “and we must try to keep him from going to rack and ruin as his father did. It is high time he was doing something now. He must be five-and-twenty, I should say.”

And Mr Basil Stondon's relative was quite right. He was five-and-twenty—a man with eyes dark, dreamy, and sadly tender—a man whom women raved concerning—a desperate flirt, and a

dangerous flirt, because while the fit was on him he really did care for the person who had excited his admiration.

He danced like an angel—so the ladies said. There were few games either of chance or skill at which he had not tried his hand. He could hunt over the worst country if his friends would only give him a mount. If his horse could take the leaps, Basil could sit his horse. It did not matter to him if an animal were quiet or the reverse. Find him a strong bit, and let the girths be tight, and the young man would fight the question of temper out at his leisure.

He was a good oarsman, a good swimmer, a capital fellow at a picnic. He had quite a genius for making salads and mixing sherry cobbler.

He knew very little about literature, but the number of his acquaintances was something to stare at.

He had forgotten the little he ever learned at school and college; but he could talk about the opera and the theatres, about the new prima donna and the favourite danseuse, with an intimate fluency that moved his listeners oftentimes to admiration.

Further, he was not conceited; he did not vaunt his talents. He was not boastful, he was not a bore; he was amiable, he was pitiful, he was generous, he was swift to forgive and repentant for having erred; but he was weak and he was self-indulgent; he was as weak as water, as uncertain as the weather, as changeable as an April day; a vacillating creature whose purposes ebbed and flowed like the sea, who had no fixed principles, whether bad or good, and who came and went and went and came wheresoever his impulses carried him.

And it was this man, with his handsome face, with his careless, easy, engaging manner, who came the next day by special invitation to call at Marshlands.

He did not call alone. He had not courage enough for that, he told the Hurlfords, laughingly; so Mrs Hurlford and Miss Derno and young Frank Hurlford accompanied him, nothing loth, for Miss Derno and Mrs Hurlford had "taken the young

man up," and decided that it was a great pity of him, that it was all nonsense for him to keep aloof from his relatives because his father had cut his throat, and that, in fine, Captain Stondon should know him, like him, and do something for him

Women were always taking Basil up—were always, dear souls, planning and plotting to advance his interests. In London he was perpetually being introduced to some great man who promised to find a vacant post. In the country he was continually being put in the way of marrying some sweet creature—some heiress, some widow—somebody who would make him happy, or push him on, or bring him a fortune.

There was no end to the roads that opened out before Basil Stondon; but by a curious fatality they all led nowhere; and the most sensible thing that ever was proposed for his benefit was to bring him and Captain Stondon together, and to get the owner of Marshlands to give his next of kin a helping hand on in the world.

"All he wants, my dear," said Mrs Hurlford to Miss Derno, "is a fair start and a sensible wife—a wife just like yourself."

"Only ten years younger," added Miss Derno.

"Now, what would *he* do with a young girl?" demanded Mrs Hurlford. "Why, they would be lost out in the world like the babes in the wood. He ought to have a woman, a strong-minded, clear-headed woman, who could manage for him and tell him how to go on, and see that he was not imposed on."

"A kind of keeper," suggested Miss Derno.

"How absurd you are. You know what I mean perfectly well. Even for his sake you ought to play your cards better; and for your own, I can tell you, Olivia, Marshlands is a very nice property, and has a very nice rent-roll attached to it."

"What a pity I cannot get Basil to think of me excepting as his mother!" observed Miss Derno.

"What a pity," answered Mrs Hurlford, who was a distant relation to her visitor, "that you will not believe any woman may marry any man. Propinquity, my dear, it is all propinquity. I heard a very clever lady say once she would undertake to

bring any man to a proposal if she were thrown with him for a fortnight at a country house, and I am positive she could have done it too."

"How glad I am not to be a man," remarked Miss Derno. "If I were, I would never venture beyond the gas-lamps."

"But it would be for his good, for his happiness, you ridiculous creature!" persisted the lady; and so confident did she feel of the ultimate success of her manœuvres, that she absolutely decided on the colour of the dress she should wear at the wedding, and saw the very bracelet she intended to present as a cousinly offering to the bride.

Entertaining these views, it is not to be wondered at that she eagerly offered to accompany Mr Stondon to Marshlands.

"We owe Mrs Stondon a visit," she remarked, "and it will make it a less formidable affair for Basil if we all go over together."

"Poor Basil!" said Miss Derno, "I wonder if he will ever be brave enough to go over there alone?"

"It is not Captain Stondon I dislike meeting," he replied, "it is his wife."

"I think her perfectly charming!" broke in Mrs Hurlford, with enthusiasm. "And as for Mr Hurlford, you should hear him rave about her!"

"I really should not allow it, Laura," said Miss Derno. "Mr Hurlford ought not to rave about other men's wives."

"I cannot imagine what any man can see in copper-coloured hair and blue eyes to get spoony over," observed Basil. At which remark Mrs Hurlford shot a glance towards her cousin, who retorted—

"I have seen you spoony about every colour, from white to black, Basil. When you were only twelve years old I remember your being in love with a little Irish girl whose hair was exactly the colour of tow; and as for eyes—do you recollect Miss Smyth, whose eyes were red?—if you do not, I do."

"Now, Mrs Hurlford, I appeal to you!" exclaimed Basil. "Is it fair for the sins of the boy to be visited on the man?"

How should you like me, Miss Derno, to commence telling tales?"

"If they were entertaining, I should like it of all things," she answered; "but to return to Mrs Stondon—she really is beautiful, and she never looks so beautiful as when she is talking. If you do not recant before you leave Marshlands this afternoon I will give you such a scolding," finished Miss Derno, flushing a little as she caught Basil's eyes fixed upon her with an expression which was quite as intelligible to her as it was to Mrs Hurlford.

"He will propose before the week is over," thought that lady, little dreaming that the ceremony had been gone through two or three times already. "She must be married from here, but it will be very miserable for her travelling in the winter. However, she does not dislike travelling," reflected Mrs Hurlford, while she went upstairs to prepare for her visit to Mrs Stondon. "Only if they could be married at once, and get away in the summer, how much nicer it would be."

From which speech the reader will see that Providence had been very good to the male sex in denying Mrs Hurlford daughters. She had sons, but then "sons are not daughters, Heaven be praised!" said a gentleman of her acquaintance.

"It is a beautiful property," remarked Mrs Hurlford, as they drove under the elms and the fir-trees up to Marshlands House.

Basil Stondon had been thinking the same thing, and he had been thinking of other things as well, that made him look a little sadder than usual when he crossed the threshold of his kinsman's house.

"We have come to take you by storm, Mrs Stondon," said Mrs Hurlford. And then Phemie assured her she was very glad to see them whatever their intentions might be: and Miss Derno, remembering the shy, blushing girl of six years before, looked on and marvelled.

"The spring cannot last for ever," reflected that lady, philosophically, "and yet summer has set in very early with her." And Miss Derno watched, and Miss Derno listened, and the more she watched, and the more she listened, the more astonished she felt.

Mrs Stondon inquired after the health of Mrs Montague Stondon calmly and politely, as though she had never sat on thorns in that dreary drawing-room in Chapel Street. She made her visitors stay for luncheon, and went with them about the grounds in a bewitching straw hat, laughing and talking as they walked.

The girl Miss Derno remembered had vanished, but the fascination which had hung about the girl had been retained somehow by the woman. For the first ten minutes people might not like Mrs Stondon; but the longer Miss Derno watched her the more satisfied she grew that there was a charm about her which no one who knew her intimately could resist.

Under the polish, under the easy manner, under the graceful indifference, there lay heart and passion and feeling and conscience. Under the rocks we find iron and coal, and the iron is firm to endure and the coal has warmth and heat. Whose fault is it if the mines are never worked,—if the hidden treasures lie buried for ages? Is it the sin of the earth that holds them? Is it the crime of the breast where they remain dormant?

After all, was it Phemie's fault that she seemed a well-bred, passionless woman? Had she not done her best in the station of life in which she had been placed, and was her best not what her guests found her—ladylike, unimpulsive, attentive, a trifle sarcastic perhaps, but still graceful and well-educated?

"I recant," said Basil Stondon to Miss Derno, when Marshlands was left behind. "I think Mrs Stondon as beautiful as ice in sunshine, as snow in summer. She is as polished as marble, as cold as steel." And the young man went through a pantomime of shivering as he spoke.

"And how do you like Captain Stondon?" asked Miss Derno.

"He is one of the most delightful old men that was ever ruled by a young wife," answered Basil Stondon, laughing. "How did she happen to marry him? Why, a woman like that might have aspired to a coronet."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Miss Derno. "Excuse me, Basil, but really men are so very foolish. They see a well-dressed woman, with a pretty face, and fall down and worship forthwith, and talk

such nonsense about her as might make the very angels weep."

"Granted," said Basil; "but what has that to do with Mrs Stondon?"

"Why, only this much:—you see Mrs Stondon mistress of Marshlands, and say she might have aspired to a coronet: so she might if she could start in the race matrimonial now; but Mrs Stondon of Marshlands and Miss Keller of nowhere are two very distinct people. Miss Keller did exceedingly well when she married Captain Stondon."

"But she was a Keller," insisted Basil.

"True, but she was a poor Keller, and she is now a rich Stondon, and she has made, in my opinion, an extremely good match, beautiful though she may be."

"How very vehement you are, Olivia, my dear," said Mrs Hurlford, as a reminder.

"I am vehement because I do think she has done very well for herself. Setting aside his wealth, Captain Stondon is a husband any wife might be proud of. He is just the man I should have liked to marry myself."

"I shall really have to speak to Mrs Stondon," remarked Mrs Hurlford, while Basil laughed, and said that he was sure Mrs Stondon would feel greatly flattered could she hear all the remarks they had made on herself and her husband.

"I am going over there again one day next week, and I shall be able to make mischief, Miss Derno," he finished; whereupon Mrs Hurlford at once replied she hoped he would make some favourable impression on her, "because," she concluded, "I did not think her manner at all cordial to you to-day."

"It is not likely," said Basil Stondon, "there can ever be much cordiality between us." And the conversation dropped.

CHAPTER XVIII.

VISITORS.

TIME went on, and as it went Basil Stondon grew to know his way over from the Abbey to Marshlands so well that he could have walked the road blindfold.

Mrs Stondon never grew cordial, but that was no drawback to the young man's enjoyment. He had been so accustomed to women who liked and made much of him, that to meet a woman who did not like him, and who was merely civil, seemed only a pleasant variety—nothing more.

It amused him to watch Phemie's devices for getting rid of him, and to circumvent them; it delighted him to see her face vary and change while he vexed and tormented her. Especially was he pleased when Phemie grew angry, as she sometimes did, and turned upon him. When her eyes flashed, when her cheeks flushed, she certainly did look beautiful; and no one could bring the colour into her face and the lightning into her eyes like Basil Stondon.

She would sit and think about those dead children if he annoyed her, hour after hour. Had their been a boy upstairs, this young man, this stranger, this Eliezer, would not have been wandering about the grounds with Captain Stondon, riding with him, walking with him, getting to be unto him as a son.

Phemie could not bear it; she got pale, she got irritable, watching the pair. She grew beyond all things doubtful of herself, doubtful whether she had ever made her husband entirely happy.

If he were happy now, he could not have been so before. If he loved her as she once thought he did, he ought to know by intuition that she did not like Basil being so constantly at Marshlands. And yet was not there something wrong about herself? Was she not, after all, as the dog in the manger? She never really desired anything till she saw another hand stretched out to seize it. She had not cared for her own children to inherit, and yet she grudged that another woman's son should own the broad lands of Marshlands. She knew that had her will been paramount Basil should never have entered the park-gates, either as guest or master; but she could no more hinder her husband asking him to the house, and learning to like him as he did, than she could hinder him succeeding to the estates.

For who could help liking Basil Stondon? Basil, who was so easy, so good-natured, so forgetful of injury, fancied or real, that long before Mrs Stondon had ever begun to question whether it was right for her to hate him as she did, he had forgotten his feud with her, forgotten that he and his mother had always laid his father's death at the door of this strange woman, forgotten everything save her youth, her beauty, and her marvellous voice.

He had no remark now to make about blue eyes and auburn hair. He did not now inform Miss Derno that he liked Marshlands but hated its mistress; on the contrary, the oftener he visited his kinsfolk the pleasanter his visits seemed to be, till at last he found he was so far reconciled to Phemie as to be able to endure to stay under the same roof with her.

"Of course," said Captain Stondon, in answer to the young man's faint remonstrances, "you must do something; but meantime, till you find something to do, make Marshlands your headquarters." And, nothing loth to fall into such good quarters, Basil bade good-bye to the Hurlfords, packed up his portmanteau at the Abbey, and unpacked it again in a house that soon seemed more to him like home than any in which he had ever previously set foot.

"I suppose Captain Stondon means to adopt you," remarked Miss Derno. "I hope you will not be spoiled at Marshlands;

but it is not the lot I should have chosen for you could I have had my wish."

"It is not the lot I should have chosen for myself," returned Mr Basil, tenderly. "If you could have cared for me, Olivia, how different in every respect—"

"You do not know your own mind," interrupted Miss Derno, hastily; "you cannot read your own heart. You fancied you cared for me, and that fancy has passed, or is passing away; you have only dreamed another dream and wakened from it. How many women I have seen you in love with!" she went on, a little bitterly. "I wonder, I often wonder, who will fix the wandering heart at last, and keep it prisoner for life."

"You might have done," he answered; "you might have made anything you chose of me. I would have worked for you, striven for you, died for you. It may seem a laughing matter to you, but it is death to me. A man can love but once, and I have loved you."

"A man can love but once, and you have not loved me," she retorted. "You will turn to the first pretty girl you meet at Marshlands and love her, or think you love her, and so you will go on—on—on—till you find some one strong enough to take your heart, and hold it fast for ever." And so they parted—on friendly terms, it is true, and yet not quite good friends—for Basil could not be blind to the fact that the way in which things had turned out did not meet with Miss Derno's approval.

She thought Captain Stondon would have done better to get his kinsman a Government appointment rather than let him idle about Marshlands. She thought so, and she said so; and although Basil carried off his annoyance with a laugh, still he was annoyed at her idea of idleness being so bad for him.

"May a fellow not enjoy this lovely weather without a thought of work?" he asked. "I shall have enough to do doubtless before the winter."

"I shall be glad to hear of it," answered Miss Derno, drily. And she was very glad when the news came that Basil Stondon was going to be busy at last.

She had a long time to wait first, however, and many things happened before he began to earn his living.

As for Phemie, she disliked the idea of Basil taking up his abode at Marshlands, more even than Miss Derno, and showed her aversion to the project so openly that Captain Stondon felt grieved and hurt.

It was natural, he thought, that she should not care much about Basil, and yet it was only right and Christian that families should live at peace with one another.

He was so happy himself that he wanted to make those about him happy also; added to which there could be no question but that Basil supplied in a great measure the want in his life to which I have before alluded. He was getting fond of the man who would in the ordinary course of nature succeed to the property after him—they had a joint interest in the lands and woods and fields. Basil was not a wasteful, extravagant man like Montague. Basil had been kept so short from boyhood of money by his father, he had always been obliged to look so closely after his few sovereigns, that he was quite as economical as any young man need to be. He had ridden, he had shot, he had pulled in many a match, but he had always been indebted to some friend for a mount; he had never shot over his own preserves with his own dogs; he had never owned a yacht; he had never kept his own hunters.

His training had not tended to make him either very proud or very independent, but it had made him careful. Save that he had dressed well, he had not a single extravagance. Altogether Captain Stondon often marvelled where Montague had got such a son, and wished Providence had given Basil to him instead of to the reckless ne'er-do-well who ended all his earthly troubles in so ghastly a fashion.

“I am certain, love,” he said to his wife, when he saw how coldly she took the intelligence that Basil was coming to spend a month at Marshlands, “you will, for my sake, try to like him a little better. He is so different from his father, and it would be such a comfort to me to be able to do something for him; and I

cannot do anything for him unless I first see what he is fit for. You will try to make the house pleasant to him, dearest, will you not?" And Phemie answered—

"I am doing my best; only he is so constantly here, and one has to be so perpetually doing one's best, that there is no time left for rest. However," she added, noticing the look of annoyance on her husband's face—and it was a sign of amendment in Phemie when she noticed annoyance in any one—"I will strive to be pleasanter to him, I will, indeed." Which promise so delighted Captain Stondon that he called her the most amiable of women, the delight of his life, the blessing of his existence, the only happiness he had ever known.

"And I am so afraid of happiness making me selfish, my dearest," he finished, "that I should like to do as much as I can for others. Perhaps if I had been more lenient to Montague's faults he might never— . It was a money question," he went on, "and it seemed terrible for the want of money to bring about such a tragedy. Blood is thicker than water, after all Phemie; and I should never forgive myself if Basil went wrong too. You will help me, love, will you not? But you have said you will, and that is enough. He is so young, and has all his lifetime before him still, and it would be a sin not to help him at this juncture, when he most needs assistance from some one."

Captain Stondon sighed as he said this. It seemed such a fine thing for a man to have his lifetime before him, and not to be tasting his first cup of happiness when the evening shadows were stealing on!

"You have helped my people," said Phemie, gratefully, "and I will try to help yours. Henry, I have been very wrong."

Whereupon Captain Stondon stooped down and kissed her, as if she had conferred some benefit upon him.

Then Phemie noticed—what she had never observed previously—how grey he was getting. She did not know why she had not seen this before, she could never tell why she saw it then; she only felt that his manner, and that changing hair, gave her a pang

such as had never yet passed through her heart. He was growing old, and she had, perhaps, not done what she might for him. She had taken her own pleasure, and grudged him the happiness of having one of his own blood to benefit. He who had done so much for her; he who, never forgetful of her wishes, asked if she was not going to write and ask Helen and Duncan to spend some time with them.

“And if your uncle would come too, we might all go down to the sea-side together. Should you not like it?”

Like it! Next to the hills, or indeed better, perhaps, than the hills, Phemie loved the sea. To her it always seemed singing the songs she had listened to in her childhood; to her it was mother, father, home, friends. Phemie knew no loneliness while she sat and watched the waves rippling in on the sand, or breaking upon the rocks. Already she had grown a little weary of the monotonous Norfolk scenery, and she longed for the sight of a more open country, of the far-off mountains; or, better than all else on earth, of the restless, murmuring, sorrowing, passionate sea.

Helen came first to Marshlands. She was young, pretty, simple; very proud of the prizes she had won at school; greatly interested in new pieces of music; rapturous concerning fancy-work; deferential towards her rich cousin Phemie; and stood in great awe of Duncan, who was now a hard-headed, hard-working, somewhat plain young man, following the bent of his inclinations among steam-engines and boilers and forges and wrought iron and cast iron and moulds and patterns and a general flare and glare of furnaces and sputter of sparks and din of hammers and blowing of bellows.

A young man possessed of that pleasant turn of mind which made him, in the capacity of a worker, look on all idlers with distrust and contempt. There was war between him and Basil Stondon for some days, till Mr Aggland appeared on the scene, and rated his son soundly for his rudeness.

“He wanted to know what I did,” answered Duncan, stoutly, “and I would not tell him. What business was it of his?”

“What business was it of yours, Duncan, asking him whether he would be afraid to take May-day over the bullfinch at the bottom of the home park?” inquired Phemie.

“So you are taking his part next,” said Duncan, “and I thought you did not like him.”

“I like fair play,” answered Phemie, “and he has as much right to ask in whose office you are as you have to ask him, as I heard you ask him the other day, where he lived when he was at home, and if it was play with him and not work all the year round.”

“I earn my living, and he never did an hour’s work since he was born,” returned the engineer.

“If you earn your living, you *knew* who put you in the way of earning it,” broke in Mr Aggland. “The same man who buttered your bread—which you would have had to eat stale and dry many a day but for him—chooses to have this young gentleman staying here; and if you will not behave towards him as you ought to do, you shall clear out of his house and spend your holiday where you can.”

“Besides, Duncan,” added his cousin, “Mr Stondon did not intend to vex you, I know he did not. He asked about your employer and your work merely from politeness, just as Miss Derno asked Helen how she got on at school, and what new music she had been learning.”

“You ought to scold him well, Phemie,” remarked her uncle; “if he is to do any good out in the world, he must learn not to be so thin-skinned. He should write out Shakspeare’s axiom, and lay it to heart—‘Use every man after his deserts, and who shall scape whipping?’ He would not, I can tell him that. He forgets all he owes to Captain Stondon—his education, his present position, his chances of future advancement. It is all very well to talk about independence, Duncan, but a man can never be independent who does not know how to be grateful, because an ungrateful man is a slave to his own selfishness and pride. ‘I hate ingratitude more in a man than lying, vainness, babbling, drunkenness,’” said Mr Aggland, by way of a neat ending to his sentence.

“It is to be hoped Duncan will not take you literally,” remarked Phemie, laughing; and Mr Aggland laughed himself, while he answered that he hoped whatever Duncan did he would not spoil their holiday.

“I need a truce myself,” he added, “from care and pelf;

‘And I will have it in cool lanes,
O’er-arching like cathedral fanes,
With elm and beech of sturdy girth,
Or on the bosom of green earth
Amid the daisies.’”

“We all mean to enjoy ourselves,” said Phemie; “and to ensure Duncan’s happiness as well, I intend to ask Miss Derno to join our party. Duncan has lost his heart to her already, uncle. See how he blushes.”

“Well, it is enough to make any one get red to hear how you talk,” retorted Duncan. “You should remember there was a time you did not like to be laughed at yourself; when you used to go about the house crying because you had to leave us, you couldn’t bear to have a word said to you in jest. It is not right of you, Phemie, and you have set Mr Stondon at me now. If he tries it on again I will break his head for him, I will; and as for Miss Derno, I wish you would let her stay where she is; I am sure I never care to set eyes on her again.”

“It is very naughty for children to tell fibs,” answered his cousin; and the very same day she drove over to the Abbey and asked Miss Derno to accompany them to Cromer, to the infinite delight of Mrs Hurlford, who declared to her cousin that she thought Mrs Stondon was the sweetest woman that ever lived.

“Only to think of it!” exclaimed Mrs Hurlford, “only to think of her asking you, although she has got that young girl staying with her. I may tell you now that I trembled when I heard she and Basil were to be in the same house together. Why, Mrs Stondon might make up a marriage between them as easily as I could walk across the room; for if he began to flirt with her, he could not back out of that without offending Captain Stondon. Make the most of your time, Olivia; at any rate keep

him from making love to that chit, for she must go back to school before long, and then you can have the field to yourself."

"Why should he not make love to her if he please?" asked Miss Derno, gravely.

"Why should he not? Good gracious! Olivia, are you losing your senses? Are you turning into an idiot? Can he marry both of you? I only put it to you, can he?"

"Certainly not; indeed it does not seem to me that Basil Stondon is in a position to marry any one at present."

"He told you so?" This was interrogative.

"I believe he did make some sensible speech to that effect," answered Miss Derno.

"Then you are as good as engaged," was Mrs Hurlford's immediate deduction. "I think, Olivia, considering our relationship, and the position in which we stand to one another, you might have told me this before."

"When I am engaged to him you may be quite certain I shall not keep the news back from you for a moment," replied Miss Derno, and she left the room a little out of temper.

CHAPTER XIX.

SUMMER HOLIDAYS.

THAT was a happy time—the happiest Phemie ever knew. It was the bright summer holiday of her life, and not even when, a child, she built her perishable houses of sand and shell on the sea-shore—not even when, a girl, she had wandered over the Cumberland hills gathering flowers and wreathing them into garlands for her hair, had Phemie been so happy as she was in those swiftly-passing hours that sped by, rapidly, noiselessly, like a wild bird on the wing

Considering how much happiness this world holds for even the wretchedest among us, it is strange that we so rarely get it unalloyed.

The inevitable “but” that seems to dog our pleasures is incessantly trampling on the heels of happiness; and thus it comes about that whenever we can manage to outstrip our haunting shadow, whenever we do chance to drain a draught which leaves no bitter after-taste behind, we remember those pleasant hours, that delicious vintage, for ever and for ever.

The enjoyment may not be so great when we come to analyze it, but it has been perfect of its kind; the diamond may not be large, but it is without flaw or blemish. We have known no drawback, we have had no mist, no cloud, no cold, no sorrow. We have enjoyed—wholly and entirely—for once we have basked in the warmth of complete happiness; and the memory of that

glory of sunshine which has flooded our lives, and forced its way into the darkest chambers of our hearts, can never be effaced by the darkness of the tempestuous days that follow.

Do we forget the summer in the winter? Do we forget the flowers when the frost is covering the ground? We have enjoyed the summer, we have loved the flowers, and we can no more cease to recollect the sunshine and the gay parterres, than we can forget to remember the warm grasp of a hand that may now be cold enough—than we can lay the coffin-lid over the face of the dead, and shut out by that act the recollection of the smiles, the tears, the tones whose immortality has commenced for us on earth.

Did Phemie forget? My friends, if one of you stood for a time in Paradise, should you be likely to let that part of your existence slip out of your memory? If you had ever for a moment stood in the Garden of Eden, without knowing there was a tempter in it; eaten of the pleasant fruit, without thinking there was a worm lying at the very core; drank of the waters of gladness, without dreaming there was poison in the draught, death in their sweetness,—I can only say you have felt what Phemie Stondon felt in those days which were happy as heaven unto her. And as the spot where you lay down and took your rest will remain green in your heart till the end, so the memory of that happy summer holiday, through all the after-years, faded not away.

Whether they took long excursions into the country, whether they walked on the sands, whether they sat by the beach, whether under the moonlight their boat glided over the sea, while the dipping oars kept time to the sweet voices of the fair singers, whether they were talking, or laughing, or silent,—they were happy. If there had been no such things as sin and care and sorrow, they could not have enjoyed themselves more. Had there been no to-morrow in life, to-day could not have seemed brighter. Mr Aggland, from his farm, from his isolated existence, from his uncongenial home; Duncan, from his hard work in the heart of London; Helen, from her lessons; Phemie, from company; Miss Derno, from her relations; ; Captain Stondon, from the cares of

ownership ; Basil, from anxieties concerning his future,—took holiday.

They carried no skeleton, they left no one at home that they wished at the sea-shore with them, and they enjoyed—if I were to write for ever I could never hope to tell how fully they enjoyed—that time!

As for Phemie, in those happy, happy days, she forgot her rise in the world—she forgot her accomplishments—she forgot that Basil was to come after her husband—she forgot everything that had made her womanhood so much less lovely than her girlhood, and grew softer, gentler, sweeter.

Away from the familiar family circle—always on her guard before strangers—she had grown worldly, and selfish, and self-conscious ; but by the lonely sea-shore, where the waves sung the dear song she had listened to in her childhood, Phemie changed once again—not to the girl who had won Captain Stondon's heart among the Cumberland hills, but to something far different—to a woman who might have won any man's heart. Alas! for Phemie!

In those days she grew pliable as wax in the hand of the moulder ; she grew loving, and loveable, and tender ; she would sit with her uncle's hand in hers, listening to his discourses, smiling at his quotations, pleased to hear him say how happy he was, how for years and years and years he had never enjoyed himself so much before.

She would talk to Duncan about his future life—about his plans, his hopes, his prospects, for hours at a time ; while the waves kept rippling, rippling at their feet. She delighted to have Helen beside her, and the old caressing attitude, so long discontinued, came back naturally to them both. Her admiration for Miss Derno woke to life once more ; and best of all, there came into her manner towards her husband a graceful thoughtfulness, a grateful appreciation, that comforted Mr Aggland exceedingly.

Phemie! Phemie! my love, my darling!—Phemie of the blue eyes, of the auburn hair!—vain, fanciful, exacting, jealous

Phemie!—if I were to leave you now sitting by the sea-shore, leave you at the acme of your happiness, and close the book, and clasp the rest of the story within its leaves, would the world like you, as I have done, I wonder!

Rather would you not seem a mere sketch, a fair faint outline, an unfinished portrait, beautiful though you may be, lingering in the sunlight of those bright summer days, when your life was full—full to overflowing—of prosperity and happiness and love. And love, poor child—and love! It was the dream-hero come too late; for the Phemie Keller who had waited for him by the tarn and the waterfall, who had listened for his footsteps over the hills, was free no longer to greet his appearing. She had owned but one life—but one, and this was what she had made of it. Never be able to love sinlessly, never be able to love openly, never be able to whisper the sweet secret to herself save with tears of bitterness, with pangs of anguish. This was what “I will” had meant for her when she uttered the words in Tordale Church—where the everlasting hills looked down on the beautiful valley below.

Never, O God! never—so long as the sun shone—so long as the rivers flowed to the sea—as the birds sang—as the snow fell—as the rain descended—never!

And yet the waves rippled, and the sunbeams danced on the waters, and the green leaves rustled in the summer breeze, and the earth looked lovely in its robes of green all brodered and festooned with flowers, and Phemie came to love the man she had disliked, and was happy, unknowing what such happiness meant.

Knowledge came to her soon enough; but not in those sunshiny days when she walked by the sea-shore, and rejoiced in the summer gladness, when she “grew,” as she said to herself, “to like Basil better,” and to wonder less at his popularity.

Poor Phemie! with careful hands and loving hearts all around, was there no one to see whither you were drifting? No one to notice the rock whereon your poor ship went to pieces?

It was holiday time, and all seem too busy taking their ease,

enjoying their hours of idleness, to think of danger or of distress. Besides, we do not ordinarily dream of ice catching fire, of purity itself dragging her garments through the mire. She was innocent. How should knowledge of sin ever enter into such a home as Phemie's? And yet, oh, reader! given this position:—on the one hand, duty and an unsatisfied heart, a heart that the love of man had never filled, that the faithlessness of man had never broken, that was as inexperienced as the heart of a child; and on the other, temptation, youth, romance—how was it likely to end?

Can one pass through the fire unscorched? Is it virtue, never having even seen the furnace, to reach the end of life with no smell of burning on our garments?

Had sin never stood in the path before her, how would it have been with Phemie Keller—who can tell? And who can tell either, oh, friends, how it would fare with any of us if at some point of our journey we had to buckle on our armour, and wage war with the devil and his legions?

It is one thing to be a criminal and another to be a judge. I pray you to remember this, you who from the height of virtue look down on these pages, and read therein the story of Phemie's struggle.

Slowly as the waves steal in upon the shore, as the leaves come upon the bare branches, crept this love into Mrs Stondon's heart.

That the sky seemed clearer, that the days were shorter, that the whole earth appeared more beautiful, that there was a stillness on the sea, a glory over the landscape, such as she had never before dreamed of, Phemie knew; but that the brightness and the beauty, the calm and the glory, were all born of love she did not suspect till she wakened from her slumber—till, like the gold and the silver of a fairy tale, her happiness turned to misery, her rejoicing to despair.

But at the time of which I am speaking, what did love mean to a woman who had never felt its power? It meant nothing. No more than religion means to the infidel—than the Word of God signifies to the atheist. She had never believed in it; she had treated it as an idea, folly, a delusive dream. Children put

faith in stories of dwarfs and giants, of enchanted castles, of magicians, of sprites and gnomes; boys and girls, in a similar manner, placed confidence in love tales, in romantic legends, in sentimental songs; but when children grew up to be boys and girls, and when boys and girls grew up to be men and women, they abandoned their old superstitions, and became like unto Phemie herself, a wise individual who believed in nothing out of the common course of events, who thought that marriage meant no more than what the Prayer-Book said it did,—who would have gone before a magistrate and sworn to the fact, had such testimony been desired of her who laughed at love, and whose firm opinion was, that love between a man and a woman not related to one another by blood, meant either folly or sin.

Folly! In the day of her bitterest distress, she learnt that the strongest love may be the highest wisdom. Sin! I think Phemie, through much suffering, came to understand that there may be as much sin in loving too little as in loving too much.

Till she had eaten of that tree, however, how was she to distinguish between good and evil? Till she had felt danger, how was she to arm herself against harm? Are the blind to be blamed for walking on straight towards a precipice? Was Phemie a sinner, then, because she rejoiced in the sunlight on the waters, because she delighted to hear the birds sing, because she thought the country had never before looked so beautiful, because she looked with dreamy eyes up at the pure blue summer sky, because the floating clouds were lovely to her imagination, because there was a glory on the sea, on the land, on the fields, on the woods, because she was happy, unknowing why?

Was she to blame? Was she a worse woman, then, in the day of her temptation, than she had been in that of her prosperity? Was the dead heart holier than the erring one? Who may answer? I can only tell the story as it came to pass—only show how the error produced fruit of sorrow, how her fault brought forth trouble and remorse.

They were all talking on this subject one Sunday evening after their return to Marshlands. Talking, I mean, about how his sin

finds a man out even in this world. How the fault committed and forgotten by the creature is not forgotten by the Creator ; how it is rather like seed cast into the ground, sure to spring up, and to bring forth abundantly sooner or later after its kind—either private sorrow or public shame, when Captain Stondon remarked—

“The last time I heard a sermon on the same text as that this afternoon was among the Cumberland hills. Do you remember Mr Conbyr’s ‘Wages of Sin,’ Phemie?” he added, turning to his wife : “the day I first saw you—the day I first saw Tordale—the day I sat on the side of Helbeck, and watched the sun set among the mountains—the day I broke my arm and sprained my ankle—that day Mr Conbyr told us that the wages of sin is death?”

“And have you seen any reason since to believe that he told you what was not true?” asked Mr Aggland.

“I am afraid I have never thought about the subject from that day to this,” answered Captain Stondon. “Sin seems so strong a word, so utterly outside the ordinary experience of an everyday life.”

“Perhaps so,” was Mr Aggland’s reply ; “yet still we acknowledge every Sunday that we are sinners. What does that signify? I only ask for information,” went on Phemie’s uncle. “What is the sin of which the wages is death, if it be one which we can ward off with a fine house, good fires, and purple and fine linen? And if we are not all offenders, if we are not every day committing some fault, what do we mean by confessing we are miserable sinners? We either attribute some meaning to the words, or we do not. Which is it?”

There was a moment’s pause before any one answered. Then Miss Derno said—

“I think you and Captain Stondon are traversing different mental lines. You are taking sin in its broadest sense ; you are thinking of sins of omission and sins of commission, and sins of selfishness, of sins of which the law of the land takes no cognizance ; while Captain Stondon was speaking of those that are punished by Calcraft, or by fine, or by imprisonment.”

"Which are not usually committed in well-regulated households," put in Basil Stondon.

"As, for instance, theft, murder, and so on," added Captain Stondon.

"But the text refers to death in the next world, not in this," remarked Phemie. They were talking the matter over, just as people do talk such matters over—neither theologically nor philosophically—not pursuing any distinct line of argument, but speaking out whatever thought chanced to come uppermost at the moment.

"I should rather say death in the next world *or* in this," amended Mr Aggland.

"Will you explain your meaning a little more clearly?" asked Miss Derno.

It was an interesting group on which the beams of the departing sun fell aslant—interesting because of the beauty of the women, of the faces of the men; because of the way in which the light wandered in and out among the trees that overshadowed the talkers; because of the golden track that lay upon the grass; because of the stillness of that holy summer's evening; because, taking sin in the sense we generally use the word, it seemed so strange a subject for such a "well-ordered household," to quote Basil Stondon, to have selected for conversation.

Sin! If a select party standing about the bar of a public-house in Whitechapel had commenced such a discussion, it would have appeared only natural. If rags and filth and vice had been able to tell all about it, we should only have said it was right and proper for the natives to speak of a plant indigenous to their soil. But twice now Captain Stondon had heard the same text preached from, under circumstances that had impressed it on his mind. Both times the preacher had addressed himself not to the men and the women from contact with whom virtue in this world shrinks decorously. In Tordale, Captain Stondon had wondered for a short space as to what sin the farmers among the hills were likely to commit; at Marshlands, when the clergyman had not above twenty of a congregation, the text grew almost personal.

Sin! The rector had discoursed to them about all sorts of sin—about the sins of idolatry, and the sins of disobedience; about the sins of the Israelites—about the sins of Ahab—about the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat—about the sins of Saul, and the sins of David, and the sins of Gehazi, and the sins of the Jews, and all the offences which are counted as sins in the New Testament. He had told them how “sin when it is finished bringeth forth death.” And now they were discussing the subject, and Mr Aggland said sin brought death in this world or in the next or in both.

“Unrepented sin,” he observed, in answer to Miss Derno, “may bring death in the next world; being no divine, however, that is a point I should prefer not meddling with; but any man has a right to speak of what he has seen in this world—he has a right, I mean, to talk of the ways of Providence, so far as he has been able to trace them on this side of the grave; and I have seen even in this world that the wages of sin is death.”

“Death by disease or violence—which?” demanded Basil Stondon.

“Neither,” replied Mr Aggland; “but death to every hope, to every wish; death to peace and contentment, to every pleasant memory, to the happiness of every passing hour. ‘We have all our vices,’ says Horace, and Baxter advises us to kill them before they kill us. ‘Use sin,’ are his words, ‘as it will use you—spare it not, for it will not spare you: use it therefore as a murderer should be used, and though it kill your bodies, it shall not be able to kill your souls; though it bring you to the grave, it shall not be able to keep you there.’”

“I am still at a loss,” remarked Captain Stondon, “to understand what sin could produce such effects as you speak of. What sin, for instance, as any among us would be likely to commit?”

“What sin did Dives commit?” asked Mr Aggland in reply. And the evening sun fell, as he spoke, on his strange face, on his hollow cheeks, on his tangled hair, on his thoughtful eyes, on his mouth, which he opened wider than ever while he put his question—“What sin did Dives commit? Ho was a rich man,

and not a bad man. So far as we can see, he wore purple and fine linen; he lived in a grand house; he fared sumptuously every day. No death came to him in this world, but hell-fire in the next. Look over the Bible for yourself, and you will find it is not sin which the law of the land punishes the most severely that we are warned against with the greatest frequency. It would be a hard thing if it were more difficult for the poor to reach heaven than the rich—for Lazarus than for Dives. It would be an awful thing if God despised the poor as we do; if there were ‘respect in the next world for him who weareth the gay clothing, who enters the assembly with a gold ring, and in goodly apparel.’ (You look at me, Miss Derno, as though you did not know I am quoting Scripture.) Though we go to the grave in a carriage with nodding plumes; though we are followed thither by the wealthy and titled of the land; though we lie down and take our rest in a coffin covered with velvet and lined with silk, yet we shall all have to enter heaven as paupers. Happy will he be in that day who, finding himself naked, shall yet not be ashamed.”

And Mr Aggland looked up to the western sky, all crimson and purple and gold, as he concluded his little sermon,—looked up as though he there saw what he had been talking about, while Miss Derno said—

“You give us the truth naked enough, at any rate, Mr Aggland.”

“For anatomical purposes clothing is unnecessary, Miss Derno,” he answered. At which remark they all laughed, excepting Phemie, who, sitting a little apart, was looking, like her uncle, at the pomp and splendour that surrounded the setting sun.

“Does not some one say something about our sins resembling our shadows, uncle?” she asked, with a sad thoughtful expression on her lovely face.

“Suckling does,” he answered. “His idea is that in our noon they, like our shadows,

—‘when our day’s in its glory, scarce appear;
Towards our evening—how great! how monstrous!’”

“And it is evening now, and too late for us to sit talking here much longer,” observed Captain Stondon, offering his arm to Miss Derno.

Mr Aggland arose, and followed after Basil Stondon and his niece. Before he passed into the house he paused, and looked once again towards the west, and as he looked, sighed.

That was the last night of their happy holiday, and their talk had been of sin!

CHAPTER XX.

KNOWLEDGE.

TIME went by—it was autumn—it was winter—it was spring—and still Captain Stondon found some good reason why Basil should remain at Marshlands.

Nothing loth, Basil stayed on; stayed to be always with Phemie and her husband, to go with them everywhere; stayed till people forgot the time when he had never been seen in Norfolk, and came to consider him not merely the heir but the child of the house.

A child in comparison to Captain Stondon, perhaps; but how about Phemie? Phemie, who was younger ever so much than he; Phemie of the blue eyes, and the auburn hair, and the divine voice; Phemie, who was growing to be all the world to him, who was becoming fonder, and fonder, and fonder of him—fonder and fonder as the days went by.

“That virtue which requires to be ever guarded is scarcely worth the sentinel,” says the Vicar of Wakefield; and yet I doubt whether, in this case, it had not been better for Captain Stondon to have trusted Basil a little less, to have thought of consequences a little more.

We watch the women whose purity we suspect; we leave perfect purity to be sullied if it choose. Is not this locking the stable door after the steed is gone? Is not this being “wise afterwards” with a vengeance?

Time, as I have said, went by; but to Basil and to Phemie the

months seemed days, for they had entered into that dreamland where, as in eternity, there is no account taken of the passing hours. They were happy, for Phemie did not dream of danger, and Basil would not think of it. He liked the river, and he wilfully shut his eyes to the fact that it was flowing to the sea; besides, if there were any harm done, it would be only to himself. Mrs Stondon, "of course," was safe. Of course; ah! well-a-day!

A young man who from his earliest boyhood had been in love with some one, was scarcely likely not to know that he cared for Phemie more than it was quite in the proper order of things for him to care for another person's wife; in fact, by the time the primroses were blooming on the banks and under the hedgerows, he knew perfectly well that his fancy for Miss Derno was gone, and that an attachment for Mrs Stondon had taken its place. He knew it, but he would not acknowledge it. He was like a man who, feeling every hour in the day twinges and pangs that are the premonitory symptoms of a mortal malady, will yet not even whisper to himself that he is sick. He has not courage to turn from the sunlight and look down into the grave. Basil Stondon was for once in his life afraid to think of his new love. All his wounds before had been trifling in comparison to this cancer, that he dared not show to mortal.

Not even to the woman who was to "fix the wandering heart at last" durst he show by word or look or sign what she had become to him. He had to know and suffer in silence; he had to bear his pain with a smile on his lips; for he understood well enough that if once he spoke he would be cast out of his earthly Eden; and though there may be a serpent in it—a serpent stinging him every day—still it was Eden for all that.

"The battle between evil and good," says a living preacher, "is perpetually being fought in silence."

Have you ever thought about this, my reader? ever laid it to heart that, under all the decorum of our nineteenth-century life, the old, old warfare that began so many thousands of years since is still being waged? that the devil is defied, that the devil is

triumphant, that temptations are resisted, that tragedies are acted out with no spectator, save God, looking on the while?

Smooth and bright may be the surface of the waters, but what about their depths?

Happy and peaceful seemed that Norfolk household: there were pleasant walks about the grounds, there were drives through the narrow lanes, there were rides across the breezy commons; within sight of the quarries where the "crags" were hewn out; beside marshy pools, from the margin of which geese stretched out their long necks and hissed at the strangers as they paused to look; there were parties at Marshlands, and at the houses of friends and neighbours. There was the usual routine of an English country life; its calm, its contentment, its want of excitement, its affluence, its propriety, its monotony; but there was something else besides, something that was changing Phemie and altering Basil, that was eating the heart out of that happy life; eating, eating at the core of that rich ripe fruit, and changing all its former sweetness to bitterness and decay.

He should have gone when he first learnt how dear she was growing; he should have left her, "loved her and left her—left her for ever." He had friends; he might have visited them. He had a mother; he might have resided with her. Had he pressed the point, Captain Stondon would have got him some appointment; but even supposing none of these roads open, he ought to have left Phemie; ought to have been man enough to say, "I will not bring sorrow on her; let the future hold what it may for me."

A man can get away from temptation, but a woman cannot. Without telling any one, without asking advice or seeking assistance or making a disturbance, a man may always turn his face north, east, south, or west, at a moment's notice. He can cease visiting at a house; he can walk where he is certain not to meet the woman he loves best; he can do, in fact, what Basil Stondon ought to have done—leave her.

But this was just what Basil Stondon did not do. He would pay a flying visit to London, or go to see his mother, or accept an

invitation to stay for a day or two with a friend here, or another friend there, but he always came back to Marshlands, hungry and thirsting for a sight of the woman whom he ought never to have seen more.

His mother would not come to Marshlands. It was well for Basil to remain there if he liked, she said, but she could not forget her husband, which was the less praiseworthy of Mrs Montague Stondon, as Marshlands would have killed her in a month.

"How you bear the monotony," she remarked, "I cannot imagine." To which Basil made answer, that men were different from women; "we can ride and hunt and shoot," he explained.

"And she" (the "she" meant Mrs Stondon), "she, you say, is really presentable. I have heard the same thing from other sources, but I can scarcely credit it. She was so dreadfully unformed when I first saw her."

"You would not think so now," answered her son.

"Those kind of people," said Mrs Montague, "soon learn our ways—that is, if they are clever; and she is clever, Miss Derno tells me."

"I suppose she is," replied Basil, who found his mother expected him to make some answer.

"And that cousin. Now, my dear Basil, I do not wish to put ideas into your head, but pray be on your guard, pray—pray. You who may marry so well—you who will have such a property—do not let any one entrap you into marrying that girl. Whenever you told me 'she' was getting more civil, I suspected her reason. As she has no children, she would like one of her own family to marry the next heir. Be on your guard, therefore, I entreat; be on your guard."

Basil very solemnly promised her that he would, and remarked that if she would only come to Marshlands when Helen Aggland next visited it, she might see for herself how little danger there was of his falling in love with such a chit of a child; but his mother would not believe in his safety.

"I cannot forget, if you can," she answered. "If Captain

Stondon had only done half as much for your father as he is doing for you, I should not now be a widow." Upon which, Mrs Montague began to cry, and Basil changed the subject, for he knew he had altered his opinion about that matter entirely, and that he did not now consider either Phemie or her husband had any share in his father's suicide.

"Blameable share, of course, I mean," said the young man to Miss Derno, and Miss Derno remarked she was glad to find he was growing so sensible.

This was in the spring, when Miss Derno came down into Norfolk again, to stay with the Hurlfords, who meant to have quite a gay time of it, in honour of a General Sir Samuel Hurlford, who having done great things in India had returned thence, been knighted, and was now making a tour of his relations prior to returning to India in the beginning of the new year. He was a very wonderful man, so everybody said, and the Hurlfords were naturally proud to have, and anxious to exhibit him, as well as his daughter, Miss Georgina Hurlford. This young lady had been educated in England, and after having been brought out (unsuccessfully) in London, under the most excellent auspices, was about to accompany General Sir Samuel back to India.

Money and fame had not quite kept pace together in the General's case, and prudent friends thought it was quite possible Miss Hurlford might marry better on the other side of the equator. At any rate Miss Georgina meant to try.

She had not found the husband-crop plentiful in her season, but she hoped matters would be different in India. She was just the girl to "go off" there, her acquaintance said—lively, good-natured, ladylike. She liked the idea of travelling; she did not mind the sea; she did not care for the heat; she thought it would be something new; and besides, she could then be always with "dear papa."

Dear papa was very fond of Georgina; very proud of her hair, which curled naturally; of her eyes, that were a light cold brown; of her cheeks, which were round and rosy; of her mouth, which was small and pretty.

He admired his child excessively, but when he said she "is like her poor dear mamma," he sighed.

There were those who knew that "poor dear mamma" had led the worthy General a pretty dance before she reluctantly left a world that seemed to her a very desirable one to inhabit; but no one in Norfolk, unless, indeed, it might be Miss Derno, was aware of this, and the sigh was put down to regret for the dead, not to solicitude for the living.

Miss Georgina had been most carefully educated, so the General's sisters assured him. She had spent eight years of her life at a school where there were masters for everything, extras in abundance, a pew in church, and a clergyman once a week to catechise the young ladies.

Her vacations she had spent with one or other of her aunts; either with her aunt in town, or her aunt in the country; either at Kensington, or at an old Grange in Berkshire. In London she learned the value of a good settlement; at the Grange, how to sit close to her saddle, and not to ride on the reins. Miss Georgina was an apt pupil, and gave great satisfaction to all who were kind enough to instruct her. A most discreet young person, who could dance well, sing German songs, talk French with any one, take her fences, interpret Schulhoff and Chopin, play waltzes and quadrilles, and who withal was pleasant-mannered and agreeable. What more could a man and a father desire? particularly as Georgina was prudent, which her poor dear mamma had never been.

She had met Basil Stondon before, in London; as who, indeed, among the upper middle-class had not? She liked him greatly (they danced together many evenings); and if I may say such a thing of a young lady brought up as Miss Georgina Hurlford had been brought up, she loved him.

There are some men whom all women seem to like or to love, and Basil Stondon was one of them.

The dear creatures have a fancy for extremes—extreme of strength or extreme of weakness.

It is your medium man whose love goes a-begging, in whose face the door is shut unceremoniously,

Without fortune, Basil might have looked long enough for a wife, but he need not have walked abroad to look for love and affection.

Women were very fond of this young fellow ; women who, it is to be hoped, met with husbands calculated to make them happier in course of time ; and one of the girls who liked him excessively was Miss Georgina Hurlford.

To General Sir Samuel, Captain Stondon took amazingly, as in duty bound ; they talked about India together all the day long. In a small and friendly community any strange face is welcome, providing it be a pleasant one ; and Mrs Stondon made quite as cordial advances to Miss Hurlford as her husband did to Miss Georgina's father.

Here was an opportunity not to be despised, and Miss Hurlford was not above availing herself of it. She met Mrs Stondon half-way, more than half-way ; and after the curious manner of the gentle sex, fell in love with her straightway.

If a man had paid her half the compliments that fell from Miss Hurlford's lips, Mrs Stondon would have thought him deranged. Hero worship ! What was any hero worship in comparison to such heroine worship as Miss Georgina offered to her new friend ? It was incense all the day long ; and Phemie never, because of the smoke, could see the meaning of it.

Everybody joined together in making much of her ; and Phemie was pleased to be made much of, and basked in the sunshine.

She was happy ; ah, heaven ! she was so happy : she was so innocent ; she was still so young. This girl, fresh from a boarding-school, was wiser in her generation than the seven years' wife, and wound Mrs Stondon round her finger like packthread ; but there was a balance ! the sun and the wind and the rain could never talk to the one as they did to the other ; the voices of the night never spoke to Miss Hurlford as they did to Phemie. Never since she was a child had Georgina looked at anything with the same guileless eyes as those with which Mrs Stondon stood gazing through the calm twilight of a summer's evening at the

woods and the fields, on the last night when she and perfect truth and unsullied purity walked through life together.

For ever—for ever, the Phemie we have travelled with so far in poverty and riches departed, and another Phemie came and stood in her place.

It was as though the calm, self-possessed, unimpressionable nature set with the sun; as though the night, the cool, calm night, took her in its soothing embrace, took her away and hid her, and gave back with the dawning day—not the same, ah! no, but another—a passionate, sorrowful, despairing woman, who knew why the hours had sped by, why time had seemed to fly instead of to travel at ordinary speed; why a glory had all at once come over her life; why she had appeared to be always living in the sunshine; she knew all this, I say, and knew at the same moment that the sun had set, that the glory was departed—the illusion dispelled—the happiness passed to return no more—no more.

Knowledge came to her thus—came in the twilight as she stood under the verandah, watching the night steal on.

She had never felt so happy before, I think; and as she leaned against one of the pillars of the verandah, and drank in the thousand perfumes that arose from the garden beneath, she gave herself up to the full enjoyment of the moment, to that sensuous enjoyment which is produced on the minds of some by the scent of flowers, by the fading light, by the trees standing dark and silent in the distance, by the balminess of the air, by the lights and shadows on a landscape.

The roses were blooming beside her; the honeysuckle was lying against her cheek; the night air fanned her forehead. They had no company that evening save General and Mr Hurlford, and Miss Derno. Dear Georgina had not been able to accompany her papa: so at that present moment Captain Stondon was doing the agreeable to General Sir Samuel and Mr Hurlford; being assisted in his laudable efforts by Mr Basil Stondon.

Miss Derno, who had been staying for a few days at Marshlands, was, to the best of Mrs Stondon's belief, writing a letter in her

dressing-room, and Phemie had consequently the twilight and her reverie to herself.

It was getting dark—darker, but still Phemie stood leaning against the pillar, with her dress concealed by the trailing creepers that covered the low light trellis-work dividing the balcony from the terrace, thinking dreamily and happily, until it suddenly occurred to her that under the distant elm-trees she could see something moving.

If we fancy anything of this kind, we watch, and Phemie therefore only did what her neighbours would have done under the circumstances—she strained her eyes to see if she were right in her conjecture.

She was not frightened, she was hardly curious; she thought it might be some of the servants; and though the servants had no business to be making love under the elm-trees, still Phemie was not likely to speak harshly about their having done so.

“It must be two of the servants.” Phemie said this to herself over and over, as the shadows changed to figures, and came slowly on.

“It must be the servants,” and her heart began to beat quicker.

“It must be the servants,” she repeated, and she could have struck herself for refusing to believe her own word. She knew well enough who it was. She knew even in that dim light the sweep of Miss Derno’s dress, the gracefulness of her walk, the lithe beauty of her figure. She knew—she would have known it among a thousand—the pleading softness of Basil’s voice—the whispered music of the tones that came to her through the stillness.

She plucked a rose from its stem and pulled the flower to pieces in her nervous irritability. She dropped the leaves from the naked stem, and the thorns pricked her soft dainty fingers.

They came nearer—nearer still, and then they paused for a moment, and spoke earnestly and eagerly together. After that they turned on to the grass, and walked across the turf closer and closer to where she stood, till Phemie could almost hear their words rising to her in the stillness.

Then they paused again, and one sentence reached Phemie.

"I could never doubt you, never misinterpret you: if all the rest of the world proved false, I should still believe you true till the end."

It was Basil who spoke—who, stooping over Miss Derno's outstretched hand, kissed it ere they parted.

He walked down towards the fir plantation, where he smoked a solitary cigar: she went round to the conservatory, and re-entered the house that way.

It was all past, and that was all, and yet Phemie, kneeling in her own room—kneeling with her face buried in her hands, wept such tears that night as had never fallen from her eyes before. Passionate tears, jealous tears, tears of shame, of anguish, of despair.

She knew all about it now—knew that the foe she had mocked at was her conqueror—knew there was such a thing as love in the world, and that she loved—knew she had been walking along the road leading to destruction—knew that she was fonder of this man than she had ever grown to be of the husband who had raised her to what she was.

To what she was! Alas! was it for this he had taken her from the sinless quiet of her former life? for this he had given wealth and rank and position? Had she passed from the peace of that tranquil valley, so far away in point of distance, so much farther away in memory and feeling, to be sobbing her heart out all alone in the dark?

She had wept once looking down the valley of Tordale, but not like this; she had shed tears before, but not like these; she had looked out on life then—on an ideal, an untried life; she was facing its realities now; the wells of her heart were open at last, the secret chambers were unlocked after all, and with an exceeding bitter cry Phemie woke to a full knowledge of what nature had dimly foreshadowed to her before marriage.

She had never loved her husband—never. She loved this other man who could never be anything to her—never. Among the hills she had owned one life—among the hills she had

pledged that life away. She could not go back to the hills now, and begin existence in the new. She had sinned; she had sinned in marrying; she had sinned in loving; she could never be happy, but she could be true; she could, though her sorrow killed her; she could, though her tears fell ceaselessly; she could and she would. Poor child! poor wife! poor Phemie!

CHAPTER XXI.

FROM LESS TO MORE.

For two days Mrs Stondon kept her room. She said she had a headache, that she had caught cold, that she was too ill to see any one excepting her husband, and yet she would not allow Captain Stondon to send for a doctor. She was afraid a doctor might guess her malady to be more mental than physical, and so she refused to do anything except lie on a sofa in her dressing-room, while her maid bathed her forehead with eau-de-cologne and water, and brought her up morning and night a cup of tea.

On the evening of the second day Phemie went down-stairs, lest her husband's anxiety, her husband's tenderness, should kill her.

She had thought over the matter during those two days till she was almost mad. She had loved a man not her husband—a man who loved another woman. She had loved unsought, unwooded. She had planted without hope of gathering. She had loved unmasked, but, thank God, unknown.

Well, she could bury her own dead without the help of man; she could destroy this curse which had come to her in the guise of a blessing; she could hate Basil as she hated herself; she could leave him and Miss Derno to settle their love affairs to their own liking. She could keep her secret, her shameful, disgraceful secret, to herself, and mortal should not wring it from her. It was known but to herself and her God, and He would have pity.

Thinking all these good thoughts, having formed all these good

resolutions, Phemie left her room and rejoined the family circle, and answered all inquiries about her health with a disagreeable politeness which she had laid down for the rule of her future life.

Ill enough she looked to have satisfied any doubt that might have been entertained about her sudden indisposition. She was pale, she was weak, she was weary ; she spoke as though it were a trouble for her to talk ; and though both Miss Derno and Basil Stondon saw she was trying her best to keep up before her husband, they took private occasion of advising him to send for a doctor whether she liked it or not.

“ You seemed so well at dinner on Tuesday night,” said Miss Derno.

“ But we had a long walk over Wildmoor, you remember,” remarked Basil, “ and Mrs Stondon complained then of being tired. Do you not recollect her sitting down to rest as we came back ? ”

Miss Derno did remember perfectly, and she remembered something else which she had scarcely noticed at the time, namely, how concerned Basil seemed about Mrs Stondon’s weariness.

The coming of light is often felt before its actual advent. Miss Derno had not arrived at putting two and two together yet, but she had begun to perceive that somehow there was a two and two, and Basil’s anxiety about Mrs Stondon’s indisposition set her wondering. It was not ordinary anxiety, it was not ordinary interest. To have heard Captain Stondon, any one might have thought his wife sick to death with some mortal malady, but to see Mr Basil was more astonishing still.

Nothing would serve him but to mount his horse and ride off for a doctor. He would trust no messenger, he would listen to no remonstrances. After he once saw Phemie’s face, he never rested till he got leave from Captain Stondon to fetch medical advice, and through the twilight he galloped away to seek it.

“ How very much Basil takes your illness to heart ! ” remarked Miss Derno as he left the room ; and Phemie, from among the sofa pillars, answered, “ He is very kind.”

Very kind! he was indeed too kind; and Phemie, noticing it, felt that her own love might not be the only battle she should have to fight—felt dimly that she had not loved without return, that heart had answered but to heart, and spirit to spirit.

Poor Phemie!—poor soul!—what could a doctor do for her? He could order her back to her own room, and send her draughts, and prescribe quietness and arrowroot; no fatigue, and beef tea; no excitement, and after a few days a couple of glasses of Madeira; but the fever that was on Phemie he could not conquer; the heat and the cold, the alterations and the changes, he could neither see nor control.

She knew when he said she was better, that he was mistaken. She felt that from day to day the struggle must continue—the fight go on. She confessed to her own heart, when she came down-stairs for good, and began to walk and drive and ride once more, that the old disease was still unsubdued, that she was no stronger than ever she had been, but weaker by far.

Day by day the battle grew worse; the more she absented herself from Basil the more eagerly he welcomed her when she did come. Though she did not now like Miss Derno, still she entreated her to stay rather than go back to the old life—the sweet life that had been so full of pleasure and of peril. She asked Miss Hurlford, Mrs Hurlford; she filled the house with company; she seemed never happy save in a crowd: she grew restless, impatient, irritable; she answered Basil shortly, and, as Miss Derno thought, sometimes not over-civilly.

“I have it!” exclaimed that clever lady to herself one day; “Basil has been simpleton enough to fall in love with Mrs Stondon’s bright eyes, and she thinks it necessary to assume the grand matron with him. Heaven help the woman! If she knew as much of him as I do, she would not attach much importance to it.”

Which only shows how greatly deceived even the wisest women may be. Could Basil have married Phemie, he might not have cared for her; had she been eligible, he might have found his love damped by considerations of ways and means—of

the butcher, baker, and grocer ; but as it was—as Phemie was perfectly unattainable—Basil lost his senses about her. God help any woman who being loved by such an one loves him back ! There are times in a woman's life when it is better to fall into the hands of the wicked rather than of the foolish. I think Phemie would have known what to do with a villain, but she did not know what to do with Basil, who was not sinner enough to think of bringing misery to her, who was not man enough to leave her, who had not sense enough to see what the end might be, but who, torturing himself by Phemie's change of manner, by Phemie's pale face and fretful answers, stayed on, tormenting her with his presence, with anxious inquiries about her health, about her spirits, about her varying moods.

“I am ill,” she said one day, when he had persistently followed her about till she could keep her temper no longer. “I am ill—cannot you see that for yourself? I want to be alone—I want rest—I want quietness—”

“And yet you fill your house with visitors. That is a strange way of compassing the desired end,” he answered.

“If Captain Stondon be satisfied, I suppose it cannot signify to you what I do,” she retorted.

“Anything signifies to me that affects your health or happiness,” he replied, a little tenderly.

“I am surely the best judge of what does affect my health and happiness,” answered Phemie.

“You say you want rest,” he began.

“So I do,” she interrupted ; “rest from being asked perpetually how I am.”

“You say you are ill, as any one, indeed, may see for himself. Why do you not have some advice?”

“I have had advice, but found it did me no good.”

“Why not go to Town with Captain Stondon, and consult some first-rate physician? We are thinking of running up to London for a few days next week.”

“I know you are,” answered Phemie.

“Well, will you consider the matter, and come with us?”

She stood silent for a minute or two, and then answered,—
“Any physician who knew exactly what was the matter with me would order rest and change. I may think about that when you are away, but I will not go to London.”

“Perhaps, however,” urged Basil, “you do not know what is the matter with you?”

“Perhaps not,” answered Phemie, shortly; “but I believe I do.”

This was the way he followed her about; before strangers he kept at a distance; even when Miss Derno chanced to be present he had learned to be prudent; but for all that he pursued Phemie like her shadow; he was always pleading and praying that she would take care of her health; he was always telling her how, for his sake, for Captain Stondon’s sake, for the sake of all her friends, she should give up so much company, and live quietly, and keep early hours, “as we used to do,” finished Basil, who longed with a terrible longing for the days to come back again—that could never come back more.

“We cannot live to-day as we lived yesterday,” was Phemie’s answer. “What was pleasant in the past might kill one in the present.”

“Would that quiet home-life which we enjoyed so thoroughly until just lately kill you if it could come again?” he asked.

“It would,” replied Mrs Stondon. “I could not bear it now. I was all very well while it lasted, but I could not go back to it, for all that.”

And then knowing that leaving those days, against the monotony of which she was inveighing, had been to her like leaving heaven for earth, Phemie went off to her own room and cried—cried till her head was aching and her heart weary.

“If he would but leave me alone,” she thought. But when he did leave her alone, as he sometimes did—for Basil occasionally grew angry at her answers and left her in a rage—matters were no better.

Phemie would watch him talking to other women, smiling his smiles for them, speaking his tenderest, looking his handsomest,

until she grew sick with jealousy, until she went almost mad to think how she must always keep him at a distance—how it ought to be her greatest happiness to see him angry with her, indifferent to her, fond of some one else.

She could not help speculating as to whether he cared for her. The one battle of her own love she might have fought, but the many battles of her own love and his doubtful love, of his tender care, of her own overpowering jealousy, of her own despairing remorse, made Phemie little better than a rudderless boat on a turbulent sea.

“O'er billows of temptation” the poor child tossed day by day in safety; but she felt the struggle was an unequal one; that the day must come when Basil would know her coldness, her indifference was all put on—unless he went away, or she went away—unless they were separated altogether.

While he and Captain Stondon were in London, she had nothing to contend against save her own sad loneliness and her constant desire to hear his voice, to see his face, to feel his presence in the house.

It was so easy to be good away from him, that Phemie took her resolution.

She would leave Marshlands; she would flee to the mountains, and stay there till she grew strong again, till she had conquered herself, till he, perhaps, had got something to do or decided on marrying Miss Derno. She would leave—and Mrs Stondor straightway ventured on the first decided step she had ever taken in her life; and, without consulting Captain Stondon on the subject, started for Carlisle, accompanied by her maid and a manservant, in whose care she sent back Miss Jennings to Marshlands.

At Carlisle her uncle met her; and after years—after long years of travel and success and happiness—Phemie returned to the dear old valley, to the sweet beauty of the familiar landscape, a delicate, unhappy woman.

“Why did your husband not accompany you?” asked Mr Aggland, who was uneasy lest something had happened.

“I thought I told you in my letter,” she answered, listlessly.

“He was in London and I at Marshlands. The notion took hold of me that I should like to sleep in my old bed, to look at the waterfall, to walk over the heather once again; and when the fit came on I could not rest, I could not wait. I felt I must get away from those trees, from those fields, from those trim gardens, or die. And I am so ill, uncle,—I am so ill.”

“Ought you not to have gone to London for advice?” said Mr Aggland.

“No, I ought to have come here,” she answered; “I want the mountain air and the mountain scenery and rest and quiet—rest and quiet.” And she closed her eyes as she spoke, and leaned back in the carriage which her uncle had provided.

Mr Aggland looked at her; he did not understand the cause of this sudden freak, and he was just the man to dislike whatever he could not understand.

“Phemie,” he said, “I suppose I need not ask you whether there is anything amiss at home? Captain Stondon would not, I am certain, be unkind—”

“Unkind!” she burst out, “unkind! He is far too good and kind. You do not know, I never could tell you, how good he is, how tender, how devoted. It is not that, uncle; it is only that I am ill; bear with me as he has done. Let me be at peace for awhile, let me go as I like, come as I like, and if I am cross and irritable and out of spirits, think I shall be different soon.” And she put out her hand and stroked his face with an imploring gentleness which made Mr Aggland feel sorrowful.

This was not the Phemie of the Hill Farm—this was not the Phemie of Marshlands—this was a beseeching, dependent, exhausted Phemie, who might, for aught he could tell to the contrary, have come home from the midst of all her wealth and luxury to the old place to die.

He thought of her mother, he thought of those terrible illnesses abroad, when she had fought for her life, fought so hard to keep it! What if this passion for the hills and the mountains was but a morbid sickness to see earth’s best-remembered places ere passing away from earth for ever?

He took the poor hand—now so thin—and felt her pulse. He prided himself on being half a doctor, and said,

“Irritable and weak ; you will require wine, Phemie ; I must send down and ask Mr Conbyr to let me have some old port out of his cellar.” But Phemie answered—

“I want no wine except the wine of the mountain air—the bouquet of the wild thyme and the heather. Have not I come, uncle,” she said, “from a place where everything money can buy has been able to do nothing for me ? It is not eating or drinking that can make me well, but the sight of the dear old hills—of the sky as we see it reflected in Strammer Tarn (I have never seen such a sky since)—of Scotland from the top of Skillanscar—if I ever get strong enough to climb it or Helbeck. I have grown weary of the Lowlands,” she added, with a sigh, “and I have come to the Highlands for you to make me well.” And the soft hand stroked his cheek once more, and Mr Aggland could have wept because of her words and manner.

“She must be going as her mother went,” he thought ; “I will send Johnny over for Mr Fagg in the morning. He may not be very first-rate, but he will be able to tell me that.”

Now “that,” in Mr Aggland’s vocabulary, meant, were Phemie’s lungs sound—was she in a consumption ? And he sat pondering on what could be the matter with her, if it were not consumption, while his niece lay back in the carriage, watching for the old familiar faces of the hills—watching, with her uncle’s hand clasped tight in hers, with a terrible sorrow tearing at her heart, with a sickening remorse oppressing her conscience.

“There they are ! there are the dear old mountains !” she exclaimed at last ; and then she burst into a passion of tears, which frightened her uncle, who could not understand what was the matter with her.

“You will make yourself worse, Phemie,” he remonstrated ; but it was all the same to Phemie.

Whether tears made her worse or better, she could not help remembering what she had been when she left those hills—what she was now,

“If he but knew,” thought Phemie, “it would break his heart to—” And I fancy Phemie was right, and that had Mr Agglard suspected what was really the matter with his niece, he would sooner have seen her in her grave than coming back burdened with such a secret to the place where she had dwelt in innocence and purity for so long.

And yet never a sweeter, gentler creature trod those lonely hills, those mountain fastnesses, than Phemie Stondon, who revisited each well-remembered haunt—each tarn and stream and crag, sorrowing.

With her long dress trailing among the heather, she walked slowly over the moors day after day, thinking thoughts such as had never passed through her mind before. She would sit beside the trickling waterfall, where the ferns and the grass bent down the stream just as they used to do, and with her hand leaning upon some mossy stone, would weep tears that, had she shed them before marriage instead of after, might have made her life more useful and more happy.

She had a kind word and a sweet smile for every one; she was vain and fanciful no more; she was subdued and quiet and humble to such a degree, that the farmers and the farmers' wives looked after her in amazement, and marvelled among themselves whether that could be the Phemie Keller, the sauey, flighty, conceited Phemie who had gone away to be made a grand lady of all at once.

“She does not think as much of her silks and satins now as she used to do of her old muslin gowns,” said one.

“And is she not homely like and kind?” added another.

“She took the baby in her arms the other day,” remarked a farmer's wife, “and the tears came into her eyes when she told me she had never a living one of her own.”

“And oh! my bairn, my bairn!” mourned Peggy McNab, ‘what hae ye dune wi’ the heartsome life that was in ye? and whaur hae ye gotten that mournfu’ luik that it gars me greet till see? Yer mither had the same when she came back hame among us; but—”

"But I have no reason for looking like what she did, is that what you mean, Peggy?" asked Mrs Stondon. "Perhaps it is only because I am ill that I am mournful, as you call it."

"But ye're no *that* ill," remarked Peggy.

"I may feel as ill," answered Phemie, who was only too glad in those days to make her health appear as bad as possible. She laid all sins, all shortcomings, to sickness; and she was ill enough to make Mr Aggland seriously uneasy, to urge him to grave discourse with Mr Fagg—now a married man and the father of three children.

"I cannot tell what is the matter with her," said that gentleman, frankly, "unless it be, as she declares—exhaustion. You see," went on Mr Fagg, "Mrs Stondon is one of those women who keep up for a long time and then drop all at once. She would scarcely feel she was overtaxing her strength till the stock was completely gone. You must have known yourself many a man who never felt fatigue while walking, and yet who gave way in a moment when the distance was accomplished. His spirit kept him up, and then, when the motive for exertion was over, the reaction came on. Now that is what it seems to me is the matter with Mrs Stondon—reaction, and perhaps her longing for the hills. Her passion for this solitude is probably nothing more nor less than nature's voice telling us what will cure her. One thing I know," finished Mr Fagg, "that I can do nothing for her, and I do not believe any man in England could."

Mr Fagg was right; the fever that was on Phemie was beyond the power of man to cure, and it was beyond the power of nature either. Beside the waterfall among the heather, pacing the valley with Davie—now old and sedate—following the mistress he loved so well, Phemie came to understand all she had pledged away in the church among the mountains.

She knew now why she had wept that night when the wind blew and the rain beat against the windows, when, through the wind and the rain, Captain Stondon came up from the vicarage to hear her decision.

She had forgotten that night until lately—forgotten her tears,

her doubts, her hesitation ; but, as at the day of judgment the scroll of our lives will be unfolded before us, so even in this world there are times when part of the history is remembered by us, when the thoughts and the resolutions of the long ago appear before us like unwelcome ghosts.

Her life had been her own then, but it was too late now—too late—too late !

And among the broom and the ferns, and the thyme and the heather, Phemie would take out her husband's letters—the long loving letters he sent her each day from London, and read them till she forgot her own misery in thinking of the misery knowledge of her fault would bring to him.

Could there have been anything worse for such a woman than solitude ? when she never knew peace day or night for thinking of Basil, and for reproaching herself for thinking of him.

She was sitting one afternoon by Strammer Tarn, on the very spot where she had been wont to twine wreaths and garlands for her hair in the old days departed—sitting looking at the dark waters, at the frowning rocks, at the expanse of moor and mountain.

It was the glory of the summer-time, it was the noon of the year, and she had walked slowly over from the Hill Farm, drinking in the full beauty of the season, the perfection of the scenery, with a strange sad thirst. There was not a thing during the progress of that walk she overlooked—the moss growing upon the stones, the heather budding into flower, the wild thyme blooming upon sunny spots, the trailing brambles, the chirp of the grasshopper, the humming of the bees, the great grey boulders lying on the grass, the springing of the turf beneath her feet, the little pools of water in which Davie slaked his thirst, the very insects that winged their way past her—all these things Phemie noticed and remembered afterwards.

She remembered when she sat by Strammer Tarn, how Davie lay stretched at her feet—how with her face resting on her hand she had been looking for ever and ever so long into the dark deep waters, when suddenly Davie sprang up, and with all his short

bristly hair standing on end, growled at one who came brushing his way through the heather towards her.

It was Basil! She had barely time to rise from her seat, and with breath coming quick and short, and colour deepening and fading, make sure it was he, ere he was beside her—ere he held her hands in his—ere he was pouring out almost unintelligible words of joy.

Why had she run away and left him to come home to a desert? Did she think he could exist away from her? Did she think he knew peace, or rest, or comfort where she was not? Ah, Heaven! did he not see in the woman's face all she thought, all she had suffered? Had he not noticed the red and the white, the blush and the pallor? All alone there, could he not tell her the tale of his love at last—tell her, sure that his love was returned—that she had fled less from him than from herself?

He had not come there to tell her his story, he had only come craving to see her—to speak to her—to be near her once again. But—well—well—love, holy or unholy, finds a vent for itself sometime: and it was among the lonely mountains, under the summer sky, that Basil yielded to the temptation and spoke of his.

And Phemie. Ah! reader, be pitiful, be merciful, if you have ever known what it is to have the man you love best on earth tell you that you are all the world to him—be lenient to this poor sinner whose dream-hero had come to her beside the tarn—too late—too late!

She could not help it: she had never felt before what it is to love—to be beloved: her heart gave a great leap of triumph, and then it stood still with agony.

She went mad with happiness, and then the misery of her position made her sane.

She tore herself out of his arms and fell to the ground and wept; she lay with her face buried in the turf, sobbing till her heart was fit to break. In the stillness of that mountain solitude, the voice of lamentation seemed to rise through the air and float away and away, while the bee hummed, and the rocks frowned,

and the flowers sprang, unmindful of passion, unsympathetic with woe.

Her beauty, her accomplishments, her wealth—everything of which she had been proud, of which she had been ambitious—had brought her to this.

Then she rose up and bade him go: with his kisses on her lips, with the tears streaming down her cheeks, she reminded him of her position and of his.

She told him how, so long as the sun rose and set, she could never be anything to him; she told him she honoured her husband beyond all men on earth, and that sooner than hurt him or disgrace him, she would die a hundred times over.

She felt strong now, stronger than she had ever been; she spoke of all her husband had done for her—of how he had taken her from poverty and given her wealth—of how he had fulfilled his part of the compact—of how he had loved and trusted her always.

“And he has been kind and good to you, and this is how you repay him!” she went on. “God give me strength to despise you as I ought.”

He stood silent till she had done—till, having panted out her last reproach, she ceased to speak—then he said,

“Oh! if I had but met you then—if I had come here instead of him—”

“You would have left me here,” she retorted.

“I would not! I could never have seen you and not loved you.”

At which Phemie laughed scornfully.

“You see me a lady now,” she said; “but I was only a poor sountry girl then. You would have been much too fine a gentleman to have looked at such as I was, or if you had looked, it would not have been with honest eyes like his. I did not know the world in those days, but I have seen enough of it since; and what I have seen has taught me that there is not one man in ten thousand—not one man in a million—who would have married me as he did.”

"I would," said Basil.

"You would not," answered Phemie; and she turned away; but Basil stopped her.

"Phemie," he began—it was the first time he had called her by her name, and it sounded strangely sweet in her ears—"Phemie, can we never be anything to one another? I will wait years—I will wait till my hair is grey—only say you love me."

"Basil Stondon," said Phemie, facing round, "I know what you mean—I know what you would say; but put that out of your mind once and for ever. I will never step across a grave to happiness. I have made my bed, I will lie in it. If I am ever a widow, if I should have the misfortune to outlive my husband, I will outlive him single. When I pledged my troth to him among these hills I did so for better or worse—the worse has come to me, but that cannot alter our position. We can never be anything to one another—for I chose my life before I ever saw you. Never."

Never! He was a poorer creature even than Phemie thought him, for as he walked up and down Tordale valley that night, recalling to his memory her every word, her every gesture, he vowed to himself that she should be something to him—that he would be something to her.

He was in for the race, and he must strive for the winning-post. He had loved this woman, and he could love no other woman in the future like Phemie, his kinsman's wife.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DOWNWARD ROAD.

BASIL STONDON had come to fetch Phemie home. Before he knew of her departure for Cumberland, Captain Stondon had invited some of the friends of his bachelor days to stay at Marshlands, and he accordingly wrote to his wife, begging her, if she felt at all well enough, to return to Norfolk.

“And later on in the season,” continued Captain Stondon, “if you, dearest, wish it, we can take a house for a month or so beside Derwentwater or Windermere, which surely would be pleasanter for you than the Hill Farm.”

To this Phemie had agreed, so far as returning home was concerned. She only begged her husband to allow her to remain as long as possible. “If you let me hear from you one day, when your friends are certainly coming, I shall be ready to start the next,” were her words; and when Captain Stondon read them out to Basil with the comment that he thought she ought to return at once, the young man proposed going to Cumberland to fetch her.

“I have never seen the lakes,” said Mr Basil, “and I should like to take a look at them.”

“Very well,” agreed Captain Stondon, “only do not fall down the side of a mountain as I did.”

“It proved a very lucky fall for you though, I believe, sir,” remarked Basil. To which Captain Stondon answered that it had, little dreaming what was passing in his companion’s mind at the moment.

Thus it came about that Basil Stondon found his way to Cumberland and to the Hill Farm, from which place Mrs Aggland showed him the path to take to reach Strammer Tarn.

Mrs Aggland had grown fat and unwieldy in her later life, and offered no temptations for a *tête-à-tête*.

"One of the children can run with you to show you the way," she volunteered; but Basil declined her politeness.

"He could find Strammer Tarn, no doubt, thanks to her explicit directions; and if he did not find it he would turn back when he thought he had walked far enough."

All of which he said with such courtesy and politeness that Mrs Aggland was quite taken with him, and greeted her husband on his return with a glowing account of the "nice young gentleman," who had come to take Phemie home.

"So pleasant-mannered and genteel," she said, "and as handsome as a picture, too; but what are we to do with him here, Daniel? He'll never put up with our house."

"Then he must go to Grassenfel," was Mr Aggland's reply. And he went out to the top of the hill to watch for their coming.

"I can offer you but poor hospitality, Mr Stondon," he said. "If you think you can sleep in so humble a dwelling I shall be only too proud to do my best to make you comfortable; but at the same time I must tell you we are very plain people, and that I am sure Mr Conbyr would give you a hearty welcome at the vicarage."

"Thank you," answered Basil, simply, "I had much rather remain at the Hill Farm. I have heard of it so constantly that it seems like the realization of a dream to sleep beneath its roof."

For which speech Phemie hated him. According to her ideas he ought to have left her then and there—left her for ever. After her explicit answer, was not all over between them? Could not he take his "No," and go, and leave her to return to Marshlands under her uncle's escort?

"You can make a tour of the lakes, and stay away until you have decided on your future plans," was Phemie's suggestion; to

which Basil listened in silence, without the remotest intention of following her advice.

No programme, indeed, was ever more altered than that sketched out by Phemie for his guidance. Had there been no lakes in England—no Skiddaw to climb, no Stockghyll Force to see, no Langbourne to visit, Basil could not have stayed on more contentedly at the Hill Farm.

What Captain Stondon had done before him Basil did now. He walked over the hills, he sat by the tarns, he drank of the waterfall, and wished that he might keep Phemie's heart till his own was cold. He visited Mr Conbyr and talked with him of the outer world; he sate in the same pew in church were Captain Stondon had sate beside the ill-dressed girl who was now as stately-looking as any princess in the land. He leaned over the wall of the graveyard, and looked at the rivulet wandering away and away. He lay on the grass where the mountain stream came tumbling over the rocks and dropped into the basin beneath; he looked at the ivy and the lichens, the foxgloves and the broom, the grass and the ferns, the mossy stones, and the trees that waved their branches over him. He stood in the garden at the Hill Farm and gazed down the valley—the sweet valley of Tor-dale; he went about with Mr Aggland and won golden opinions from all men—particularly from all women.

He was so frank, so pleasant, so kind, and so handsome, that he won upon the inhabitants of that remote spot, as he had won upon the inhabitants of very different places.

“An amazingly fine young fellow,” remarked Mr Aggland to his niece, when he saw that Basil really did not care about his inner man, that luxuries were indifferent to him, and that he made himself as much at home in the parlour of the Hill Farm as he might in Captain Stondon's drawing-room. “An amazingly fine young fellow. I wonder, Phemie, that you have never taken to him kindly.”

To which speech Phemie answered—

“One never does like the next heir cordially, does one, uncle?”

“Shame, shame!” exclaimed Mr Aggland; “I never thought,

Phemie, to hear you make a speech like that. When you have enjoyed fully yourself, you ought not to grudge another the chance of enjoying fully in his turn likewise."

"Still one never does like an heir, unless he be of one's own blood," persisted Phemie, who never missed an opportunity of throwing dust in her uncle's eyes.

"Can she be grieving because she has no children?" wondered Mr Aggland. "Does she dislike this young man because he occupies the place that might have been more happily filled by one of her own sons? I should like greatly to know now," thought her uncle, "if it be envy and hatred and all uncharitableness that is the matter with poor Phemie after all. 'As rust corrupts iron, so envy corrupts man,' says Antisthenes. Solomon declares it is the 'rotteness of the bones,' and Cowley calls envy 'of all hell's thongs the direfullest.' According to Socrates it is a poison which drieth up the marrow of the bones and consumeth the flesh. Daughter of pride, he calls envy. Now Phemie was always proud,—a little, I mean," modified Mr Aggland, "and she has never been the same—at least judging by her letters—since this young man came to the house. I remember her expressing strong dislike to him before we went to Cromer. It may be that she is jealous." And for years afterwards Mr Aggland believed that Phemie cordially hated Basil Stondon—that she hated him because he stood where her children might have stood, and that she was pining and fretting because she had no living sons—no prospect of having sons who might oust the intruder out. Of which idea Phemie herself, I am sorry to say, took no pains to disabuse his mind, but rather encouraged his notion, and led him to believe she was very sorry Basil must inherit after her husband, when the real truth was, that if Phemie had been able to shower gold and property on him, she would have done it.

"You should not dislike him, Phemie," Mr Aggland said one day; "it is not right. Though you are my own niece, and he a stranger, I cannot say that I think you treat him properly at all."

"Now pray, pray, uncle," entreated Phemie, "leave that Basil

Stondon question alone ; you cannot tell in the least what you might do if you were in my place."

"I know what I should do if I were in his," retorted Mr Aggland ; "I should not endure your manner, Phemie. I declare I hear you speaking to him sometimes as I should not speak to the poorest labourer I employ."

"Well, you can address your labourers in whatever form of language you think best, uncle," she said, a little flippantly ; "but I mean to talk to Basil as I choose."

"Phemie!" was Mr Aggland's only remonstrance.

"I am not a child any longer," she burst out, passionately ; "I will say what I like, as I like it. If people think I am wrong, they may think it ; but they shall not tell me. I know what my own sorrows are ; but I will not let anybody intermeddle with them. I know my own business, but I will not have anybody interfere with it ; not even you, uncle," she added, "not even you."

"I cannot imagine what has come to you, Phemie," he said. "I think you must be mad ; one day you are as docile as a lamb, and the next you are rabid."

"There is a pleasure sure in being mad," she answered ; but when he turned away, pained and wearied, she followed him into the garden, and hanging on his arm, said coaxingly,—

"Forgive me, uncle ; the things I would not say I speak ; the things I would speak never, somehow, pass my lips. Does not some wise man say that clocks will go as they are set ; but that we will not ? That is the way with me, I want winding up. I want new works. I want sending to the jeweller and seeing to. It is not my fault, uncle ; it is my misfortune."

"Phemie, dear, you are ill ; you ought to have first-rate advice ; you must go abroad."

"I never want to see 'abroad' again," she answered ; "I should like to stay in the hills with you always. I should like to go to Scotland and see the coast I loved when I was a better girl than I have ever been since."

And Phemie dropped her uncle's arm as she spoke, and sat down on the grass, saying she was tired.

I should think she was tired! The conversation that ought, in her opinion, to have ended the subject of love between her and Basil proved only to have been the commencement of her troubles. He would not leave her alone; he could not let her be; she had fled from Marshlands to be rid of him; she must return to Marshlands to see if she could escape from him there.

She felt like a hunted creature; she felt every day that her strength was decreasing—that his power over her was increasing. His words sounded sweet in her ears; she grew weary of struggling; she learned to listen to his poor sophistry and believe it.

He was taking nothing from Captain Stondon that had ever belonged to him; he only wanted Phemie's love—only a kind look, a pleasant word. There was no sin in speaking civilly to him, surely; there could be nothing wrong in talking quietly and gently as she used to do. If he had said anything to offend her he was sorry; if she had not run away from Marshlands and left him desolate he would never have told her how he loved her—never. He would have borne any pain rather than wound her—she ought not to be so unkind when his very heart was breaking for her sake.

And at that, somehow, the words of that old, old song she had sung when she was still free, came into Phemie's mind.

Oh! if she could only go back—only be a girl again—what happiness might not be hers!

Alas! the happiness might be, but the misery was.

Who can travel a dangerous road and keep clear of the pitfalls? Who can begin descending and not slip? Who can touch pitch and not be defiled? Who can handle sin without becoming less virtuous? Who can drink of the wine cup and keep his head perfectly clear?

Phemie could not at any rate. She was quaffing in a draught that was stealing through her veins like poison. She had her times of repentance—her seasons of despairing remorse—her hours when the sound of Basil's voice was hateful to her—when she detested her own weakness in listening to him; but after all, what did this signify—what good did this effect?

When purity is sullied, who may make it otherwise than soiled ?

“The fleece that has been by the dyer stained,
Never again its native whiteness gained ;”

and the man whose hands are guilty may not wash them in innocence.

I have no excuse to offer for Phemie, save that the heat and burden of the day was too much for her ; that she had not strength enough to extricate herself from the net ; that she had no one to help her ; that she was not called upon to resist absolute sin, such as the world frowns on. He did not ask her to leave her husband ; he never again spoke of a future in which she might be his wife. He only prayed for love that it was no wrong for her to give him, because she had never given it to any one else.

“It belongs to me, Phemie,” he said ; “though you are another man’s wife ; though you may never be my wife, yet I own the love of your heart ; and whether you try to keep that love from me or not, you cannot prevent my having it.”

He was right : Phemie could not prevent his having all the love of which her nature was capable. She could not help the tears with which she watered her pillow ; she could not help her thoughts, her regrets, her misery.

“I will go back to Marshlands,” she said, “and get rid of you ; it will be impossible for you to say these things to me under the same roof with him.” And Phemie turned her from the mountains and the valley, and, weary and wretched, travelled home.

How shall I tell of the time that followed ?—of the torture that woman passed through—of the frantic projects she formed—of the resolutions she took—of the plans she devised ?

She would go away, where neither Basil nor Captain Stondon could find her. She would tell her husband—and she would have told him, too, but that she dared not even think of the anguish her fault would cause him. She would try to get rid of Basil ; but Captain Stondon did not want Basil to leave Marshlands. She would never be alone with him. How was it possible for her always to have some one at her elbow ?

And besides, it was so hard—so hard! He loved her so much, better than Captain Stondon had ever done! Better? Down on your knees, Phemie, and pray God to deliver you from such love that would drag you down to hell. Better? There is a love which can love a woman better than itself; but of such a love Basil Stondon knew nothing.

It was not in his nature to be thoughtful for others, unselfish towards himself. He did not care about its being the road to perdition along which he was leading Phemie, because he chanced to fancy travelling it himself.

He had no mercy, because he was weak; he had no pity, because he was foolish; he had no forbearance, because he had no principle: so he tortured the woman he professed to love; he put her on a mental rack, and tormented her every hour in the day.

“I cannot leave you, for I love you,” he said once.

“You will not leave me, because you love yourself,” she answered. And yet still his love, whatever it might be, was sweet to her. She was making a journey from which few ever return in safety; she was trying an experiment from which no heart ever came forth pure.

She was endeavouring to love two men; she was striving to serve two masters: and still she was slipping—slipping towards the precipice over which no one who fell ever came back.

She loved her husband no less than ever; nay, rather, she loved him more. She was so repentant, so wretched, so angry with herself, so sorry for him, that there came into her manner a tenderness—a thoughtfulness which it had always lacked before; and many and many a time Captain Stondon would follow her with his eyes, and wonder, with the wonder of old increased and magnified, if any man was ever so fortunate as he—so blessed in home and wife and friends.

“If my darling’s health were only better,” he said one day to Miss Derno, “I should not have a care or anxiety in life; but she looks so ill, and her spirits are so wretched, that I cannot help feeling anxious about her.”

“I am afraid she is not strong,” answered the lady, who was a

great favourite with her host. "Let us talk about her," she suddenly added: "come down to the lake, and I will tell you my opinion of your wife. She wants rest; she is wearing herself out: all these people may be very pleasant, but she ought not to be among them. You should take her abroad, or winter in the south of England, and send Basil away. He is strong himself, and he thinks fresh air and exercise is all she requires; and so she goes out walking and riding and driving, when she had a great deal better be lying quietly on the sofa. Get Basil an appointment. In Mrs Stondon's state of health she ought to have no strangers near her: and besides, Basil will not take kindly to work after all this idleness. He was lazy enough when he came here; what he will be after all this long holiday I am afraid to think."

"But Basil is the next heir, Miss Derno," answered Captain Stondon; "I do not see why he should work. I will speak to him about dragging Phemie out. She need not stand on ceremony with him as though he were a stranger. It is only his anxiety for her to get well that makes him urge her to be constantly in the open air."

Miss Derno beat her foot impatiently against the ground.

"Do you think idleness good for any one?" she asked. "Do you think it well for a man to have all the advantages of a large property, without having any of its anxieties and responsibilities? This is a Castle of Indolence for him; and if I were his mother I should like to see him usefully employed."

"Was it not about my wife we were talking, Miss Derno?" inquired Captain Stondon.

"Yes; but I have long wanted to speak to you about Basil. He is an old pet of mine, you know. I know his faults and his virtues better, perhaps, than anybody else on earth, and I am confident this idle existence is not good for him: it would be trying to any man; and it is doubly trying to a man like Basil."

There was truth in what she said, and Captain Stondon admitted it.

"The same idea occurred to me the other day," he said; "and

I have been considering whether I could not give him the management of some portion of the property."

"Will you be angry if I put a question to you?" inquired Miss Derno. She was leaning on his arm, and she stooped forward and looked up in his face as she spoke.

She could see that its expression changed a little; but he answered kindly and courteously as ever,

"It must be a very singular question, or series of questions, Miss Derno, that could make me angry with you."

"You are bringing up Basil as your heir," she said; "suppose you had a son; how would it fare with this idle young man then?"

For a moment Captain Stondon remained silent. The idea was one which he did not think she ought to have suggested. He did not consider it at all in Miss Derno's department to talk about such possibilities to him. He felt it was inconsiderate of her to open up the old sore. He believed that it was nothing to her whether he had sons or whether he had not; but still he replied, quietly and calmly,

"If such an extremely improbable event were to happen, I should provide handsomely for Basil—be sure of that."

"But still you would not give him Marshlands."

"I could not if I would," was the reply; "I would not if I could."

"And yet you will not make him independent of Marshlands altogether?"

"Should such a necessity as you have named arise, I should do my best to push him on in the world."

"Expecting him, doubtless, to be satisfied with a dry morsel, after he had been regaling himself on the stalled ox?"

Miss Derno could put things as unpleasantly as possible when she had a mind; and she succeeded in making Captain Stondon uncomfortable for the moment.

"The fact is," he answered, "I am very fond of Basil. Having no son, I like to forget that he is not my son. I should miss him sadly if he were to leave me; and I do not think it is

well to deprive oneself of pleasure in the present, because of the chance of what may happen in the future. However, Miss Derno, I will think over what you have said. I will give the matter my maturest consideration."

She was grateful to him for what he said. She felt, all things taken into account, that he had borne her interference as few men would ; and so, with all her heart in her face, with all the earnestness of her nature thrown into her manner, she spoke her thanks.

"If I have seemed impertinent," she said, "pardon me ; if I have seemed intrusive, think that I am not really so." And Captain Stondon assured her he could never think of her otherwise than as she would wish him to do ; and the pair walked on beside the lake where the lilies floated, and then back beneath the lime-trees to the house.

"Miss Derno seems to be almost as fond of your husband as she is of Mr Basil Stondon," remarked Miss Georgina Hurlford, who was standing beside Phemie in the garden.

"Yes, I think she likes them both greatly," answered Phemie ; and the conversation dropped. But Miss Hurlford noticed that the blood came rushing into Mrs Stondon's face one moment, and that the next she was pale as death.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JEALOUSY.

MARSHLANDS had never been so gay before as during the August of the year concerning which I am now writing.

The house had never been so full of company ; there had never been so many parties, so much visiting, and such innumerable picnics in the memory of that part of Norfolk. Young girls and staid matrons walked about the grounds ; in all the by-lanes, in all the cross-roads, sprinkled over the commons, were ladies mounted on glossy steeds, attended by cavaliers who seemed to think that the whole duty of man was flirting and pleasure.

Flirting and pleasure was the order of the day at Marshlands ; and every one agreed the Stondons were delightful people to know.

Mrs Stondon was such a thoughtful hostess, mothers and daughters both agreed. She never spoiled sport ; she never put either herself or Helen forward ; she exacted no attention ; she conversed, by preference, with white-haired old gentlemen, who called her "a delightful woman."

"To see Captain and Mrs Stondon," said an old bachelor, "is enough to make one think seriously of marriage."

"Talk of May and December," observed a man who had served out in India with Captain Stondon ; "I tell you what, sir, I never saw May and June agree so well as my dear old friend and his young wife. Charming!—I should think she was charming! All I am afraid of, sir, is that she will leave him a widower. She is getting thinner and paler every day."

Major Brooks was not the only person who felt uneasy about Phemie. Miss Derno made effort after effort to induce her friend to take more care of herself, but her entreaties, listened to at first coldly, were at last replied to sharply and angrily.

Mrs Stondon would go out in the night air if she chose; she would ride if riding gave her any pleasure; she would walk when she took a fancy for doing so; and she would attend to no remonstrances on the subject.

“What can it signify to any one what I do?” she said one day to Basil, when they were out driving together. “I would rather die than live. If any doctor came to me now and said, ‘You cannot last two months,’ I should be glad.”

“But you ought to think of others,” he answered. “You ought to think of me.”

“Of you!” she echoed; “what would you care if I were dead to-morrow? You would look after any pretty girl you met, out of the window of the mourning-coach, though it is you who have brought me to this;” and she took off her glove and stretched out her hand before him. “You make love to others before my eyes. I do not want your love,” she went on. “I do not wish you to cease holding this girl’s bridle rein; to cut no more bouquets; to beg no more flowers; to stay indoors instead of walking in the moonlight with Miss Derno. I do not want you to do this, only be honest. Do not harass my life out one moment, and then make me jealous the next. Leave me to go my way, and I will never follow you or yours. And do not talk to me about my health, for you and Miss Derno both would be only too glad to see me in my coffin.”

“Phemie, how can you make such an assertion?” They had reached a very lonely part of the road, and he laid his hand gently on hers, but she shook it off and answered—

“Keep your hands for the reins; I will not have them touch mine. Every word I say is true. You do flirt; you are a flirt; you make every girl you meet think you are in love with her. You know when you were trying to make me care for you that you were engaged to Miss Derno. You know

while you are talking to me now that you are engaged to her still."

"Who told you that falsehood?" asked Basil.

"Miss Hurlford."

"Miss Hurlford be damned," said the young man, laying his whip not over lightly on the near pony, which at once began to plunge and kick.

"You need not upset us because you are angry at my hearing it," remarked Phemie. "It does not matter to me whom you marry; but you shall cease persecuting me, you shall. I will ask my husband to send you away. I will tell him it is not pleasant to have a stranger in the house. I came out with you to-day solely to be able to say this to you. I am not double-faced, if you are. I cannot do one thing and pretend another."

"I know that," said Basil, sneeringly. "You never professed to dislike me before people; you never answered me as though you hated me while your uncle was present; you never hang about Captain Stondon as though you liked him better than all the world; you never pretended anything, did you, Phemie?"

Then Phemie broke out.

"If I ever pretended, it was not of my own free will. I am no hypocrite with my husband. I do love him, and honour and trust him more than any other man on earth; and if I seem not to like to be with you before people, you cannot say that I like any better to be with you alone. It is you who are a hypocrite; it is you who pretend; it is you who want to have every woman you meet in love with you. But this I tell you, Basil," she added, sitting bolt upright in the phaeton as she spoke; "you have chosen to make my life wretched, and I will make yours. You never shall love anybody as you have loved me; you shall never forget me; you shall never love girl, or woman, or wife as you have loved me. When you are standing in the twilight you shall remember me; when you are lying awake in the darkness you shall think of me; when we are far apart you shall not forget me. I can never be anything to you as another woman may;

but I can be near to you for all that, and I will. You may try to make me jealous now, if you like ; I do not care."

And Phemie dropped back in the carriage, whilst her companion vainly endeavoured to convince her she was mistaken ; that he had never tried to make her jealous, that he had never thought of caring for any one but herself.

"Will you attend to your driving, Basil?" she said, "and not talk any more about the matter. It is a light thing for you, I dare say ; you can go out and never think about the misery you have brought on me. You fancy this will form but an episode in your life, though it has taken all the sunshine out of mine ; but you are mistaken. Good gracious, Basil, what are you doing with those ponies ? There, now, I told you so."

They had come out of the lanes, and were driving over a road that led across Wildmoor Common. As Phemie spoke, the near pony shied at a flock of geese, and Basil, glad to vent his annoyance on anything, lashed it savagely.

The creature reared and plunged and kicked ; then it got its head down and the bit between its teeth, and both ponies were off.

"Sit still—sit still ; for God's sake don't jump out!" said Basil.

"Never mind me, attend to them," was Phemie's answer.

They were tearing across the common now ; over the little unevennesses of the ground the carriage went rocking like a cradle.

Basil was a fair whip, but he could do nothing. What man ever did do anything with a pair of mad ponies harnessed to a low light phaeton ?

The bays had it all their own way over the grass. They dashed through stagnant pools ; they flew past bush and bramble ; the horses grazing on the common galloped hither and thither, making the brutes more unmanageable still. The sun was shining on the bare, flat Norfolk landscape, and Phemie could see in the distance farmhouses, with their tiled roofs ; homesteads,

where the new hay had just been stacked ; trees standing dark and clear against the sky ; she could see all this as they dashed along ; see it even while she was sick with terror, while she was wondering what would bring them up at last.

She knew Basil never could stop them ; what would ? what ! She saw the walls of a house in the distance, shining in the sun ; she thought of the flints that were in it, and then she screamed out—

“ Oh ! Basil, the quarry : keep them away from that.”

He stood up and pulled with might and main at the reins. He sawed the ponies' mouths. With all the strength he had he tried to pull them in, to turn them aside. For a moment he had the mastery ; then the phaeton tilted up on one side over a mound of earth, and he was jerked out.

He made an effort to retain the reins, but they were torn from him, leaving his hands bleeding and raw. Pheemie tried to seize them, but failing to do so, shut her eyes.

She knew what was going to bring them up now. With a crash ponies and phaeton and Pheemie went down into the quarry together, and when Basil Stondon came to the edge and looked below, he could see nothing but a confused heap of broken wood-work, of straggling horses, of blood and muslin.

For a moment his courage failed him, then he jumped down after them.

Let life bring what it might to Basil Stondon, it never could bring a bitterer moment than that.

He would not go for help, he did not call for assistance ; living or dead, he would do what he could for her himself.

From under the phaeton he somehow managed to extricate her ; then he took the dear burden in his arms and carried her on to the common and laid her on the grass.

By that time people, who having seen the runaways had hurried after them, came up, and asked was the lady killed ?

He could not tell ; he knew nothing of medicine ; he only saw she had moved no finger, made no sign ; that she was covered with blood ; that she was shockingly cut and mangled.

Never since his boyhood had any human being seen Basil Stondon weep, but he cried like a child then.

He had made her life wretched ; they had been quarrelling all the morning ; he had tried to make her jealous ; he knew she had only spoken the simple truth. When she tried to do right, he had endeavoured to roughen her way as much as possible. Her last words before the ponies ran away were full of upbraiding. It was his fault that the animals had started at all. Half an hour before he had taunted her ; he had been unmanly, mean, angry ; and now she lay before him, apparently dead, while he knelt beside her, sobbing in his passionate despair.

“I do not think, sir,” said one of the men, that the lady is dead. If you would only sprinkle some water over her, and let one of us go for a doctor, and bring her into the farmhouse yonder, and see what the women can do for her. Will you, sir? will you?” and he approached to raise Phemie up, and carry her away.

But Basil would not permit it. He lifted her himself, and holding her close to his heart, bore her across the common ; and as he walked under the sunshine, with everything around him looking its brightest and its gayest, his tears fell thick over the face of the woman he loved best on earth.

“My darling! my darling! I was cruel to you ; my darling, I have killed you!” and so he kept moaning and whispering till he felt the feeblest pressure of the fingers that lay beside his hand.

She could not speak, she could not open her eyes ; but she could show him by this mute sign that she was still alive.

In a moment he saw the sunshine and the sky ; in an instant hope revived within him.

She was not dead ; she might not be fatally injured. She might recover, and he might have opportunity given him of atoning for all the past.

Stumbling across the common, dizzy with his own fall, bruised and shaken and hurt, half stupefied by the events of the last few minutes, Basil Stondon prayed to God as he had never prayed in all his life before.

He prayed that she might live, that he might have opportunity for making atonement to her ; that he might not have to bear the sight of Captain Stondon's agony ; that he might not have to go on—on through the years without her.

With all his heart and with all his soul he prayed, and the prayer was granted ; but in the future—in the sad, sad future—he often marvelled whether it would not have been better for him and for her had she died on Wildmoor Common, and never lived to face the dreary after-years to come.

CHAPTER XXIV.

STRANGE TIDINGS.

THERE was silence in the house which had lately been so full of merriment ; the guests were gone ; the rooms deserted ; the sweet laughter of women was heard no more echoing round and about Marshlands ; the sunshine had given place to gloom—gaiety to sadness ; for Phemie lay in a darkened room struggling for life as the young only can struggle—fighting, fighting for the victory.

She had not been strong from childhood ; but there are some weak constitutions that have a wonderful hold on existence ; and though Phemie had a hard battle for life, still she won the day at last, and came forth from her chamber after weeks, white as spring lilies, delicate and beautiful, fragile and weak as they.

Weak, mentally and physically. God help us ! in the great day, will not the Lord Omnipotent—the Judge of all the earth, remember how feeble His creatures are ? how frail His servant was at this point and at that ? Has He not, think you, more knowledge and more pity than we ? Will He, who took our poor humanity upon Him, not have mercy upon us, and bid many poor sinners pass into Heaven who have gone with weary feet far astray on earth ?

Will He not be merciful ? Friends, dear friends—I say nothing against the righteousness of the world's verdict in cases grievous and terrible ; but, after all, may the world not oftentimes be but God's officer, who brings the accused before His bar to be judged

on higher evidence, to be pardoned because of fuller knowledge?

It may be right—it is right—in the plan of the Almighty that men and women should suffer here ; but it is comforting to think that, maimed and bleeding, many a man and many a woman may stand up for judgment at the last day, when He who sits on the Great White Throne, knowing what they have suffered, shall wipe the tears from their eyes, and bid them enter, wanderers though they may have been, into the joy of their Lord.

I think, hard and lonely, sorrowful and desolate as Phemie's life was, still that the Almighty ordered every step of her way, and brought her to Himself by paths which, though weary to travel, led ultimately to the beautiful city whose maker and builder He is.

Phemie never sinned. Let me say this much before going farther—never sinned as the world views sin—never “fell,” as society puts it—never, I may even go this far, trod the edge of the precipice of vice voluntarily.

There is many a woman at this present moment whom the world talks well of standing at the very mouth of the pit of hell—many a woman, wise, discreet, decorous, keeping herself straight with society, believing in no sin except the sin which is found out, and forgetful that there is another bar besides that of a certain “set” in fashionable society, before which things that have been hidden shall be made manifest, and all that has been concealed shall be brought to light.

There is many a woman worse by far than Phemie ever was, who yet knows nothing of the pangs of remorse, of the agony of the self-reproach, of the prickings of conscience, of the fierceness of the battle through which she had passed, ere wearied and worn, ere faint and exhausted, she ceased to struggle against her fate, and, lying between life and death, considered that, after all, love was very sweet ; that to her, who had always stood without in the cold darkness, the warmth and the brightness of loving and being loved was something wonderful.

For a moment they had been close to one another, close as people are who, with all the conventionalities and fashions and

artifices of society stripped off them, draw near, soul answering unto soul.

To Phemie that moment was a revelation—the “might have been”—the certainty of the awful mistake she had made—the assurance of Basil’s love—the hopelessness of that love—its very uselessness, and the impossibility of it ever bringing happiness to either of them—all conspired to weaken her resistance of evil—all caused her to lie bruised, and shattered, and suffering, hugging this sinful affection to her heart while she wished for death, while she prayed for no better boon than to be taken away from the struggle and to pass out of life, carrying her love with her.

Only to float thus away—only to glide down the stream, away from the duties which had become intolerable, from the affection for which she was ungrateful, from the ties which were now unendurable—only to float with the sweet music she had listened to sounding in her ears—only to touch his hand before passing away for ever—only to feel his lips press hers once more, with a knowledge that all necessity for battle was over—only to leave her memory with him, and then to sink to rest. Reader, pity her! for though she might be a grievous sinner to wish to enter eternity burdened with a love which she found too heavy to carry through time, still her ways had not been ways of pleasantness; she was very young—she was very weak—the sunshine was very beautiful, and that fair land wherein even the very birds seem to be singing the old old story was lovely in her eyes.

It was a dream, shall we say?—a sad, sweet dream, in which the slave imagined herself free, in which the prisoner thought her chains were unloosed, her fetters struck off, her dungeon doors opened. It was a dream, and Phemie woke to find that reality’s cold grey shadows were stealing in on her life; that she had to come off the shining river, and return to the shore she once hoped she should have to tread no more—that Death holds back from those who court his embrace; and that there remained for her in the future only what the past had held—duty and struggle—a colder duty, a fiercer struggle, and repentance and despair.

When she was well enough to travel they all went together to

the sea—to Hastings—a place Phemie had never previously visited, and which, it being the very height of the season, was full of youth and beauty, of fashion and frivolity, of sickness and sorrow, of age and infirmity.

Had she not a happy time there? I am afraid she was dangerously happy then—that in the midst of her weakness there was a subtle sense of pleasure and triumph tipping the moments as they fled by with sunshine, making her poor, cold, narrow life seem wide and beautiful. She was taking her heart's holiday—the working days were all to come. Out over the sea she looked, but she must return to the woods and the fields of Marshlands for all that. She sat and listened to the music; but the years were advancing when the drip, drip of the rain and the falling of her own tears would be the sole music of her life. She passed among crowds, and was amused and interested by the variety of characters, by the succession of fresh faces. She beat time to the waltzes, as in a state of delicious convalescence she leaned back and hearkened to the band on the Parade. Under the moonlight she saw gay groups standing: she beheld the visitors walking up and down: to the laughter of children, to the happy voices of the young and beautiful, she inclined her ear. Night after night she walked slowly up and down, up and down the Parade, with her husband on one side of her, and Basil on the other, while the music rose and fell, and the feet of many people hurried by, and the faces of the young and the old, of men and women, succeeded to each other as the scene changes in a panorama, and the moon sailed high over the East Cliff, and the waves came washing up on the shore—now advancing—now receding, and the sound of the waters fell on the ear like a subdued accompaniment to the noisy melody of human fears and hopes that was being sung continually on the strand.

To Phemie, who was dreamy and fanciful, it seemed that the Parade was the stage, the visitors the performers, the sea the orchestra, herself the one solitary spectator. She seemed to do nothing save listen and feel; and yet there was at times a tone in the great sea which woke an answering chord in her heart, and

caused her vaguely to marvel whether in the dim future every string in her nature might not be tried and tested; whether she should not some day understand more fully the meaning of that eternal murmur which never ceased by day nor by night; which went on just the same, whether men stood on the shore or left the coast desolate; which took no heed of human sorrow or of human joy; which had gone on through the ages, and which should continue through the ages, till there was no more sea—till the heavens were rolled up like a scroll—till time was merged in eternity, and the great problem of existence solved at last.

Life! She was beginning vaguely to think, not merely about her own life, but about all lives—about all those men and women who went hurrying along within sound of the great sea. She was commencing to understand that there was a lesson to be learnt out of these things somehow, though she had never conned a line of that lesson yet herself. It was all very vague—it was all very sweet, but there was a terrible sadness in it notwithstanding—a minor that brought tears into Phemie's eyes oftentimes, she scarcely knew why or wherefore.

Yet it was a happy time—sinfully happy to the poor misguided woman—until the Hurlfords and Miss Derno arrived at Hastings also. Then in a day all seemed changed; the liveliest tunes sounded sad to Phemie; the sweetest airs grew wearisome; she tired of the rush of the hurrying feet; the moon ceased to rise over the East Cliff; there was no longer any track of silver light on the waters; the evenings felt chilly; the sun did not shine the same as formerly.

It was all as when a man puts a sprig of some bitter herb into the wine-cup, and bids his neighbour drink—the flavour of the wine is lost, and he turns from the rich juice of the grape because of the disagreeable taste of the herb. Phemie's visit to Hastings was spoilt. "Well, let it be!" she said, wearily to herself. "What does it matter?" What! though she could not see the waves for tears; though she sat alone in-doors while they went about enjoying themselves?

Mrs Stondon was not strong enough to bear the rocking of a

boat. She grew dizzy when the little vessel was tossed about on the waters. She was unable to ride for very weakness, and so in time it came to pass that—as she was not selfish at this advanced period of her story—as her affection would not let her keep Captain Stondon always at home for her sake, as her pride would not allow her to make any sign to Basil, she was often lying on the sofa solitary, whilst the Hurlfords, and Miss Derno, and Basil, and her husband were riding, or boating, or walking.

In most lives there are such pauses, when the musicians are silent—when the voices of the singers are hushed—when there is a time between the lights—when we lay down the volume of experience, and think, tearfully it may be, of all we have read out of it. Happy the man or the woman who, unlike Phemie, think to some good purpose; who can trace the meaning of the life story; who can resolve that the future shall not be as unprofitable as the past.

Wearily, she thought, ah! wearily—grievously she misjudged the best friend God could have sent her—a woman who loved and pitied the poor wife.

There was nothing Miss Derno did that seemed right at that time in Phemie's eyes.

Dressed in mourning for the aunt she had spent best part of her life with, Mrs Stondon considered her a hypocrite.

"People who have been left handsome legacies can afford rich mourning," Miss Georgina Hurlford suggested; and that was a view of the question upon which the invalid thought it pleasant to dwell.

If Miss Derno offered to remain at home with her friend, Phemie viewed her kindness as a piece of deception. If she went out riding or boating, walking or driving, Phemie still thought she was playing her cards—doing her best to win Basil.

And supposing she did win Basil, what then? Had Phemie not said she never would step over a grave to happiness? Could she expect him to remain single for her sake all his life?

"Can you guess the course Miss Derno is urging me to adopt?" Basil said one day as he leaned against the window, looking out

over the sea. "She wants me to accept General Hurlford's offer, and go out to India."

"Perhaps she would not object to accompany you herself," Phemie answered.

For a moment Basil, though a gentleman, hesitated; he knew Phemie's weak point, and his power through it, then he answered—

"Miss Derno would not marry a poor beggar like myself even were I inclined to ask her."

"The heir to Marshlands cannot be considered a beggar," Mrs Stondon answered, coldly.

"Phemie!" it was the only word he uttered, but their eyes met, and she turned hers aside abashed, but, woman-like, she held to her opinion, and brooded over it.

"You will go, Basil," she suggested.

"And leave you?" he replied.

"Don't talk to me like that," she entreated; "don't, for God's sake. Leave me and seek your own life—that which a man at any point, at any age, can make it. Leave me—my life is gone. I ask nothing but to be let do my duty which I have neglected. Take his offer, Basil—take it, and go;" and then she buried her head in the sofa pillow while he answered—

"And you think I could do this—you think a man's love is no more constant than all that comes to. You imagine I could go away and forget—forget you, Phemie—forget you—"

Then with all the strength of her nature Mrs Stondon uprose, and said—

"I think, Basil Stondon, that if in the book of a man's life there are two wicked pages, he should paste them together, and go on and make a better of the leaves that are to come. I think that if I were in your shoes I should flee from temptation, and not remain even within sight of dishonour. I do not think I could eat a man's bread, and be conscious all the time that I loved his wife. I do not believe—woman though I am, weak though I may be—that could I go, as you can go, I should stay."

"Shall I take General Hurlford's offer, then?" he asked. But

she had exhausted her strength, and was lying weeping in the very extremity of her physical weakness. God help us! again I say, when the weakness of our bodies is sometimes able to subdue the strength of our souls. God help men and God help women, for we are all poor frail sinners alike!

"I did not think," said Miss Georgina Hurlford to Mrs Stondon, "that Olivia would have counselled Mr Stondon to accept my father's offer; but I suppose her aunt's death has made all the difference? It cannot matter to her now whether she marries in England or goes abroad."

In her desperation Mrs Stondon turned to Miss Derno. "I suppose," she said, "your aunt's death will make a difference in your future plans?"

"Most assuredly," was the reply. "I have some idea of taking a cottage near Marshlands; I feel that I should like to be near you."

"If Basil remains in England you remain, I conclude?" answered Mrs Stondon, and at her remark Miss Derno flushed scarlet.

"I am at a loss," she replied, "to imagine how Basil's future plans can influence mine."

Whereupon Phemie laughed. "That is what we all say," she answered, and the laugh grew hysterical.

"We! Ah, heaven," thought Miss Derno, "what can she know about the matter?—she who has never felt what it is to love honestly and passionately all her life long—whose purest love can never more be anything but sin—who, if she had only known Basil Stondon first, and her husband afterwards, might have loved her husband with all her soul and strength and might, but who can never love anything but this poor weak, unstable young man—never, for ever—for ever, never."

Was she right in this, my reader? No. For there came an hour when Phemie was able to put the two men in the scales together, and weigh their merits impartially—when she knew which of them had been true and faithful, which false and tickle

—when, for the second time, she could make her heart's choice, and took the better man.

But according to her then light Miss Derno argued—according to her then light, Phemie judged.

You think," answered Miss Derno, "that *I* mean to go to India with Basil if he accept Sir Samuel's offer—that I intend to take a place near Marshlands if he do not—and in both ideas you are wrong—how wrong you may know, perhaps, hereafter. Meantime, I can only say this much:—I shall not—much as I should prize your friendship, greatly as I should like to be near you—take a cottage in Norfolk at all. I will flee to the uttermost parts of the earth—to Wales, to Ireland, to the Highlands—(what does it matter to me?)" she added vehemently; and Phemie remembered she had uttered words like them. "I have promised to remain for a month with my cousin; at the end of that month, farewell, my dear, a long farewell; for it is ten chances to one if you and I ever meet again on this side heaven."

"Where do you mean to go, then?" asked Phemie; "you told me long ago everybody met somewhere in the end—that there was no 'never' in society."

"There is no 'never' in life, Mrs Stondon," was the reply; "there is no 'never' in eternity—unless—"

"Unless what?" Phemie inquired.

"Never mind," was the reply. "I detest religious discussions; this present life ought surely to be enough for us, without wanting to penetrate the mysteries of the next before our time."

"But we live here for the next," said Phemie, who could not forget the teachings of that old Scottish manse; of that lonely house among the hills.

"Do we?" retorted Miss Derno; "I should not have thought it. Forgive me," she added next moment, as Phemie broke into a fit of weeping—"forgive me, I was thinking more of myself than of you—I was indeed—I was, upon my word—forgive me, dear—forgive."

But, somehow, Phemie's forgiveness was a thing not readily

granted in those days. Phemie, what with her beauty, and her delicate health, and her devoted husband, and her fine position, was rather a great lady, and as she had not been born great, she was not perhaps maguanimous: let this be as it may, she did not accord her forgiveness readily, and within a few days she and Miss Derno were removed further than ever from each other, namely, by a visit from one of Mrs Stondon's relations, the first who had favoured her with word or call or letter since her marriage.

Mrs Keller prefaced her visit with a letter, skilfully worded, penned in the most beautiful of handwritings on the best of note-paper.

The Stondons were in Hastings; she dated from St Leonards. They were, after a fashion, strangers. She was a regular comer, well known and respected. Captain Stondon was from Norfolk, a place as it might be in the Antipodes; Roundwood was in Sussex, and every Hastings tradesman, livery-stable keeper, and lodging-house lady knew Mrs Keller, and Mr Keller her husband, and the young ladies her daughters.

Mrs Keller had a very bright pair of black eyes, that were capable of seeing any object at any distance; further, she had a very clear head, out of which she planned a letter to Mrs Stondon.

"What does it mean?" Phemie asked, listlessly handing her aunt's epistle up for Captain Stondon's judgment. "I cannot understand what she is driving at. What does it mean?" And she turned towards her husband, who, after reading the letter, placed it before Basil.

"It means," said the latter gentleman, "that Mrs Keller has no sons—that there are no more brothers,—that failing direct male heirs, the estates revert to the female branch,—and that you are the next heir."

"I?" and Phemie's pale cheek grew paler.

"Yes, you," went on Basil. "Mr Keller cannot live twelve months, so the doctors say. Miss Keller is dead. Mrs Stondon will inherit Roundwood, and become a greater lady than ever,—

so great a lady, in fact, that we shall all have to approach her hat in hand."

"Then, if my father had lived," interrupted Phemie, "he would have inherited Roundwood before this Mr Keller?"

"Undoubtedly, after General Keller's death."

"And you are certain you are not mistaken?—you are satisfied all that property will some day be mine?"

"Perfectly satisfied, unless, indeed, Mrs Keller takes it into her head to have a son at the eleventh hour, which, considering this note, is scarcely probable. There now," added Basil Stondon, "what have I said, what have I done?" And repressing the strong impulse which made him long to take Phemie in his arms, and kiss away her tears, and hold her to his heart, he stood aside while Captain Stondon sat down beside his wife, and drew her lovely head on to his breast, and let her cry out her heart there—sobbing—sobbing passionately.

Her life—it was that she was considering—poor disloyal Phemie—weak, traitorous, unworthy wife—with her head against his breast, with her face against the heart which held no thought save for her—she was yet reflecting what a happy lot hers might have been had this news come before marriage instead of after. She might have had Basil then, instead of Captain Stondon—might have had the tinsel instead of the pure gold, the coloured glass in lieu of the precious gem!

CHAPTER XXV.

BASIL DECIDES.

“AND I am so sorry, my dear, never to have been able to call upon you before.” It was Mrs Keller who said this, as she and Phemie sat in the drawing-room that looked out over the sea. “But, of course, as long as poor Miss Keller lived she was so bitter on the subject of her brother’s marriage, that it would have been impossible for us to take any step of the kind without offending her. Had we made any advances towards you we would always have thought our opposition was the reason of her iniquitous will, and I am certain that would have made you most uncomfortable ; so, perhaps, it is all better as it is. Her will, my dear ? Is it possible you never heard about it ? She had not a living relative except her cousin, my husband, our children, and yourself ; and she had an immense fortune from her mother—a fortune that would have enabled us to live without anxiety for ever.

“Well—would you believe it?—she turned Dissenter, and left everything she had in the world to building chapels, and sending out missionaries, and we were never one sixpence the better of her death, except fifty pounds, which she said my husband was to spend in buying a mourning ring. Ring, indeed ! it did not pay quarter of the expenses of the mourning. Jacqueline, my youngest daughter, had a horrid set of amethyst ornaments—hideous things—that might have been worn by Queen Philippa ; but she bequeathed her diamonds to some society, and they were

sent up to London—absolutely sent up and sold by auction for the benefit of some penitentiary, or reformatory, or whatever it was.”

Phemie laughed. The misfortunes of her relations clearly did not affect her as they ought.

“I suppose Miss Keller thought she had a right to do what she liked with her own,” she suggested.

“But she had not a right,” returned Mrs Keller; “she induced my husband to join General Keller in effecting a mortgage on the property—Roundwood, I mean—and told him she would make it up to him some day; and she never made it up; and to this hour we are paying interest on the mortgage, and unless we live like beggars we can save nothing, absolutely nothing; and there is not an insurance office in England will take Mr Keller’s life; so there is a predicament for us; and the property goes after his death.”

“I suppose that is really the most disagreeable part of the business?” Phemie remarked.

“It would be useless to deny it,” answered Mrs Keller, with charming sincerity; “but as it is to go away from us, I am glad it is to pass to you.”

“Why?” asked Mrs Stondon, and she leaned a little forward in her chair as she uttered the word.

“Why? because, of course, one would rather have to do with a woman than with a man.”

“Should you?” interrupted Phemie; “notwithstanding your experience of Miss Keller?”

“But then all women are not like her,” answered Mrs Keller; “indeed, she was as unlike a woman as anything I ever saw in my life—not in the least like you, at any rate: and in the next place, you are married, and would not want to turn us out of Roundwood in a minute if anything did unfortunately happen.”

“Well, what else?” asked Phemie, as Mrs Keller paused.

“Nothing else. I have said all I meant to say—”

“Though not all you were thinking,” laughed Phemie, once again. “It is something to have for next heir a woman without

children, whom your eldest daughter may one day succeed in—'

"My dear Mrs Stondon, I assure you—"

"My dear Mrs Keller, I assure you," interrupted Phemie, "that I know you know a great deal too little of me, and a great deal too much of the world, to be indifferent to such considerations. There is but a life standing between you and Roundwood, and I cannot blame you for seeing that this life is not a good one; still it is only fair for me to assure you that my present illness is the result of accident, not of constitutional delicacy. In a general way I am as strong as my neighbours." Having concluded which pleasant little speech, Phemie sank back in her chair, and looked straight in Mrs Keller's face, with a sweet smile.

"Godfrey," said Mrs Keller, on her return to St Leonard's, "that woman frightens me. She knew what I was thinking of; she is worse than her aunt ever was—cooler, more collected, keener. Talk about Captain Stondon having married an innocent, unsophisticated girl! Folly! Depend upon it, she is far more worldly-wise than he, and knew all about his property, and the position he would be enabled to give her. Guileless, indeed! A designing minx, like her mother, doubtless."

"Her mother had not any great amount of guile about her," answered Mr Keller. "I remember seeing her in Paris, just before Mrs Stondon was born; and a prettier creature I never beheld."

"There you are, man—man—man all over," retorted Mrs Keller; "a pretty face and a soft manner deceive the wisest of you. It has evidently taken in Captain Stondon, who is certainly one of the very nicest old gentlemen I ever met—such frank, kindly manners: so courteous, so considerate. He came in from Battle while I was there; and to see him speaking to her was really as good as any comedy. Had she been a queen he could not have treated her more reverentially. How was she? and had she felt lonely until I came in? and did she feel inclined to take a drive or a walk? and had she eaten any lunch, and was she certain she had taken her wine? and had the doctor called? and

did she think she was really better, really, really? Those are the kind of things that annoy me in this world," finished Mrs Keller; "the perfect idiots men make of themselves about women, as if they belonged to some superior order of being."

"Well, don't you think that you do, Honoria?" asked Mr Keller; "it has often occurred to me that you must entertain some idea of the kind."

"I entertain no idea of the kind, Godfrey, so don't be ridiculous. I hate to see men humbling themselves before women, more especially before such a piece of languid superiority as Mrs Stondon. And she is just the same to everybody; she orders that young Stondon—what is his name? Basil Stondon—about as though he were not next heir to Marshlands; and he comes and goes at her beck and call just as a dog fetches and carries; he does, indeed."

"It is very sad, is it not?" answered Mr Keller; "but perhaps, my love, if you were as young and handsome as Mrs Stondon people might fetch and carry for you, too."

"Now that is precisely what I meant about Captain Stondon. *He* would never have made a speech like that even to his own wife; he would never be rude, unmanly, brutal. And as for Mrs Stondon," burst out Mrs Keller in an accession of indignation, "some people might call her handsome, but I don't. She has not an atom of colour in her face, nor a bit of flesh on her bones. I wonder she does not rouge. It would make her look a little less like a ghost."

"Did she express any wish to see the girls?" asked Mr Keller, who, as was natural, felt some paternal anxiety on the subject.

"Could you imagine the Queen expressing a wish to see them?" asked Mrs Keller, facing suddenly round. "When you meet Mrs Stondon you will have some idea of the woman she is, but not till then. I asked her to come to Roundwood, but she declined. 'My mother was not received there,' she said, 'and I shall certainly not visit at a house the doors of which were shut in her face.'

“‘But they were not shut by us, my dear,’ said I.

“‘No,’ she admitted, ‘but that could not make any difference. Her relations had not taken any notice of her (Mrs Stondon) either, and would probably not have taken any notice to the end of the chapter, but that she chanced to be the next heir. As for children,’ she added, ‘she could not bear them; girls, more particularly, she disliked. Some day, perhaps, she would be able to see my girls, but not till she grew stronger.’ And there she sat in the arm-chair all the time,” went on Mrs Keller, “as though she were an empress, and I a subject paying her homage.”

“Then on the whole your visit was not a productive one?” suggested Mr Keller.

“It was, so far as Captain Stondon could make it so,” answered his wife. “He is going to call upon you, and he hoped he should see us at Marshlands; which I intend he shall. And upon the whole I don’t think she disliked me; but then she seems to care for nothing. I cannot make her out at all.”

“And neither can I,” declared Miss Georgina Hurlford, to whom Mrs Keller confided this opinion a few days subsequently. “When first I went to Marshlands, I thought Mrs Stondon the most beautiful and charming woman I ever beheld, but she is quite changed lately. It is not the effect of that terrible accident, for she was changed before it happened. Now do, Mrs Keller, use your penetration, and see if you can discover for what she wishes, or whether she wishes for anything; of whom she is fond, or whether she is fond of any one. I am dying to understand Mrs Stondon. Sometimes I think she is too happily married, for such a husband I never saw. I am sure if I could meet with any one like him, I should not mind having to beg my bread for his sake.”

And Miss Hurlford fell into a little fit of rapture over Captain Stondon’s perfections, while Mrs Keller, who had sense enough to see Miss Georgina did not look much like a young lady who would relish begging her bread, even in company with a model husband, ventured to suggest that Mr Basil Stondon, who was

eligible, would probably make a wife quite as happy as his relative.

“Basil!” repeated Miss Georgina, with a curl of her lip. “Basil thinks far too much of himself ever to be like his uncle. Besides which, he is engaged. Did you not know it? Ah! really, now, you are jesting. I thought every one knew that, although they keep it so quiet—Miss Derno and he have been engaged for years, at least so I am told; but Mrs Stondon cannot, it is said, bear the match, and wishes it broken off.”

“Why, what possible business can it be of hers?” asked Mrs Keller, in astonishment.

“That is what we all want to know,” returned Miss Hurlford. “Some people say she hates the notion of Basil having Marshlands at all; others that she wants him to marry some relative of her own—a pretty girl, Helen Aggland, have you ever seen her? (her father is the funniest old man possible); in fact, no one seems to be able to tell what to think—”

“But surely Miss Derno must be much older than Mr Basil Stondon?”

“A few years. She is the kind of wife, though, he ought to have—at least so everybody says—clever and experienced, and able to take the lead, and keep him in order,” rattled off Miss Hurlford.

“Has he not been offered an appointment in India?” asked Mrs Keller.

“In Ceylon, I think it is. No person thinks it can be good for him living in idleness at Marshlands, and so when papa heard of this vacant post, he said, ‘Now that is just the thing for young Stondon;’ but Captain Stondon won’t hear of it. Miss Derno, of course, wants him to accept papa’s offer, because it would enable them to marry; and now her aunt is dead, she may go abroad if she likes any day. I am sure I cannot tell how it will be,” finished Miss Georgina thoughtfully, while Mrs Keller returned to the bosom of her family, thinking—

“She seems a frank enough kind of girl, but for all her frankness I have an idea she wants Basil Stondon for herself.”

Wherein Mrs Keller chanced to be right, only matters were not progressing at all to Miss Hurlford's satisfaction. Boating, riding, driving, walking, listening to the music on the Parade, wandering over the East Cliff, climbing up the Castle Hill, she was not an inch nearer her object than ever.

Phemie had his heart and soul. She was the love of his life, and since the accident he had loved her more despairingly than ever. From all other women he turned to her. He would have asked nothing better than to sit at her side, to walk with her along the shore, to drive her through the pleasant lanes, to look in her pale face, and to feel her soft hand lying still and warm and quiet in his. The man's very nature seemed changed; he was fickle no more, he was importunate no more; he loved her entirely, and he knew she loved him, and he was content to wait—that was what he said to himself—till she was a widow, when they would marry and be happy.

He ate Captain Stondon's bread, and yet still thought this; he addressed his relative respectfully, and spoke of him in terms of the highest admiration and affection, and yet all the time he would have taken his ewe lamb from him—all the time he was thinking, "Captain Stondon is getting old, Captain Stondon's health is failing, Captain Stondon's spirits are beginning to flag," which observation chanced to be quite correct. Phemie's husband was altering every day. He was growing less cheerful, he was getting sadder, and not all his wife's tenderness, not all her remonstrances, could clear away a gloom that seemed to be settling down upon him.

From the time General Hurlford mentioned the Ceylon appointment to him, a change seemed to come over Captain Stondon. At first it was but a shade, but the merest cloud; but as time wore on the cloud grew blacker, and people began to think that the idea of Basil deserting Marshlands had seriously hurt and grieved him.

"I will give you an answer, so far as I am concerned, when we return to Norfolk," he said to Sir Samuel; "though, after all, it is a question for Basil to decide."

“But Basil says he will do whatever you think best,” answered the General.

“I cannot expect any man to build his house on my plan,” replied Captain Stondon; “it would not be right for me to do so, and perhaps I have already been selfish in keeping Basil so much at Marshlands. I will think the matter out there, and talk it over with him.”

“He ought soon to make his mind up on the matter,” said General Sir Samuel, a little pompously, for he thought—naturally perhaps—that his offer had not been accepted so promptly as it ought, and that the amount of gratitude felt by both Captain Stondon and Basil fell infinitely short of that which he considered his due.

“It is not with my good will that he has hesitated so long,” answered Captain Stondon. “I wished him to refuse your kind proposal at once—for reasons which I have explained more than once.”

“But consider the opening, my dear sir.”

“Consider the distance,—consider the climate. It is an excellent opening for men in the position we occupied at one time, but certainly not for Basil. We had our way to make, his is made for him. There is no reason that I can see, why he should risk his life out there, when he might just as well stay at home. In fact,” went on Captain Stondon, “I confess there is something I cannot understand in the persistency with which all Basil’s friends urge him to do something for himself. One would think that a man could desire no better home than a place like Marshlands, which will be his own in the ordinary course of nature. Do you all think I am going to turn him out some day? Can it be that you fancy I shall not deal fairly by him so long as I live? Tell me frankly why his friends are making themselves so busy in his affairs. Tell me, for instance, why *you* think Basil should go to India.”

“Well, in the way you put it—I really can see no reason why he should go at all; but still, as you say, all his friends seem to think he ought not to be dependent on your bounty,—or charity,

indeed, as Miss Derno puts it. The moment the appointment was vacant everybody cried out—‘Why, that is the very thing for Basil Stondon;’ and so, of course, I offered it to him; and as they still keep saying he is mad to refuse, I keep offering it to him still. That is all I have got to say about the matter—it is, upon my word and honour.”

And Sir Samuel, who had uttered all this in the teeth of a north-east wind, blew his nose violently, and buttoned up his brown top-coat, with a tremendous show of dignity.

“It is very singular,” remarked Captain Stondon.

“It is indeed—as you observe, it is very singular.”

But at this point Sir Samuel, who was descending the steps that led down from the West Cliff to the old town of Hastings, past St Clement’s Church, stopped as if he had been shot.

“An idea has just occurred to me,” he said. “I remember a remark Mrs Hurlford once made, that may serve to throw a little light on the matter. It was to the effect that Basil could not marry without your approval; for although you kept him you might not feel inclined to keep his wife and children also. Do you think we have solved the enigma at last?” inquired the General, whose nose was blue and whose cheeks were black from the cold cutting breeze that seemed to be trying to cut him through and through.

“Thank you, I think you have,” answered Captain Stondon, simply; and he took Sir Samuel’s hand and shook it heartily—gratefully. “If that is all, I believe we can get over the difficulty; but does Basil want to marry any one? Is there anybody to whom he is attached?”

“Such things are not much in my way,” answered Sir Samuel; “but you know people do talk about him and Miss Derno.”

“Miss Derno! you amaze me. If I had thought at all on the subject I should have guessed very differently; but I will talk to my wife about it. Women, you know, generally are sharper in affairs of this kind than we are.”

“May I inquire,” asked the General, on whose comprehension a faint glimmering of light was just dawning, “where your guess

would have fallen? I do not ask from idle curiosity, believe me."

"It was only a passing idea," answered Captain Stondon. "I thought for a moment of my wife's cousin, Helen Aggland."

"Certainly—yes, to be sure." And the light that had been struggling into General Sir Samuel's brain was suddenly extinguished.

That very evening Captain Stondon talked to Phemie about Basil. He told her what he had heard, he asked her what she thought. He opened the subject so unexpectedly that Phemie blessed the twilight in which they sat, for hiding her face while she listened. She felt it flush—that poor face usually so pale and white—and she grew faint and sick, as her husband inquired whether it had ever occurred to her that Basil was attached to Miss Derno.

"I have thought so for a long time," she answered. "I once heard they were positively engaged, and I remember teasing Basil about it."

Teasing!—it was an easy, simple word, far enough removed from any feeling she had ever experienced in the matter. Had she said, tortured herself—had she said, tormented her spirit, lacerated her heart—she would have been much nearer the mark; but as it was, she merely declared that she had teased him, and Captain Stondon asked—

"What did he say?"

"Oh! he denied it, of course; and then I tried Miss Derno, and she denied it also."

"And what is your opinion, Phemie?"

There was a great silence in the room; outside on the shore the waves came rolling up against the Parade; over the sea the grey twilight was settling down into darkness; there was a wild night at hand; and all these things together seemed to speak to Phemie of a time when the waves would be talking to her with a different voice—of an evening when the twilight would be merging into a deeper darkness—of a night wilder, colder, more dreary, that would come to her if she were not wise in due season,

if she did not confess and repent, and turn back, ere the tempest was unloosed, ere the rain beat and the wind blew upon her.

“Tell him now,” was the murmur that filled her ears; “tell him now,” said the holy voices of the night; “tell him frankly and truthfully that you believe Miss Derno cares for him, but that you know he cares for you. Tell him the truth—now in the silence—now in the gathering darkness, with the evening shadows hiding your shame from him, with the night concealing his anguish from you—take courage and begin—be honest and be true.”

And there arose in the poor wife’s heart a terrible longing to burst out and tell him what I have written. She would have given her life then to be able to speak the first word—to take the first step back to loyalty and peace. If she could but have been sure he would not ask her how it was all the time with her, she might have spoken; and even as it was, she hesitated—hesitated too long.

“I asked you what was your opinion, love,” Captain Stondon gently repeated; and the opportunity was lost; the wave had receded; the precious moment had slipped back among its fellows.

“I have always thought she cared for him.”

“And he, Phemie?”

“I cannot tell. I fancy he must be fond of her still.”

“And you imagine she wishes him to accept this appointment, so that they may get married?”

“It is very likely.”

“Then he must not accept the appointment; we can do better for them here.”

Her punishment was beginning; she put her hand to her heart, while a pain, sharp and terrible as the thrust of a sword, seemed to pass through her breast. Could she see them married, and live? Could she go through the years of the existence his love had made wretched, bearing and making no sign? She thought of the lonely hours, and days, and weeks, and months; and as

she leaned back in her chair tears, hot and scalding, rolled down her cheeks slowly and silently.

Deep wounds do not bleed much—the worst of all bleed internally; and so in like manner deep grief weeps little, and the bitterest tears are those that never wet the eyeballs.

Could she live if he left her? Could she live if he deserted her? And the pain grew sharper, and the agony greater.

This was love—this was that which she had walked on through the years to meet—unholy, jealous, passionate love that was draining away her heart's blood drop by drop. It was killing her. She had mocked at love, and behold love had taken her unawares—taken her captive.

Only to die—only to be sure of dying; and she turned her tired eyes towards the window, from which she could just discern the sea tossing and moaning.

“I wish I were out there,” she said, aloud. “It would be free and pleasant.”

In a moment her husband's arm was about her waist. “Out where, my darling?” he asked. “I am afraid it is too cold a night for you to venture on the Parade.”

“I did not mean that,” she answered. “I meant out on the sea. I never seem to want to be on it except when the night is coming on, and the waves are rough and crested with white foam. Then I think I should like to be out on them without a boat, going away and away to the ocean.”

“My love, I am afraid you are not so well to-night,” he said anxiously.

“Yes, I am,” she answered; “only when I sit in the twilight I begin thinking—and when I begin thinking I want to be away—away in the body, or out of the flesh, I suppose. Shall we soon be going home?” she asked. “I believe I want to return to Marshlands.”

“We can return whenever you please,” he replied, and then she nestled her head down on his shoulder, and thanked him; and so it was settled that they should go back to Norfolk immediately,

and Captain Stondon begged his wife to ask Miss Derno, and Miss Georgina Hurlford, and General Sir Samuel, and Mr and Mrs Hurlford to return there with them.

“I want to see Basil and Miss Derno together,” said Captain Stondon, who considered that his penetration had been sadly at fault; and accordingly, when the October woods were arrayed in their most brilliant colours of brown and yellow, and red and russet green, guests again assembled in the old Norfolk house, and Phemie played the hostess there—for the last time but one.

On the whole it was not a successful attempt at gaiety. Phemie proved a less charming entertainer than formerly; the whole party seemed somehow at sixes and sevens. Everybody was continually taking somebody else into inner chambers, into remote parts of the grounds, into dark walks, into shrubberies where the leaves were lying ankle-deep, into woods that were fast getting bare and cheerless, and talking confidentially to him or her for half an hour or so at a time. In the evenings nobody would sing or play: the gentlemen sat long over their wine, the ladies yawned a great deal, and talked about fancy-work and the new clergyman. There were too many guests for any one to be able to do as he liked; there were too few for any entertainment to be got out of them. Altogether, it was, as Miss Derno remarked, a little slow—a little like a Quaker-meeting, in which every member of the assembled company was waiting for some one else to make a diversion in the proceedings.

As for Basil, he wished the Hurlfords and Miss Derno at New Zealand; he wished India still further; and he seized on the chance Captain Stondon gave him of escape with avidity.

“He did not want to go to India,” he said; “he had no desire to leave Marshlands; but if his friends thought he ought to do so, why, he would be guided entirely by their advice. He felt he must be sometimes in the way; he knew he owed everything he possessed to Captain Stondon’s goodness and kindness; and goodness and kindness were not things to be unduly encroached on. Did Captain Stondon really wish him to remain? then he would

remain, only too gladly ; should he tell General Sir Samuel the matter might be considered settled, and his offer gratefully refused ?”

“There is one thing more I want to speak to you about, Basil,” said Captain Stondon, when they had definitively settled this point. “It has been suggested to me that your position here prevents your marrying. Now, should such be the case, I wish to say that in all respects I desire to treat you as though you were my own son. If you desire to marry I will—” but at this point Basil interrupted his relation.

“I have not the slightest wish to marry,” he said ; “I am too happy as I am.”

“Have you no attachment ?”—Captain Stondon felt that he was putting the question awkwardly ; and so perhaps did Basil, for he changed colour, and bent his eyes on the ground.

“I want to be plain with you, Basil,” went on Captain Stondon, “so forgive me if I am abrupt. Is it Miss Derno ?”

“Certainly not ;” and Basil lifted his eyes, and laughed with a secret sense of relief.

“Have you never given her any reason to think—?” suggested his relative.

“I have given her every reason to think,” was the bold reply. “I proposed to Miss Derno years ago, and she refused me. I have no intention of proposing to her again ; you may be quite satisfied about that.”

“But do you suppose she—that is, are you quite certain there was no misunderstanding—that she was not influenced by her comparatively dependent position ?”

“I conclude you mean, would she marry me now if I wished her? No, she would not ; and if you doubt the fact, you can ascertain the truth from Miss Derno herself. She never cared for me. Even when I had a fancy for her, she had none for me ; and for the rest,” added Basil, with a sudden appearance of frankness, “if I do care for any one, it is a hopeless love—one that may be buried with me in my coffin ; for nothing can ever come of it in this world.”

"Are you serious, Basil? could money not help you—could my assistance be of no avail?"

Then for a moment Basil Stondon stood conscience-stricken, looking straight into the face of the man he had wronged.

"Had I all the gold in the vaults of the Bank of England," he said slowly, "it would not mend my case. That is the only thing would take me to India; but it is as easy to bury a love here as in the East."

"And easier, perhaps, to get a new one," said Captain Stondon, with an attempt at *badinage*; but Basil shook his head.

"My fate met me one day," he answered, "and my fate was too much for me;" and as if in mockery while he spoke, a gust of wind came through the wood, stripping the leaves off the trees, and casting them at his feet. "I will try to repay you hereafter for all your goodness to me," he added, and he meant what he said—meant it fully and faithfully, every word. Captain Stondon's generosity and unsuspectingness had touched his heart.

"I will try," he repeated to his own soul; and he swore to himself with a great oath that he would strive to conquer his passion, and—meeting Phemie every day, make-believe that he had ceased to love her.

Staying on at Marshlands, he was bound to make this vow to himself; but it is one thing to make a vow, and another to keep it; and so Mr Basil Stondon discovered.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MARCH OF EVENTS.

No sooner was Basil's decision made known to the circle at Marshlands, than dissatisfaction appeared in the faces of two of that circle at any rate. Phemie, who really in some things was "changeful as the weather," took a private occasion of telling Basil that he had done very wrong—that an opportunity had been presented to him of "getting away from temptation, and relieving her of a burden (such was the flattering manner in which she conveyed her meaning), of which he might have availed himself."

"And I think it very wicked of you," she added. "I know if anybody had offered such a chance to me, I should have snapped at it."

"But I assure you, Phemie, upon my honour—upon my soul, I will not persecute you any more. Let bygones be bygones, and forget and forgive. We can be friends—can we not, dearest?"—over which last word he lingered so lovingly that Mrs Stondon knew perfectly well the struggle was not ended—that there was more misery in store for her—that he had no intention, no real intention I mean, of ceasing to persecute her. Well, she must only try to do her part,—and she would, she would, so help her God!

As for Miss Derno, she was something more than dissatisfied,—she was indignant. Miss Derno knew all about the matter now—knew that Basil loved Mrs Stondon—knew that poor Phemie loved him. She had kept her eyes open, and she saw,

moreover, that other people's eyes were beginning to be opened too, and that Phemie's reputation was not safe from hour to hour.

She loved Mrs Stondon, loved her as women oftentimes love those of their own sex who are much younger and weaker than themselves—loved her tenderly, compassionately, faithfully; and at length decided to take the first opportunity that offered, and throw light on Captain Stondon's understanding.

After a time the opportunity arrived. She was walking over from the Abbey, and Captain Stondon overtook her, riding. Spite of her remonstrances, he dismounted, and leading his horse by the bridle, proceeded by her side along one of the interminable high-banked, sandy Norfolk by-roads, which seem to stand to the inhabitants in lieu of footpaths. They talked about politics; they talked about the weather, about the soil, about the county generally, about other English counties; about Miss Derno's future plans, and then she said—

"I only wish I were a man, like Basil, a man with the opportunity for pushing my way in the world, which he seems able to throw aside. It is a great pity you do not use your authority, and make him go abroad. It would be so good for him."

"But he does not wish to go."

"Children never wish to go to bed, and yet no rational parent allows his child to sit up with his playthings all night. England chances to hold Basil's latest toy; but for that very reason perhaps he ought especially to be sent abroad."

"You speak in enigmas, Miss Derno."

"Do I? Let me speak plain English then. From his youth upwards Basil has been in love, and the more unattainable his love the more constant he has usually proved."

"Human nature," suggested Captain Stondon.

"It was his human nature, at all events," answered Miss Derno. "I have known him all his life, and I know pretty nearly every woman with whose hair, or eyebrows, or finger-nails, or dimples, he has fallen in love. I chance to know his latest 'possession,' and he wants a change of climate to cure him of his passion."

She was very pale, and she began walking very fast. Captain Stondon detained her by laying a hand on her arm.

"Would it be wrong for me," he asked, "to share a secret which seems to have been confided to you so fully?"

"It was not confided to me," she answered; "but I have observed signs and tokens in Basil which I should recommend you to observe likewise. Heaven forgive me if I am making mischief," she went on vehemently; "but some one ought to tell you, and why not I? All the disagreeable things in life have always fallen to me to do or to say! It is your own wife, Captain Stondon, whom Basil loves. I have spoken."

She had spoken with a vengeance. A man standing in her shoes would have measured his length in the road; but a woman was as safe with Captain Stondon from retort as from injury.

"You must be mistaken, Miss Derno," he said, when he could speak, and those were the only words he uttered. She never made him an answer; and they parted when they stood in front of Marshlands without another sentence being spoken.

He had looked once, indeed, in her face entreatingly while they passed up the avenue; and she, understanding the meaning of that look, had replied to it mutely. She was to say nothing more, and he was to use his own discretion. Phemie's prudence, Phemie's goodness, Phemie's purity had not been called in question, thank God! About Basil he would think: he would do nothing rashly.

And yet it was time some person interfered, for the struggle had got too much for Phemie. Basil had kept to his resolution for a couple of days; and then finding he could endure such a separation no longer, he became worse for his very forbearance, more desperate in his importunity.

She avoided him, and he followed her; she treated him with cold indifference, and he grew mad; she would have nothing to do with him; she eschewed all places where he was likely to be; she behaved at that time, as Captain Stondon himself, who was silently watching her behaviour, could not but perceive, unexceptionably; and if he thought this, what must not the woman

have been suffering, the woman who was fighting two battles—the battle of duty, and the battle of love?

For she loved Basil still, and he knew it.

“We cannot go on this way,” she said, one day, when he chanced to be left alone with her in the great drawing-room, the windows of which opened out on the terrace.

“I know we cannot,” he answered; “will you leave Norfolk with me? It is misery for both of us as it is; and Captain Stondon would give you a divorce at once; I know he would. Then, at last, we might be happy, Phemie. Only speak the word.”

But she would not speak; she bent her head down on the chimney-piece, and her great sin rose before her. He had spoken lightly of divorce, lightly of the great love the one man felt for her, who would, “he knew,” grant her this boon at once; but, oh, God! the desolate home and the lonely hearth; the rooms without her—one less on the path to heaven; one more traversing the road to hell—that was what Phemie saw while she remained silent—such pictures as conscience never painted for the preservation of the poor, weak sinner who stood beside her.

“Phemie, dearest—the one love of my life—will you put an end to all this struggle and misery?” and he bent down his head over her, and kissed the once rich hair, that was now short and unlovely.

Then with a start she turned upon him. “I will never leave my husband. I swear that to you, Basil Stondon, before God!”

As she spoke the door opened, and Miss Georgina Hurlford entered. At a glance she took in the whole situation, and a sudden rage came over her as she did so.

“I will be revenged,” she thought, and she was. Before the guests separated for the night, she heard Phemie say to Basil:

“To-morrow, at six, in the pine plantation.”

For hours she sat and wrote after she went to her own room, and next morning the housemaid found a perfect hecatomb of burnt paper under and about the grate in Miss Hurlford’s room.

“She’s been a-burning of love-letters, I’ll be bound,” soliloquized the housemaid; but she happened to be wrong.

Miss Georgina had been simply inditing a little note, which came to Marshlands next day by the hands of a strange lad:—

“If you wish to know what keeps Mr Basil Stondon in England, be near the pine plantation this evening at six.

“A WELL-WISHER.”

Have you ever had an anonymous letter, dear reader? if you ever have, perhaps you can understand with what feelings Captain Stondon read the above epistle, and with what cheerfulness and unconcern he turned him to the duties and employments of the day.

Phemie was coming to be talked about, that was his first idea; his next was—had his darling given any occasion for scandal? He would save her, he would; he would stand between her and the world; he would keep her from all sin and from all danger. Was this the substance of the shadow that had been brooding over him? Was this the reality of the dread which had been haunting him? Could Phemie—his Phemie—Phemie of the auburn hair, of the pure heart, of the innocent mind, have been deceiving him? He would not believe it; but still I am not ashamed to add that, in the solitude of his own chamber, Captain Stondon covered his face with his hands and wept bitterly.

He had been happy, and happiness was over for him for ever; he had loved, and she whom he loved was “talked about” and suspected.

He guessed, now, what Phemie had been thinking of that night when they sat together at Hastings. Oh! if she had only told him then; only told him herself; only let the knowledge come to him from her own lips, uttered by the music of her own voice.

Life—life; if we could only seize your opportunities as they slip by us; if we could only see the end of the paths we blindly pursue; if we could only understand that there are cases in which silence is not wisdom, in which speech is golden—I think and believe even this world might be happier than it is, freer from misunderstanding, more perfect in its bliss. As it was, Phemie, even at the eleventh hour, did not trust her husband; did not

throw herself on his charity, his forbearance, his trust ; but went wandering away through the twilight to keep her tryst, a mistaken woman, a lonely wife.

The heart has its diary, which it keeps more faithfully than the hand can ever do. Ink may fade, but flesh and blood cannot forget. Lines which have been traced by the pen may in time suggest merely the faintest shadows to the memory ; but the story which has been traced by either joy or sorrow, the photograph which has been burnt into the heart by passion or despair, remains stamped there indelibly till the end.

And not the one grand event merely either : every trifling accessory is photographed as well as the principal figure, and the odds and ends about the room, the floating clouds in the heavens, the ivy climbing up the wall, the folds of a dress, the straggling branch, the scattered leaves of a flower—all these things which we never could have imagined would have found themselves in the picture, are there, and will remain there till the heart is cold and its pulses still for ever.

Phemie found it so, at any rate. Did she ever forget, could she ever forget, that walk down to the pine plantation? The wind was high, and seemed to be chasing the clouds into the night. Looking up, she could see the pine-trees tossing their dark foliage against the grey sky ; banks of clouds swiftly changing their position, changing and shifting as the breeze bore them hither and thither ; some leaves whirling past ; beds in which geraniums were blooming late ; heliotropes still scenting the air ; fir-cones under foot ; the dry grass rustling beneath her tread—what did these things say to Phemie from that night on, henceforth? What did she see when she walked out at that season, at that hour, in such weather afterwards? She saw a man and a woman standing beneath the firs, hand clasped in hand, heart talking to heart, soul laid bare to soul. She heard low, broken sentences, and then louder words of entreaty, of pleading, of reproach, while the wind, after thundering and blustering among the further-off plantations, paused for a moment by the firs

to listen, and then went sobbing away through the trees—sobbing and moaning farewell, farewell!

Could she say it? She had come to try. She felt so sure of herself now, she felt so strong to cleave to the right at last, that she was there by her own appointment, in the dusk of that autumn evening, to meet the man whom, loving beyond all other men, she had hitherto avoided—to bid the only man she had ever loved leave her.

He was there, he was waiting for her; he had no thought for the lonely husband he was trying to disgrace, for the hearth he was striving to make desolate. He remembered only himself and Phemie; he felt only the strength and the might of the curse she had laid upon him. “You shall love me for ever! You will never be able to love another woman as you love me—never.”

And it was true: he felt in every throbbing pulse, in every beat of his heart, in every nerve of his body, that she had told him only the simple truth. He should never love another. Weak and false and feeble and unstable he might be in regard to everything else in life;—but Phemie—while the streams flowed to the sea—while the sun shone—while the flowers bloomed—while the grass sprang—while the earth brought forth her increase, and the rain fell, and the dews descended, he could love none other—none—but this woman whom he wanted to make wretched—whom he wanted to destroy, body and soul—whom he took in his arms and kissed over and over again. Oh, woe for Phemie!

“You have come, my own darling, my own only love!”

“Yes, Basil, I have come.” And she released herself, and stood with her one hand against a fir-tree and the other pressed hard upon her heart. “I have come, for, as I have often told you, we must part.”

“Why, Phemie?”

“Because I cannot bear it—I won’t bear it,” she answered; “because the deception is too great, the burden heavier than I can carry; because I had rather go to him and tell him all—how I never loved him—how I have loved you—than be a hypocrite

any more, than listen to the things you say to me any longer."

"I love you." It was all the excuse he could make.

"You love me!" she repeated. "Yes, and you love yourself; you love your own love better than you love me. Is it right, Basil?" she went on, passionately; "is it right for a woman to be stronger than a man? Is it for a woman to show a man the path he ought to tread, and force him into it?"

"You do not know what love is," he said, "or you would not talk in that ridiculous way."

"I do," she answered, "I do, God pardon me. Having once married my husband, I ought not to have known—I ought to have lived the decorous, untempted existence that falls to the lot of many a woman; but I met you, Basil Stondon—met you and disliked you—met you and loved you—met you and almost lost my soul for your sake! Not know what love is!" she cried, despairingly. "Basil, if I were to go through hell could I burn your kisses off my lips? Could I forget the touch of your hand? Could I come out pure as I have been? Is there any physician who could undo the past—who could take the scars of your unholy love off my soul, Basil! Basil?"

She was not crying. Phemie had outlived that state of simplicity in which a woman weeps because she suffers; when the vessel bursts that destroys life, we do not bleed externally; when our hearts are breaking no tears flow from our eyes. She was not crying, but there was an agony in her voice which wrung even Basil Stondon's soul, and made him answer—

"Phemie, dearest, I have sinned—what can I do?"

"You can go," she said; "you can take General Hurlford's offer, and leave me; you can remember how good and kind my husband has been to you, and quit tempting me. I cannot help having loved you, Basil Stondon, but I can help being false to him, and I will be true, I will."

"You ought to have thought of that before—you led me on," he said, sullenly.

"Led you on!" she flashed out. "I lead you on! What knowledge had I—what arts could I use—what wiles did I

practise? Whatever wrong I may have done, it has not been to you. Did I ask your love—did I want your love? What has your love brought to me? I was happy, and I am wretched, and it is through no forbearance or generosity of yours that I am not more wretched still. Led you on!—it would be no great trouble to any woman to drag you down, but—I—I have tried to keep you up; I have striven hard, you know I have, and this is the way you thank me. You bless me with reproaches, you repay me with falsehood.”

“Forgive me, Phemie, I did not mean it. It has been all my fault.”

“It has not been all your fault,” she said; “but it will be yours if you stay on here when you have the chance given you of leaving. Did you not promise me that we should be friends—but friends—and what did you ask me yesterday?—to go away with you, Basil, to live with you in sin, to leave the husband who has been good to me lonely and dishonoured. God pardon you, Basil, and God pardon me, for ever having fallen so low that you could say and that I could listen to such things.”

“Where is the sin?” he retorted. “I love you, and you love me. You do not love your husband.”

“But I respect him—ay, and I love him too much to bring sorrow to his door by any act of mine. Where is the sin?” she repeated; “where—oh, Lord in heaven!” and she clasped her hands together, “if this man be so blinded that he cannot see his sin, open Thou his eyes; give sight to him as Thou alone canst.”

“Phemie.”

“Yes, Basil.”

“What is the use of all that rubbish? You do not believe in it, you cannot believe in it. How can a man and a woman who have felt as we have felt pray to God, if there be a God?”

With a cry of despair she fell on her knees.

“I am here before Him, Basil,” she answered; “He can remember, better than I, every thought of mine since I first met you, every thought of yours since you first set eyes on me, and

yet I feel He has not forsaken me. I know the day must come when you will feel He has not forsaken you."

She put that thought between him and his sin. She put the thought of her God, she put purity and perfection so great, that it could afford to look without turning aside on impurity, between her and temptation. The old lessons learned so many a year before in the manse, within sound of the mourning and murmuring sea, came to her help then. The God who had been her grandfather's Father in that old innocent life was her Father now, and to Him in that hour she appealed.

"Oh! Lord," she went on, "in so far as I have sinned give me my wages, and I will take them without a murmur, but let me sin no more, and keep me out of temptation."

She lifted her hands clasped above her head as she spoke the last words—spoke them almost with a sob—and from among the pine-trees it seemed as though her sobs were echoed back.

"Was that the wind, Basil," she asked, springing to her feet—"or has somebody been listening to us?"

"Who would come here to listen?" he answered sulkily; "are you going to talk to me rationally now, at last?"

"No," was the answer, "never will I talk to you what you call rationally again. I know all you want—I know all you would say—I know how weak I am for good—how strong you are for evil—and for all these reasons, I say we must part. If you will not go, I shall have to find some means of making you go. I am willing to leave the 'how' in your hands, Basil, but the result I cannot have changed. You must go, or I will tell my husband—I was once very nearly confessing everything; and I would rather confess everything than live the life of misery and deception I have done for fifteen months past. I came to tell you this—I have told it to you—so, good-bye."

He would have detained her, but she fled from him—he would, had it been possible, have carried her off there and then, but Phemie's will was stronger than his purpose. "Good-bye," she said, and the wind took the words and carried them up into the branches of the pine-trees.

He answered her with a muttered oath—and the wind took that likewise and bore it away.

When Phemie and Basil had both left the pine plantation, the sob which attracted Mrs Stondon's attention was repeated once again.

Amongst those pines a man's heart had that night been broken—his dream was dispelled, his trust destroyed. She had never loved him—she had loved Basil; and Captain Stondon, who had played the spy for the first time in his life, heard her words and took them home to brood over.

Was it for this he had wished when he drank of the waters that fell over the rocks at Tordale?—was it for this he had married a young wife in the church that looked adown the sweet valley under the shadow of the everlasting hills?

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SOCIAL RACK.

THE real tragedies of life are, as a rule, played out behind the scenes, and the men and the women who have received the severest wounds—who have wept the bitterest tears—who have passed through the fiercest fires, come forth with serene faces, and enact those comedies which society loves to see, on the conventional boards of the drawing-room theatre.

Society hates tragedy, and it is perhaps only fair that it should do so, since tragic actors, on their part, detest society. They hate the boisterous sympathy of the people, who fill the galleries of that great playhouse, the world; they loathe the surprised ignorance of the upper boxes, and with the keenest dislike they writhe under the critical appreciativeness of the stalls and dress-circle.

Comedy, comedy, wit, gaiety, for the social audience! youth, beauty, the brilliant dress, the smiling face for strangers, acquaintances, and even friends! but the ghastly wound, the eating cancer, the deathly disease, the tear-strained face, the contrite prayer, the repentant heart—when the lonely chamber is reached and the door closed.

It was so at Marshlands. The guests there had each his or her little tragedy hidden away from sight—tragedy past or present; and yet to have seen the company assembled round the dinner-table, and to have heard the gay chatter in the drawing-room, no one would have suspected the existence of the mental haircloth

each in the little circle wore underneath the fine linen and the shining satin. With some, long years had rubbed away all the painful points, and left the trouble and the endurance, a memory—nothing more; but with others the garment was new, and caused the lips, wreathed with smiles, to tremble occasionally because of the pain to which, as the years went by, they were to grow accustomed.

It was a pretty drawing-room, and pretty women moved hither and thither about it. Besides Miss Derno and Miss Georgina Hurlford, there were perhaps seven or eight ladies in the apartment, girls and matrons, who looked at sketches, and the new magazines, who stood together beside the wood fire, or near the centre table, talking about their children, about their governesses, about their houses, their favourite horses, dogs, books, pursuits, gossiping away the half-hour after dinner till the gentlemen should come in and create a diversion.

“You look tired,” said Miss Derno to Phemie, as Mrs Stondon at length turned away from the group by the fire, and sat down on a sofa near one of the windows.

“I am tired of that insufferable woman,” answered Phemie, pettishly, referring to a Mrs Chichelee, who had been entertaining her hostess with an account of the ailments, peculiarities, and special virtues of each one of her nine children: “she always does weary me to death.” And Phemie leaned her head back on the pillow while Miss Derno said—

“Any person might have thought you found her conversation interesting, you listened to it so earnestly.”

“One has to be civil,” was the reply; “that is the worst of living—one has to be civil to *everybody*.” And Phemie laid a stress on the last word, which was not strictly complimentary to her hearer. “Sometimes I wish I were dead; but then I remember there will be even more people in the next world than in this.”

“You ought to buy some solitary island, and retire there with some fowls and a goat,” suggested Miss Derno.

“I think I shall; but then those horrid women with tribes of

children would always be visiting me under pretext of giving the little wretches change of air. For twenty minutes Mrs Chichelee has been entertaining us with the biographies of her children from their birth up to the present hour—how Gwenny had the measles, and Harry broke his arm—”

“Pity it had not been his neck,” interposed Miss Derno, “for a more detestable brat could not be found in all Norfolk.”

“And how Ada knew her letters at three years old, and how Rupert, when he was in his nurse’s arms, was always calling out, ‘horse, horse.’ I confess it is a perfect enigma to me how any woman can imagine such talk can be interesting to another woman, not the aunt, or grandmother, or great-grandmother of her precious progeny.”

“When it is all a woman is able to tell about,” was the reply; “when her life is passed in the nursery and the schoolroom with her babies and their nurses—when the care of her children is the one absorbing occupation of her life—her profession, in fact—I am not certain that one ought to blame her.”

“Are you not?” answered Phemie; “well, then, I am. Out of your mouth I will convict you. Is it good taste for a man to talk of his profession or trade? What should we think of an artist who made his friends’ lives a weariness unto them because of the multitude of pictures he had painted? May a musician speak by the hour about the pieces he has composed, or an author bore one about his stupid books? Following the same rule, if it be the sole business of a woman’s life to bring children into the world, and fill her husband’s quiver full to overflowing with boys and girls, I think she ought, when she comes out visiting, to leave her shop behind her.”

“What treason are you two concocting?” demanded Miss Georgina Hurlford, coming softly up to where Mrs Stondon was seated. “Is it a secret, or may I come and listen to you?”

“We were talking about trades and professions,” answered Phemie; “as we are all after a fashion workers in this world, so I suppose we may all be said to be in business.”

"Then yours is making yourself agreeable, it is only fair to conclude," said Miss Georgina, who had a neat way of "putting things."

"It must be," was the reply, "because I dislike the occupation so much, and I have always heard men dislike that which is the business of their lives."

"That rule would not appear to hold good with regard to women," remarked Miss Derno.

"How do you make that out?" asked Miss Georgina.

"Why, the two great employments of our sex seem not to be unpleasant to the majority—rearing sons and daughters and looking out for good settlements." Having concluded which sentence, Miss Derno looked straight at Miss Hurlford, who answered without a change of colour—

"Your experience is doubtless greater than mine, but I should have thought the latter occupation, at all events, most wearisome and unprofitable."

"It is early in the day for you to cry out that the land is barren," was Miss Derno's not over civil retort; but the entrance of the gentlemen at this juncture did away with all necessity for reply from Miss Georgina Hurlford, who was only too happy to allow the conversation to drop.

Coffee and tea were handed round; the young ladies brightened up, the matrons looked relieved; the ten minutes' interval was over, and the curtain again drew up; the sketches were studied with more interest than ever, for were there not wiser heads bending over the sketches too, able to point out their especial merits to the girls whose minds were supposed to be still lying fallow?

"Your evenings are so delightful, my dear Mrs Stondon," said plump little Mrs Enmoor, who had the pleasure of seeing her eldest daughter airing her small knowledge of botany in the sun of Mr Ralph Chichelee's admiring smiles. (Mr Ralph Chichelee was nephew to the happy father of nine waxy-faced, pug-nosed children, and next heir to a baronetage. Judge, then, of the

maternal pleasure.) "As I often say to Mr Enmoor, if Marshlands were thirty miles distant instead of eight, I do not think I could resist one of Mrs Stondon's cordial invitations."

Mrs Stondon looked round the room, took in the position at a glance, and then said, with the smile which was her stereotyped company smile, and nothing that had ever belonged to Phemie Keller, "You are very kind."

"It is you who are kind," returned Mrs Enmoor, in a little ecstasy of enthusiasm; "and it is because you are kind, and because your house is like one's own home—only pleasanter, I think—that your friends are so fond of coming here."

Phemie put out her hand and touched Mrs Enmoor's round white arm. Somehow the little lady's heartiness and gratitude touched her, although she knew the heartiness was not quite genuine nor the gratitude wholly retrospective. There was a great yearning in the poor desolate heart at times for something to love—something to pour out its treasures upon sinlessly; and when women spoke kindly and tenderly to her, she often thought she could love a woman very much indeed. After all, why should she not help on these little feminine schemes a little? Men and women must marry. Why should she not assist at the ceremony? Lily Enmoor was rather a nice specimen of a young lady. Phemie thought she could grow in time fond of Lily, and, after all, might such a marriage not be better than sending poor Basil away to India, where she would be always fancying some dreadful thing was happening to him—either being dead of fever, or being eaten by wild beasts, or wounded or maimed in some way. Basil had, however, never once looked even admiringly on Lily Enmoor, or perhaps Phemie might not have said, in answer to Mrs Enmoor's remark—

"Thank you so much. I wish you would allow your daughter to spend a week or two with me. I want to know more of her."

And then seeing how Mrs Enmoor's eyes sparkled with pleasure, Phemie wished the words unspoken; and looking back, thought that after all the old life on the hill-side had been best, where, without diplomacy or the interference of friends, or the

“helping-on” of acquaintances, Jack courted Jenny in the gloaming; and the farmers’ sons wooed the farmers’ daughters, the parents having no hand in the matter till consent was asked, and the whole affair merely wanted, to make its happiness complete, the blessings of father and mother on the young and loving couple.

Mrs Stondon had known another and a simpler life than that in which she now moved and had her being; a simpler life, and perhaps a happier; but she had not been content then, and longed to leave it. Had her game proved worth the candle? she asked herself, bitterly. Does any human game, when the last card is played or the last stake gathered in, seem worth all that we have spent to gain it? Does it? Oh reader—you who have just pocketed your winnings, and risen from your chair, answer—has your game turned out altogether profitable? has nothing come with success to dim the colour of the gold—to dull the bright tints of the picture—to cause a discord in the sweet melody—to make fame insipid—happiness regret? Is any game worth the candle? that was what Phemie sat considering while Mrs Enmoor answered her invitation with—

“You are really too good, Mrs Stondon; but I am afraid Lily would be in your way with so large a party already. No? then I am certain she will be delighted: you are her model of everything beautiful and charming—her ideal of perfection. I will not tell you all Lily says about you, for it might sound like flattery, though it would be only the simple truth—the simple honest truth, as we often declare at home.”

Phemie knew it—knew that as she had once admired Miss Derno, so many and many a young girl now admired her. She had gained ease and grace of manner, she had employed her talents, she had acquired accomplishments, she had learnt how to show off her beauty to the greatest advantage, and yet still how to wear her beauty like a garment. Everything she resolved years before to conquer, so that her husband might be fond of her and not ashamed, she had now made her own. To what end? Misery. What had she done with her gifts? Gained Basil Ston-

don's heart and lost her own. What signified the beauty and the accomplishments and the grace and the ease and the knowledge of the world? what had all these profited her?

Oh! for the old life—for the pure soul—for the unsophisticated nature—for the unspotted innocence—for the girlish trust—for the faithful heart—for the loving, guileless, unsuspecting spirit that had been her own, but which might be hers again—no more, alas! no more.

Miss Derno was at the piano by this time, playing one of those old pieces of which people never seem to tire. That mad polacca of Weber's, somewhat resembling in its insane abruptness the Tarantellas of the present day, chanced to be the music on which she was literally expending her strength, when from one of the company there came one of those excessively *mal à propos* requests which cause us frequently to think people must have some intuitive knowledge of a disagreeable subject—some secret information as to an unpleasant topic.

"Pray, Miss Derno," inquired Mr Ralph Chichelee, who considered himself rather a master, not merely of botany but of thorough-bass, "do you know that little 'Farewell' song written by Motherwell, which has just been published?—set to music, I mean, for the words are as old as the hills."

"Scarcely, I should think," answered Miss Derno, as, having completed her polacca, she sat with her hands folded, looking up in Mr Chichelee's face. "Motherwell was not in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, or else we are talking of two different men."

"I am speaking of the—of, in fact, a Scotch Motherwell," was the reply.

"Precisely so," said Miss Derno, "and I am speaking of a Scotch Motherwell who was born towards the end of the last century, and who died some twenty years since. If you mean that 'Farewell' of his, I can sing it, of course."

And Miss Derno sang Motherwell's "Farewell," two verses of which are as follows:—

“Twas not in cold and measured phrase
 We gave our passion name,
 Scorning such tedious eloquence,
 Our heart's fond flame,
 And long imprison'd feelings pent
 In deep sobs came—
 Farewell!

“Would that our love had been the love
 That merest worldlings know,
 When passion's draught to our doomed lips
 Turns utter woe;
 And our poor dream of happiness
 Vanishes so!
 Farewell!”

Olden memories, olden hopes, olden sorrows, go to make a singer's singing pathetic; and olden memories, olden hopes, olden sorrows, all contributed in this instance to make Miss Derno's rendering of the words and music perfect. Miss Georgina Hurlford stole a look towards Mrs Stondon as the last two lines of the song rose and fell with a despairing cadence impossible to convey the meaning of in any mere form of words—

“And our poor dream of happiness
 Vanishes so!
 Farewell!”

Vanishes so!—oh! poet sweet and tender, vague and beautiful, it was wise to express the universal feeling briefly, leaving it to each man and to each woman whose dream has been broken in upon to supply the hiatus.

Vanishes so!—it was all passing away from Phemie then—vanishing like a vision after which it was vain to stretch out her feeble hands. Vanishing—oh! Lord, she had dreamt—and behold now she was awake, and the realities and the duties and the trammels of every-day life were around her. Vanishing—vanishing like the faint colour from her cheeks—like the strength from her limbs. Vanishing so!

“Dear Mrs Stondon, are you ill?”—it was Miss Georgina who

addressed her—"can I bring you a glass of water? will you not come and sit down?" But Phemie put her aside a little impatiently, and with a short "No, thank you, I am quite well. What an exquisite song!" she went on speaking to Miss Derno. "I am so fond of those Scottish ballads, they always seem to me to have a second accompaniment—the sobbing of the sea; the rippling of the waves; the splash, splash of the ocean; can you recollect any more? I think they are perfectly beautiful."

Miss Derno looked up at Phemie as she spoke—looked into the face which was now flushed, into the eyes that were tearless.

"I do not know any more of the same class of songs," she answered, rising; "in fact, it was quite by accident I knew that." And she lifted her gloves and bouquet from the piano while she said this, and would have drawn Phemie back, but that Phemie would not stir.

"I am so sorry," she remarked, "it is so rarely one hears a really beautiful song."

"I know one of Motherwell's," broke in Miss Georgina, with that manner of ease and frankness which so tried Miss Derno's patience. "If I can give you any pleasure it will make me so happy—it is one of Miss Derno's songs, though, so you must make my peace with her."

And without more invitation Miss Georgina seated herself at the piano, and sang "The Midnight Wind," with which Mr Chichelee was so enchanted that he begged her to try if she could not recollect something else—something, anything. Upon which the young lady, putting her finger to her dimpled chin, considered. What did she know? what could she sing? It was so provoking whenever she was asked to sing, directly she forgot every song she knew, and she knew fifty—oh, far more than fifty—two hundred; yes, she was certain she could sing two hundred for her papa, but now she was unable to recollect anything.

"What, not one?" whispered Mr Chichelee in his softest tenor. He had a way of speaking to young ladies as though he were executing a very low recitative, intoning is perhaps a better expression, which, as a rule, produced its due effect.

Apparently it produced its due effect on the occasion in question, for Miss Hurlford took her finger from her chin, and thought she could remember a very pretty song indeed—"one quite in Mrs Stondon's style, I am happy to say. I do so love to do anything which can give her the slightest pleasure."

There is no accounting for the things that are capable of pleasing some people—so perhaps Mrs Stondon did derive some satisfaction from the song Miss Georgina selected. Remembering the circumstances of her life, reader—judge whether the melody struck on any of the minor chords in Phemie's nature; whether the old times and the new did not mingle together; whether past and present did not mix and swim confusedly before her. Phemie dear! Phemie, my love! society had taught you much, I think, when it enabled you to listen to all those songs without a tear springing to your eyes—without your flinching from the torture.

"O think it not strange that my soul is shaken
By every note of thy simple song,
These tears, like a summoning spell, awaken
The shades of feeling that slumber'd long;
There's a hawthorn tree near a low-roofed dwelling
A meadow green and a river clear,
A bird that its summer tale is telling,
And a form unforgotten—they all are here.

"They are here with dark recollections laden,
From a sylvan scene o'er the weary sea,
They speak of a time when I parted that maiden,
By the spreading boughs of the hawthorn tree.
We sever'd in wrath—to her low-roofed dwelling
She turned with a step which betray'd her pain,
She knew not the love that was fast dispelling
The gloom of his pride who was hers in vain.

"We met never more, and her faith was plighted
To one who could not her value know:
The curse that still clings to affections blighted,
Tinctured her life's cup with deepest woe.
And these are the thoughts which thy tones awaken,
The shades of feeling that slumber'd long;

Then think it not strange that my soul is shaken,
By every note of thy simple song."

There were some things which even Miss Georgina Hurlford could not do, and one of these chanced to be putting a natural expression into music. She could play *piano*, and she could play *forte*, but she lacked the soul that made Phemie's simplest airs steal their way into the hearer's heart.

In the former days Phemie's singing had been a revelation of the love and the passion which was at some future time to make her life wretched. Knowing what he now knew, thinking what he now thought, Captain Stondon felt the tones of his wife's voice thrill through him as she carolled a little French song, at Miss Georgina's earnest request for her to do so. He turned sick as he listened—sick because of his great love and his great pity. He could see all his mistake now—from the height of his age he could look down on her youth. He had been warned before—not by man—not by sense—not by any act of his own reason, but by instinct—that, though he might love Phemie, she could never give him that love which was the only one he wanted from her. He could see it all now; he comprehended at last the meaning of the feelings that had passed through his mind that night when he heard Phemie sing for the first time "Alice Grey."

He was in the Hill Farm again: the blazing fire, the closed curtains, Phemie with her guitar, Mr Aggland with his strongly-marked features, with his wild hair, with his deep-set eyes, the boys listening open-mouthed to their cousin's singing—these things were before him once again. He was making his choice; he was deciding on his future life—all the time instinct was whispering to him, "Leave her, or it will be worse for both of you"—all the time that voice never was silent; and yet he shut his ears, and made her his wife.

He took the young thing from her mountain home; he brought her to a new and an untried life; he matched her teens to his almost threescore years; he had taken her faith for granted, and he had left her in the way of temptation. He had been so sure—oh, he had been *so* sure of a heart he never owned! And now

he knew, he understood all she had suffered, all she had resisted, all the wrong she had done to him, all the perils through which she had passed in safety. He knew—ah, well, when such an hour as that comes to any man who has married a wife, and loved her through all the years of her wedded life, God help him! God strengthen him!

After all their stranger guests had departed, after all their visitors had retired for the night, after she had done everything which could be demanded of her as a hostess and the mistress of Marshlands, Phemie stood alone by her dressing-room window, looking out into the night. Long before she had dismissed her maid, and she now stood, as I have said, looking out into the autumn night.

It was not very dark, and she could see the pines and the elms and the beeches tossing their branches mournfully to the sky. She was weary; she was sick of the struggle. She had spent her last strength in trying to keep up during the course of the evening, and the old longing to get away, to be out on the sea, to be travelling from billow to billow, came over her once again. She thought it would be nice to lay with her hands clasped, and let the waves toss her hither and thither, wheresoever they listed; that she would love to feel the ocean breezes fanning her cheeks, that she would like to be out on the sea in the darkness alone. She never thought of drowning; she never felt it would be possible for her to sink; and yet she could not bear the idea of Basil adopting the very course she had been so lately urging upon him. She felt if he went away his ship would founder, and that he would go down, down among the foam and billows over which she desired to float.

What should she do, save die? How otherwise could she ever untie this knot, release herself from fetters that were entering into her very soul? She did not want him to stay; she did not want him to go; she did not wish him to marry; she did not desire that he should stay to make existence a misery—life something worse than useless. Would he go? If he did not go, how should she ever endure the struggle longer? She was faint and weary;

she had borne the heat and the burden of this her day, and was sinking under it. What should she do? Would no one help her? Was there no one to whom she could turn for advice or assistance? Should she go to the old Hill Farm and tell her uncle everything? It would break her husband's heart. Should she feign sickness, or would he go—would he—?

And then she sobbed a prayer—sobbed it with her cheek leaning against the window-frame the while, looking with her great, sorrowful eyes at the night and the flying clouds and the mourning trees—that God would help and strengthen her, and enable her, spite of pain, and spite of temptation, to reject the evil, and to cleave to the right.

“Phemie, dearest,”—it was her husband who spoke, and Mrs Stondon started—“Phemie, dearest, you will catch cold standing by the open window.” And he closed the window, and drew her away towards the fire.

“Tell him now,” her better angel whispered to Phemie; “tell him all,” added conscience; but Captain Stondon left her no time for confidences. He only kissed her gravely, and would have turned away, only that Phemie flung herself on his neck, and with her arms twined round him, lay with her head on his shoulder, weeping despairingly.

Had he spoken to her then—had he asked her any question, she could have told him all; but Captain Stondon had decided that no human being, not even Phemie, should ever again speak to him about his wife's imperilled honour—about the disgrace which had swept by her name. He knew—who better?—all that was passing through that poor heart then; he knew why she wept, why she clung to him, why she touched his grey hairs so lovingly, why she concealed her face so resolutely. The depths of her nature had been sounded at last, not by him, it is true; but yet the waters so long pent up having found a vent, she could not help but pour out some tenderness on the man whose love she was now able to estimate, whose truth and faith and honesty and trustfulness she had learned to appreciate through the very extremity of her own treason.

She could not love him best, but she loved him more than she had ever done since they were married. She had suffered, and suffering is a great teacher. She felt more loving than than I could ever hope to explain: gratitude, repentance, affection, contempt of her own weakness, all struggled together, and caused her to cling despairingly to the man whose confidence she had abused.

And all he kept saying to her was, "My poor child! my poor darling! you have done too much this evening, you are thoroughly worn out!"

That was the *rôle* he had laid out for their future life. He could keep her from harm; and yet to her he would ignore the possibility of harm.

He could not unmarry her; he could not give her back the chances of possessing an early love which she had lost for ever in marrying him; but he could save her. He could end the struggle, and she never be the wiser as to his motive for doing so.

He was a just man and a good; and yet still, I think, he made the mistake all people must make when they treat a woman as they would treat a man. It may not be any luxury for one of the lords of creation to acknowledge his misdemeanours, and enjoy the pleasure of a good talk over his shortcomings; but no one of the daughters of Eve is happy till she has acknowledged her transgressions; in which respect, so far as any information we have on the subject goes, the daughters do not resemble their mother.

But according to his light, Captain Stondon judged, and as he judged, he acted; and it was many a day before Phemie knew that, notwithstanding all her errors, he had loved her better than himself—better than houses and lands—better than anything in creation excepting purity and virtue—excepting her honour and his own.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PARTED.

“BASIL,” said Captain Stondon the next day to his relative, “I am going to ride over to Disley before luncheon, will you come with me?”

To which request, never doubting but that his opinion was desired on some question of renewing leases or felling timber, Mr Basil at once agreed.

As for the General, he was deep in the mysteries of letter-writing. The Indian mail was going out the next day, and he always sent a budget of manuscript by it. Miss Hurlford also had her home correspondence to attend to.

“I often think,” remarked Miss Derno to Phemie, “that hostesses must bless Rowland Hill a hundred times a week. I have frequently tried to fancy what a visit could have been like a hundred years ago, when people did not write letters, when ladies did not use up quires of note-paper and scores of envelopes of a morning. How the mistresses of households bore it, more especially those mistresses who prepared medicines for the bites of mad dogs, and such like useful mixtures, in the still-room, I am at a loss to imagine.”

“Probably,” said Phemie, “people did not pay visits in those days.”

“And you are wishing in your heart at this present moment that they did not pay visits in these. I agree with you; if ever I have a house of my own I do not think I shall fill it full of

people, even though they promise to write letters by the hour. Just look at the General—only look at him. One would think the whole of the management of India was resting on his own high shoulders! Are you recommending another protégé for the Ceylon appointment, Sir Samuel?" Miss Derno inquired, walking up to the table where the officer sat engrossed in his correspondence.

Very much astonished at being spoken to, Sir Samuel looked up.

"I am—no—that is, Miss Derno, Captain Stondon requested me not to write to my friend until the last moment, as he rather fancied Mr Stondon had changed his mind, and would be glad to accept."

"I am delighted to hear it," answered Miss Derno; "delighted also to learn on such good authority that Basil had a mind to change; only," added the lady, "I am afraid it is much too good news to be true." And she shot, as she finished, a look first towards Phemie and then towards Miss Hurlford, which glance told her, that with regard to the latter lady the news was hoped for, yet not expected, and that Phemie did not hope, and yet half-expected, while at the same time the news astonished and startled her.

"He has taken me at my word; he does not care about leaving me—he will marry her—he is offended. He has never loved me as I have loved him."

Could Phemie help all this passing through her mind faster than I can write it? Could the poor creature help the jealousy which had tormented and harassed her so often? Do you blame her because the veins of her heart broke out bleeding afresh at the thought of parting with him for ever? She had been very wrong; she knew it was a sin, and yet—and yet—ah! reader, he had been all the world to her, he had possessed all the love she was ever to feel for man, and it was hard. The punishment might have been deserved, but the lash fell none the lighter for all that.

Meantime the two men who loved her most on earth, who loved her perhaps equally though differently, rode on side by side

towards Disley. When they had left Marshlands a couple of miles behind them, Captain Stondon pulled his horse up into a walk and began,

"I asked you to come with me this morning, Basil, because I want to speak to you where we can be secure from cavesdroppers. There is at least one spy at Marshlands."

Involuntarily Basil tightened his grasp of the bridle, and his horse, a well-trained one, stopped dead; the next moment he sprang forward with a bound, while the younger man answered—

"Indeed! I am sorry to hear you say so."

"Not more sorry than I am to say it," was the reply; "but all this is beside the question. What I want to talk to you about is the Ceylon appointment. I have been reconsidering that matter, and it seems to me that we have perhaps been hasty in declining General Hurlford's offer. Sometimes I think, Basil," went on the old man, with his head bowed over the saddle-tree—bowed to conceal his emotion, "that it is possible you may feel I am in the way, that I am keeping you too long out of Marshlands."

He spoke all this very slowly and at intervals; but still when Basil would have answered, he held up his hand and motioned him to keep silence while he proceeded.

"I am afraid I have considered myself too much, and others too little. I was so happy; I forgot others might not be happy too. What I am going to tell you now, Basil, I wish you not to repeat to any one, especially to—to—my wife."

It was more by intuition than with the help of his ears that the young man gathered Captain Stondon's meaning. The hour Phemie had always dreaded was at hand, and he partly understood what Captain Stondon desired should be the nature of the compact between them. The knowledge, and the shame, and the punishment, and the suffering were to be theirs; she was to be kept out of the business altogether. Vaguely comprehending this, he promised, and then waited for the rest.

"I know all," Captain Stondon went on, and he looked straight into Basil's face as he spoke, "and that is why I say you ought

to accept General Hurlford's offer, and leave England. No honourable man, feeling as you felt, placed as you were placed, would have refused that offer. I say nothing about the past, however," he continued, "for I cannot recall it—would to God I could!—only you must not remain at Marshlands for the future, and I should prefer that you went abroad. I have a right, I think, to demand that you shall go abroad. It will be best for all of us that you should do so."

"I will go," Basil answered, and answered sullenly. He never tried to defend himself, he never uttered a word of excuse or apology; he simply said, "I will go," feeling himself a very ill-used man all the time; and the pair rode on in silence till they reached Disley, where Captain Stondon had some business to transact.

When he completed it, they turned their horses' heads eastwards, towards Marshlands, and trotted back mile after mile without exchanging a word.

Till, in fact, they came in view of the pines and the elms; and then Basil, thinking of all he had promised, of all he should have to sacrifice, burst out in anger against both his sentence and his judge.

"Will nothing satisfy you but my going thousands of miles away?" he began. "Will you believe no promise? will you accept no oath? If I swear never to come near her, if I leave Norfolk, if I never darken your doors again, will that not satisfy you? What is the use of my leaving England? If we are parted, what can the distance you put between us signify?"

Captain Stondon turned in his saddle, and looked at the speaker in amazement.

He could no more understand a man hesitating in an affair of this kind than he could have comprehended a man hanging back in battle. He had no more toleration for a moral coward than for a soldier deficient in physical bravery. The thing was to be done; why should he show the white flag about the matter?

He had loved Basil: he had been gentle with him because of his love and of his sorrow; but now there was as much contempt as pity in his tone when he answered—

“A moth may wish to stay near the candle, but we put him out of the room and close the window, notwithstanding. Just so I desire to put it out of your power to see my wife. I do not want to have to watch you. When it was in your own power to flee from temptation you did not flee; you stayed on and tempted her. I want now to remove you from temptation. In one word, I mean to have no more tampering with her honour and with mine. When I think of it all, when I remember how you took advantage of my blindness, and tried to bring misery to her and to me, I feel as if I could not forgive you. But go, now—only go, Basil, and I will not reproach you; I will try to remember my own folly and forgive yours.”

It was over, and Basil felt it. This was not a husband to be deluded into any false security again. His very love would make him strong to protect Phemie; watchful, for her sake; a very Argus concerning his young wife. So perfect had been his trust, that now it was once broken nothing could ever mend it again—nothing. It was over; he should see her no more; he must leave her; he should never feel the soft hand trembling in his; he should never see the colour rush up into her cheek; the troubled look pass over her face, the tears dimming her dear eyes again. He would not be able to torment her in the future. Words of love, words of reproach, words of entreaty, words of passionate sorrow, of despairing regret—for all these there must hereafter be substituted the silence of separation, the agony of loneliness. She could be nothing to him in the days and the weeks and the months and the years to come. In that far-away country there would be no Phemie; in England there would be no Basil Stondon; and but for very shame the man could have cried aloud in his anguish. Parted! parted! he and she, who had loved one another so exceedingly. Parted! he and she, who could never love husband or wife with the same passion of attachment as she had loved Basil! as he had loved Phemie!

“I cannot do it; I cannot bear it,” Basil thought. “I will shoot myself.” And he remembered his father’s end, and considered that his father had been right.

"They will be sorry then," he decided in his own mind; "they will wish they had not driven me to it." And he resolved that directly he went up into his dressing-room he would blow out his brains, and make Phemie and her husband wretched for the remainder of their lives.

But Basil Stondon was not the man to blow out his brains. "I would not do it if she would go away with me," he reflected, putting back his pistol in its case, and he determined accordingly to give Phemie one other chance.

"If she be fond of me, she never can let me leave England alone," he argued. And all the time General Hurlford was talking about the appointment, its duties, its salary, the climate, the country, the society, Basil was wondering whether Phemie would see that strange land with him, whether, hand in hand, they would walk through that earthly Eden sinfully together.

He thought he should have many opportunities of speaking to her before he left England, but in this idea he was mistaken.

He had to go to London to provide his outfit: it was of course necessary for him to bid his mother farewell. Time slipped by, and still he had never seen Phemie alone; so at last, living in the same house, he wrote to her, and bade Phemie's maid give her mistress the letter before she went down to dinner on the evening preceding that on which he was to start for London to join the Hurlfords.

He prayed her in that letter to grant him one more interview, to give him one more chance.

A selfish man can always write eloquently when the subject is his own sorrow, and because the letter was very touching, and because she herself was very miserable, Phemie cried over it till she could cry no more.

But nevertheless she would not see him, would not contrive that one opportunity he craved.

Although it was for her sake, as she believed, he was going—although it was at her instance, as she had no reason to doubt, he was leaving his native land, still she distrusted her own heart too much to yield to his prayer. She had vowed, by all the les-

sons of old, by all the teachings of her earlier youth, by all the truths she had learned in the days of her innocence, that she would put herself into the way of temptation no more. She had prayed to be kept from evil, and she would not walk into evil with her eyes open ; for all which reasons, when Basil held her hand that night in adieu—when he looked imploringly into her face—when his eyes asked for a reply to the question he dared not frame into words, Phemie's mouth formed the monosyllable "No." Phemie, with her fingers clasping his, with her blue eyes swimming in tears, with her dear face pale and sorrowful, shook her head. It could not be, it could not, and Basil cursed her in his heart. Till he has tasted all the bitterness of the very dregs of the cup of sin, there is nothing a man of Basil Stondon's stamp hates like virtue, and for this reason he detested Phemie Stondon then.

But once in London he relented ; and as he would not or could not write to her direct, he enclosed a letter to Mrs Stondon under cover of one to Miss Derno, stating that he would be in the plantation the next evening at six o'clock, and praying her to meet him there.

He was mad. I do think at that crisis of his life, the fact of the toy being beyond his reach, the grapes too well guarded, made him insane.

He felt he must try to see her once again, and he might perhaps have compassed his end, for Phemie was not stronger than her neighbours, but for this, that she never received his letter.

Miss Derno knew Basil Stondon well, none better ; and knowing him—knowing his selfish weakness, his thoughtless disregard of consequences—she put the letter he enclosed into the fire, and saved Phemie from one temptation more.

All that evening he wandered round and about Marshlands till he had hardly time to catch the last up-train from Disley ; he waited in the plantation, and watched the house which held her whose heart was only too full of love for him.

Then he went—with his soul full of bitterness, with his mouth full of curses.

"She loves herself too well," he thought; "she loves ease and social position, and her fine house and the life she leads at Marshlands, too much even to come out and bid a poor devil, who has only sinned in being fond of her, good-bye. Farewell, then, Mrs Stondon," he hastily finished, pausing on his way towards Disley, and taking off his hat to make a low mocking bow in the direction of Marshlands. "Farewell. I wonder where you will be when I return to England—where you will be when I ask you next time to meet me. Farewell, then, Phemie, my Phemie of the blue eyes and the auburn hair—my Phemie—my darling—mine no more!"

The man's heart was breaking. All his heart had been given to this woman, and now the woman was prudent. She would sacrifice nothing, so he put it, for his sake. Well, he would go, and the time might come, yes, it might, when Phemie would pray to him as he had prayed to her, and pray in vain.

He looked on the new life and the new country differently now; perhaps when he was gone quite beyond her reach, she would repent. He rejoiced, therefore, to consider she soon could not recall him; that he would be in twenty-four hours more beyond the possibility of aught save regret.

And yet when the twenty-four hours were gone, and he was steaming down the Channel, all the bitterness departed from his heart. He would have given all the hopes of his future life to look upon her dear face once more—to hold her to his breast—to kiss the sweet, pure lips—to stroke and smooth the soft hair that he had touched with fear and trembling in the days that were gone. Standing by the ship's side, gazing down into the sea over which he was passing further and further from her, the man's eyes grew oftentimes dim, thinking of the woman he had loved. Not all Miss Georgina's prattle, not all Sir Samuel's wise and improving discourse, could chase away *that* memory, could make the beauty of that far-away face seem faint, or blurred, or indistinct.

The old things of his life were put on one side, and he could not even flirt. How terrible must have been that wound which prevented Basil Stondon seeking consolation for the frowns of one

woman in the smiles of another! How wonderful the power of that love which could still retain a hold over him when he was travelling on—on—over the sea, away from the smiles and the tears and the weakness and the strength of Phemie, who had said, "You shall never forget me—never love girl, ner woman, nor wife as you have loved me. When you are lying awake in the darkness you shall think of me; when you are standing in the twilight you shall remember me. I can never be anything to you as another woman may; but I can be near to you for all that, and I will."

And was she not near to him?

Further and further the vessel bore him from England, but still Phemie bore him company. She was with him in the desert; night and day he thought of her; he wished to be with her; his heart went travelling out to meet her form, and brought it back to lodge in his bosom. He wept for her—he sickened after her—he hated her one moment—he prayed for her the next.

"If my being away gives her happiness," he would think when his softest moods were upon him, "it is well for me to be away; but let me die, oh God! let me die." And then through the darkness he could still see her standing among the pines, her hands clasped above her head, crying with a sob—

"In so far as I have sinned, give me my wages; but let me sin no more."

Should such wages be given to her and not to him? Should the fruit of the tree they had planted never be tasted by him? Was she to bear all the pain—to weep all the tears? Was she to suffer for both, and he to get off scot free? No; and Basil felt, in some vague kind of way, that his punishment was beginning; that his money had still to be paid him; that in the future he would be able to answer out of his own experience whether it was a fiction or a simple truth, that the wages of sin is death.

They were parted; the world knew nothing of their struggles, of their errors, of their misery.

Thousands of miles lay between them, the great sea, and the lonely desert, and more sea, and a foreign land, gay with tropical

flowers, bright with sunshine, presenting at every turn something new and fresh and interesting to a stranger's eye, separated the man and the woman. To their fellows they were as though they had never thought much of one another: he went on his way and she continued on hers. They never heard directly from one another, and yet day after day their hearts were constantly mocking at time and space, flitting over the ocean, setting at nought the sandy desert and the desolate plain; they were crossing—crossing—his to England, hers to India; faithful both—sinfully faithful still.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SORROWFUL TIDINGS.

It was drawing towards the close of the year 1856 (there may be some among my readers who can recollect what a dull, foggy, cheerless ending that year had), when one morning the post to Marshlands brought with it an Indian letter for Captain Stondon.

The post often brought Indian letters there—long letters (for though the writer addressed his epistles to Captain Stondon, he knew they would be read by Phemie), full of descriptions of the country, of his occupations, of his prospects, of his hopes.

Nearly three years had elapsed since Basil's departure, but time made no difference in the regularity of his correspondence. Let him be busy or the reverse, the young man still found leisure to despatch his budget of news. Perhaps he felt that on those letters Phemie lived; that her existence was only rendered supportable by the excitement of waiting for his missives, and hearing them read aloud; that she loved the sight of his handwriting as she had once loved the sight of himself; that she counted up the days as they came and went—counted how long it was since the arrival of his last letter, how long it would be before the advent of his next. The time had passed with her somehow; she was no longer the girl Phemie; she had changed from the young wife, from the beautiful gracious hostess, to a quiet, undemonstrative woman, who tried with all her heart and all her soul to do her duty.

It had come to that—for lack of explanation—even because of her husband's excessive tenderness and consideration, she found she could only give him duty, never love. Her lover was gone from her—she had driven him away! Her lover, who had not married Miss Derno after all, who had loved her, her only—Phemie Stondon, who now sat with her hands folded, and her untasted breakfast before her, waiting for the news which Captain Stondon appeared unusually loth to communicate.

When he went away she vowed she would never ask a question concerning him, and so far she never had; but now she saw something in her husband's face which impelled her to say—

“Is Basil ill—is there anything the matter?”

Captain Stondon looked at his wife as she spoke, and seeing her pale, anxious countenance—her eager, earnest expression, turned sick as he answered—“He is ill; he is coming back to England. You see what he says.” And he tossed the letter over to her, and then got up and walked to the window, and looked out, with such feelings of bitterness swelling in his heart as were only imagined by God and himself.

He made no man his confidant; but the knowledge that had come to him among the pines, while the autumn wind moaned through the branches, and went sobbing away into the night, had whitened his hair, and bowed his head, and taken the pride and the trust and the happiness out of his heart. He had his wife safe—as the world calls safety; there was no speck on her honour, so far as the world knew. Yet no time could ever make her seem to him as she had been—the Phemie he had held to his heart among the hills. The pure, innocent, guileless Phemie had gone, and left him in her stead a woman, whose thoughts morning, noon, and night were wandering over the sea; who loved Basil as she had never loved him; whom he could not accuse of perfidy, because she had not been false; to whom he dared not speak of his sorrow, because he dreaded seeing her face change and change at finding her secret discovered, her trouble known.

And all the time Phemie was wishing that by any means he and she could come nearer to each other again—that she could

show him more love, more attention, greater attachment. She was very wretched, and she wanted some one to comfort her; it made her miserable to notice his whitening hair, his bent head, his feeble steps, his failing health; she thought of him now with a tenderness such as she had never felt for him in the years before any one came between them; and if she could by any will or act of her own have kept her thoughts from wandering away to that man in the far-off land, she would have done so.

Even now she was not glad to hear he was coming back; she laid down the letter when she had quite finished it; and her husband, turning from the window, caught her eyes making a very long and sorrowful journey into the future. He knew by that look she was true—knew that the clear, honest eyes could never have held such a sad, wistful expression in their blue depths, had the news not been a trouble to her as well as a surprise.

She was thinking the same thoughts as her husband at that moment; she was wondering, as he was wondering, whether Basil was really ill or whether he was making bad health a pretext for returning to England; and she was resolved that if Basil came home unchanged, she would at all hazards speak to her husband, and let him comprehend how matters really stood; while he, on his part, was thinking that, supposing Basil was playing a false game in any way, he would either take Phemie abroad, or else—well, yes—there should be confidence—painful confidence between them at last.

And yet the man's heart yearned towards Basil. He had been fond of him as he might have been of a son; and if he were ill, if he had overcome his madness, if he could live in England, and yet not seek to destroy what measure of peace still existed in Phemie's heart, Captain Stondon felt he should be glad to see the man whose love for his wife had driven him forth into exile, on British ground again.

The mysteries of human nature are inexplicable; its inconsistencies are never ending. For any outsider even to attempt to describe all Captain Stondon had thought and felt about his wife and Basil—about Basil and his mother—about himself and

Phemie, would be useless. I can only say that he was sorry and he was glad at the news contained in Basil's note. He had been wretched about the young man; Mrs Montague Stondon made his life a weariness concerning her son. He felt that if Basil died abroad he should feel as though he had almost two deaths to answer for. If Basil would only marry, if Phemie could only forget the love that had been a curse to her, if he could only see oftener the look in his wife's face which had just comforted him, he believed his declining days might still be bright with sunshine.

And Phemie's first comment on the letter was satisfactory.

"Of course," she said, "Basil will go to his mother. He had better not come here. I would rather he did not learn to look upon Marshlands as his home again. Do not think me hard, Henry," she went on, pleadingly; "I have my reasons. It was bad for Basil leading the idle life he did with us, it was indeed."

"My love, my own darling wife, if you only tell me what you wish, I will be guided by you. I think I should have been wise to listen to you before."

"Well, listen to me now," she entreated; "if his health be really bad, give him a handsome allowance and let him travel. Let him make his head-quarters with his mother—let him do anything but come here. You will not give in to him, Henry?" she went on; "you will be firm; you will keep our home as it is, without bringing strangers here again. Will you not?—will you not?"

She was older then than when this story opened—older by ten years; but her beauty at seven-and-twenty was almost as great as it had been at seventeen; and while she stood there pleading against the love of her heart—stood with flushed cheek and soft, low, tender voice, in the tones of which there was yet a touch of passionate regret, Captain Stondon felt that, though they had been separated for so long, there would still be danger for Basil near her; and then he wished Basil were not returning. He would have given half Marshlands to have kept him out of England.

There was one thing, however, which induced Captain Stondon

to believe that his relative was really ill—viz., the fact that he meant to perform his homeward journey by long sea, to spare himself the fatigue of the overland route. There could be no deception about this matter. He mentioned the name of the vessel in which he had taken his passage; he stated the period about which she might be expected to arrive; he requested Captain Stondon to break the news of his serious illness to his mother, and ask her to prepare for his reception.

“God knows,” he finished, “whether I shall ever live to see England again; but if I do, I should like to stay for a time at Hastings.”

Reading his letter over for the first time, the earnest brevity of his communication failed to strike Captain Stondon; but the longer he pondered over Basil’s words the more satisfied he felt that he had been stricken down by some terrible sickness, and that perhaps he was, after all, *only* coming home to die.

“And if so—better so,” Phemie thought; “better he should die than that we should have to live through the past again, with its shame, and its sorrow.” And then, in the solitude of her own room, she covered her face with her hands, and wept aloud.

Can the old love ever die? Can we ever bury that body out of our sight, and heap the mould upon it, and tramp it into the clay? The men and the women may change—they may grow old—they may die—they may pass from the familiar haunts, and the place which has known them may know them no more; but still the picture painted long and long before on the canvas of some human fancy remains young and fresh and lovely. There it hangs on the walls of the heart, and not all the world’s dust—not all the world’s cares—not all time’s ravages can make those dear features other than beautiful for ever.

Well, well, the dark days were at hand when Phemie could have nothing but recollection; when the picture hung in the innermost chamber would be all she might ever hope to see more; when the man’s memory would be encircled with a halo of mystery; when a sad and tender interest would surround the last hours of Basil Stondon’s life, giving to his fate that sad and

pathetic interest which was alone needed to fill Phemie's cup of love and sorrow full unto overflowing.

The ship sailed, and the ship came, but Basil Stondon did not arrive with her; neither did the next Indian mail bring any explanation of his absence. Captain Stondon wrote to the owners, who stated, in reply, that they knew a Mr Stondon had sailed in the *Lahore*; but as the vessel had been laid up for repairs, and the captain and mates and most of the crew had shipped in a new merchantman belonging to the same firm for China, till the return of the mates or captain they (Messrs Hunter, Marks, Son, and Co.) would be unable to obtain further information. Meanwhile, they remained Captain Stondon's obedient servants.

After that there ensued a pause, during which Captain Stondon wrote to General Hurlford, requesting tidings of Basil. Before any reply could be looked for to this communication the news of the Indian mutiny arrived in England, and throughout the length and breadth of Great Britain there arose such a cry of distress and terror as drowned the sound of any single grief—of any individual's solitary sorrow.

Straightway down to Marshlands came Mrs Montague Stondon—came demanding her son as though Captain Stondon hid him there in durance.

“You know, now, what has happened to him,” she said. “He saw what was approaching, and would not desert his post. You see for yourself.” And she thrust the “Times” into Captain Stondon's face. “General Hurlford is killed; and Thilling, and Osmonde, and hundreds of others whose names are not mentioned; and my boy is dead too—murdered—butchered, and by you.”

Marshlands never witnessed such scenes previously as were enacted within its walls for a fortnight after that. Mrs Montague would not stay in the house of her “son's murderer,” but remained at Disley, where she made descents on Captain Stondon, whose life she almost harassed out of him by entreating that he would obtain accurate information for her.

"If I could but know where he was buried it would comfort me," she said. And then she relapsed into violent hysterics at the idea that perhaps he was not buried at all. "First my husband—now my son. And it was your doing, his going out there," she would remark to Captain Stondon, Phemie, and Miss Derno. "You were all against him—all. Because he was next heir you hated him. You sold him into captivity as Joseph's brethren sold him; and now he is dead, and I shall see his face no more."

"One ought not to speak ill of the dead," remarked Miss Derno. "But sure am I that whatever has happened to Basil, he never of his own free will got into the middle of that mutiny; and it is perfectly unreasonable for you to insist on anything of the kind."

"Where is he, then?" demanded Mrs Montague.

"That I am quite unable to tell you," answered Miss Derno. "If only for Captain Stondon's satisfaction, I wish I knew. But my belief is that Basil is not dead at all."

"I wish I could believe that, Miss Derno. Oh! I wish I could," said Captain Stondon. And the poor old man, utterly broken down by the absence of the son and the reproaches of the mother, burst into tears.

At this period Phemie took the most decided step of her married life. She forbade Mrs Montague Stondon the house.

"You shall not come here," she said, "and speak to my husband as you do. We are as sorry about Basil as even you can be." For a moment she faltered. "We did all we could for him while he was in England; and if anything has happened to him, Captain Stondon is not the one to blame for it. He cannot bear these reproaches. He is not able to leave his room to-day; and the doctor says he must be kept perfectly quiet and free from excitement."

Then Mrs Montague Stondon broke out. She denounced Phemie as a scheming adventuress; she spoke of Captain Stondon as a cold-blooded murderer. She declared Miss Derno was a disappointed woman, and that Phemie had wanted to catch Basil

for her cousin Helen; failing in which object, and angry at having no children to succeed to the estate, she sent him abroad to die.

She showed how grievously the idea of losing Marshlands had affected her. She declared the only reason Phemie wished to prolong Captain Stondon's life was because at his death she would cease to be a person of consequence.

To all of which Mrs Stondon listened quietly, till the speaker was quite exhausted, when she took her by the hand and led her towards the door.

"I am not going to put any indignity on Basil's mother," she said; "but as no person shall have a chance of uttering such words before me twice, I mean to see you to your carriage myself, and must beg you never to enter the gates of Marshlands again so long as I am mistress here."

A servant was standing in the hall as the pair passed out together—and so Mrs Montague had to content herself with hissing in Phemie's ears—"I hope I shall live to see you a beggar, to see you back in the mud he picked you out of."

"You are very kind," Phemie answered, aloud, and she remained at the hall-door watching the carriage till it disappeared from sight. Then she turned away and walked slowly up the stairs, and along the wide passages, and entered the room where her husband was lying in bed, with the doctor seated beside him.

"That letter, dear," he murmured; "that letter we had this morning. I am afraid I shall not be able to make the inquiries for some time."

"If you are better to-morrow, shall I go to town and see Mr Hunter?" she asked, "or should you like me to send for my uncle?"

"I should like you to do both," he answered; and accordingly the next day Phemie started for London, and proceeded from the Eastern Counties Railway Station, where Duncan met her, to the offices of Messrs Hunter, Marks, Son, and Co., Leadenhall Street.

"You will come and stay with us?" Duncan said. The "us" referring to himself and his sister Helen, who was his house-keeper; but Phemie refused.

"I must return to Marshlands as soon as possible," she said. "I feel wretched about being away at all, only it was a comfort to Captain Stondon for me to come up and learn what Mr Hunter had to tell us. They have got his boxes, Duncan."

"Then he did sail?"

"I am going to hear all about it—all they can tell me." And she looked out at the block there always is at the point where Cornhill and Gracechurch and Leadenhall Streets join, in order to hide her face from Duncan.

The punishment was not over; it was now but the beginning of the end.

Mr Hunter received her in a large office on the first floor, which was well, not to say luxuriously, furnished. There were comfortable chairs, there was a library-table in the centre of the room, the floor was covered with a Turkey carpet, the blinds were drawn down over plate-glass windows. The only articles out of keeping with the generally stylish appearance of the apartment were three large boxes, one of which had been opened, and to which Mr Hunter directed Mrs Stondon's attention.

"We advertised those boxes for months, and at last opened one of them. It is so unusual a thing for passengers' luggage not to be labelled, that when Captain Stondon applied to us for information we never thought of associating that luggage with his missing relative. But the papers we have discovered leave no doubt as to the gentleman's identity; and one of the sailors, who was laid up from the effects of an accident when the *Singapore* was ready for starting, has since called here and given us full particulars on the subject of his fate. He says he remembers a gentleman being carried down to the *Lahore* the very morning she sailed. He looked in a dying state when brought on board, and before a week had passed all was over. He was buried the next day."

"Where?" Phemie interrupted—then—

“Oh, my God!” It was all the moan she ever made, but she reeled as she uttered it—reeled and would have fallen but that Duncan caught her.

“There is but one burial-place for those who die at sea,” was the reply, spoken gently and hesitatingly. “Far from land, it is impossible to do anything with the body except—”

“I did not know that this lady was so near a relative,” began Mr Hunter, apologetically; but Phemie broke across his sentence.

“What more? He was buried, you say? Had he no one with him—no servant—no friend?”

“He had his servant, the man tells me, who took the bulk of his luggage away with him directly the *Lahore* came into the docks. He must have satisfied the captain on the matter by some plausible tale, or else he would not have been permitted to do so. How he chanced to leave those boxes I am at a loss to imagine, for I conclude his object was to appropriate the property. We can hear nothing further, however, till the return of the *Singapore*, for the surgeon who was on board the *Lahore* has gone on even a longer voyage, and will be away for three years.”

“The passengers?” suggested Duncan.

“True,” answered Mr Hunter, “you might learn something from them. About these boxes? You would wish them sent on to Marshlands, I presume?”

“No,” said Phemie; “his mother ought to have everything belonging to him. I will write to her, and then she will say where she should like them forwarded.”

She asked no more questions, she made no further remark; there were no confidences exchanged between her and Duncan on their way back to the station, only as he stood by the carriage window, waiting till the train should move off, her cousin said, a little bitterly—

“How fond you were of that man, Phemie.” And she replied—

“If you had died far from home and friends as he did, should I not be sorry for you too?”

She put up her face and kissed him as she spoke these words. The Phemie of old was dead—the vain, fanciful, exacting Phemie ; but for my part, I love better the Phemie who sat back in the carriage all the way down to Disley than the Phemie who had looked out over the flat Cambridgeshire fields five years before.

It was over—with her as with him ; she had earned her wages, and they were being paid to her as the months rolled by. Death—he was dead ! What had life to offer her in the future ? what could the years bring to her worse than this ?

At Disley the carriage was waiting for her, and something in the footman's face as he stood aside while she entered it, made her pause and ask—

“How is your master ?”

“He has been worse since morning, ma'am ; the doctor was with him when we left Marshlands.”

“Drive fast, Sewel,” she said to the coachman ; “do not spare your horses.” And accordingly Sewel took his favourite pair of bays back to Marshlands (to the intense astonishment of society) at a gallop.

CHAPTER XXX.

WIDOWED.

PHEMIE was not in the house two minutes before she knew her husband had had a paralytic stroke. The doctor was still with him; but in such a case what can a doctor do? When the Almighty strikes—when the blow falls, which no skill is able to avert—of what use are God's instruments?

From that day Phemie's work was laid out for her. To nurse him, to tend him, to take the man who had raised her from poverty to wealth, hither and thither as the medical men advised, or as his own fancy dictated; that was the employment of Mrs Stondon's life.

Mr Aggland, now a widower, came and stayed at Marshlands; he it was who propped the sick man up in bed—who read to him—who amused him—who accompanied them from place to place—who thought that never a husband had found so devoted a wife as Phemie—who made his head-quarters in London, that he might be near his niece, and who, after Mr Keller's death, made his head-quarters at Roundwood, Mrs Keller not desiring to continue her residence there.

Phemie was a great woman at last. An heiress in her own right—a person who, without any Marshlands at all, could have taken a high place in society; and yet the Phemie of those days was humbler, sweeter than the Phemie who had dreamed dreams in the valley of Tordale—who had lingered beside the waterfall and sat beside Strammer Tarn.

How did her new dignity of heiress become her? many a reader may want to know; and yet I think the reader who asks that can have read the life-story of Phemie Keller to little purpose.

How does wealth affect those who have discovered the powerlessness of wealth to confer happiness? How did wealth affect this woman who had not found wealth do much for her?

It simply suggested to her one idea—that money had come too late; that her life had been throughout one great mistake; that, as a rule, lives were great mistakes.

The burden of the song was sorrow—the refrain of the song was work. And her work, as I have said before, was laid out for her: she had from the day she returned from London to attend to her husband, ceaselessly.

They went for the winter to Hastings. The doctor recommended it, and Phemie went wherever the medical men desired.

Now the sea talked to her differently: all through those long, dreary, interminable months she listened to the winds and the waves while they mourned to her of Basil's last resting-place—of the restless ocean, in the midst of which he had lain him down to sleep.

In those days there was no one to come between her and her husband—no one; friend—nor lover—nor relation—and accordingly Phemie was able to devote herself to him heart and soul.

For a time he seemed to rally, but the constitution was too enfeebled—the shock had been too severe. While they were at Hastings Captain Stondon had a second stroke; and though his doctor pooh-pooed the calamity to Phemie, still she felt unsatisfied, and paid a visit to a London physician on her own account.

“If a person have a second paralytic stroke,” she said—“remember I want the simple truth—what is the usual consequence? Can the patient recover?”

For a moment the man of large experience hesitated, then he said,

“After a second stroke, as a rule, there can be but one thing more—a third—”

“Which is—” Phemie suggested.

“Death.”

She turned away—she felt suffocating. Death! He had been her best friend through the most trying period of her life; and she had loved—oh, heavens! in spite of all faults and shortcomings, she *had* loved him.

“I should like you to see my husband,” she faltered out. And then the doctor was very sorry for his words; but he went down to Hastings to see Captain Stondon notwithstanding.

She wanted to get him back to Marshlands; but the medical attendants shook their heads. She would have given anything to be able to move him to his own home; but the physicians said that unless a decided change for the better occurred such a journey was not to be thought of.

“You would like to get back, dear,” she said to him, when the spring buds were jutting out—when the primroses were springing in the hedges—when the hyacinths in Fairlight Glen were showing for flower; and the poor lips that could now answer in nothing save monosyllables, framed the one word—“Yes.”

“Shall I try to move you there, darling?” she asked; and the dim eyes lighted up with pleasure, and the wan fingers clasped hers tighter, and over the white lips passed the monosyllable “Yes!” once more.

“You do not like this place,” she went on, fearful that her own detestation of the sea—the cruel sea, might be leading her astray with regard to his wishes; and he answered, “No!”

Then she resolved to move him. And she did it.

Before a fortnight was over he was lying in his own room at Marshlands, listening to the song of the birds—to the cawing of the rooks—to the sweet spring sounds—that never seem quite the same when heard away from home.

In the years gone by he had wished a wish—he had prayed a prayer; and now, when the dark days were come upon him—when his strength was turned into weakness—his noon changed to night—when he lay unable to speak—unable to move—the memory of that prayer came back to him.

“O God!” he said, when he stooped over the pool, and drank

of the waters, "when Thy good time comes, leave me not to die alone."

Through the days that had passed since then, his soul went back. Tordale was with him in the time of which I am now writing, as the days of his boyhood were with him when he lay bruised and maimed at the foot of Helbeck.

For ever he was turning round at that rock which brought him within view of the valley and the waterfall and the everlasting hills. Eternally the dull plash of the stream as it fell over the rocks—the faint rustling of the leaves—the mourning farewell of the rivulet—the trickling of the water among the stones—sounded in his ear. Dead as he was to the scenes of this beautiful world—powerless though he was to lift himself up and look forth on God's earth, which he had loved so dearly, still he could remember many things, and amongst them Tordale, which he had once said lightly he should never forget.

Never! for ever! There he had been happy—there he had met Phemie—there he had heard that sweet girlish voice singing the old Covenanting Hymn—there he had wooed and won her, and now the tale was told—the sands were running out—the sun was near its setting—the end which comes sooner or later to all human hopes and fears, troubles and pleasures, was drawing nigh unto him; the wife, who had never loved him as much as he had loved her, still hung over his sick-bed and anticipated his lightest want.

"If she could but know." And in those hours, had speech been vouchsafed to him, he could have talked to her about their common trouble. "If God would but give me power to talk once more, I would not remain silent as I have done." And with light from eternity streaming in upon the pages of the past, he saw that his silence had been wrong, his forbearance useless; he vaguely comprehended that if he had opened his heart to Phemie in the days gone by Basil need not have left for India, while perfect confidence would have reigned between him and her.

"But she will understand it when I am gone," he thought; "she will know then how I loved her through all."

That was the story the weary eyes tried to tell Phemie as they followed her about the room ; that was the assurance he tried to convey when he clasped her soft hand—when by sign and gesture he kept the dear, pale, changed face near to his own ; when he looked at the white cheek, white and worn ; when he strove to return the remorseful kisses she laid upon his lips.

Summer came—summer with its sunshine, its roses, its mirthful gladness, its wealth of beauty and of perfume—summer came and shone down on the sweet valley of Tordale once again.

Twelve years previously Captain Stondon, seated in the church porch, shaded from the mid-day sun, wearied with his walk from Grassenfel, had speculated vaguely upon death ; and now, lying in his bed at Marshlands, with the windows flung wide to admit both air and sunshine, tired with his long walk through life, he thought about death once more.

After all, when it comes to this with any person, no existence seems to have lasted for years, and years, and years. There has been a sunrise and a noontide and a sunset ; the day is done, the night draws on, the task is finished, the labourer hies him homeward from the last hour's work he shall ever be called upon to perform.

What more—what more ! Oh, friends, the longest life ends with some work, to our thinking, left unfinished—some seventh unresolved—some lesson unlearnt ; but who amongst us can tell the why and the wherefore of this mystery ? Who can explain the meaning of this universal law ? We can write the story up to a certain point, but there our knowledge ceases.

When mortal sickness comes to put a finish to the life-history, what can any one say further ? The man has lived, the man has died, the day is ended, the night has closed in. Draw we the curtains, and leave the room—there is nothing further to be written ; sleep has come to the tired eyelids—ease to the worn-out frame ; there is great peace where there was much suffering. The heat has been borne, the burden is laid aside ; the wayfarer has reached his long home ; the unquiet heart is still, in the shadows

of evening man ceases from his work and from his labour, and sinks to his long rest.

What more? Nothing, my readers; that is, nothing of the stranger whom we met so long ago gazing in the summer sunshine upon Tordale. Captain Stondon was dead, and Phemie—a widow! and there was no direct heir to Marshlands.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LETTER.

WHEN trouble came upon her Phemie was not left alone to bear it. Kind hearts and loving sympathized with her—friendly hands clasped hers—true men and women were near to give what comfort they could, or, at all events, to share in her distress.

Mr Aggland and Duncan, and Helen and Miss Derno, were all with Phemie when the end came. Norfolk was importunate in its inquiries—Norfolk, professing to feel very sorry about Captain Stondon's death, wondered who would succeed to the property, and whom Phemie would marry.

Mr Ralph Chichelee had hopes—intentions, rather, would perhaps be a better word; but then other people had intentions also, so perhaps it is scarcely fair to mention his in particular.

Phemie was still beautiful enough to attract admiration—still young enough to love and be loved—still fascinating enough to choose a second husband and rule over a new home. The prospect opened out before Phemie by Captain Stondon's death seemed to society like a vision of fairyland. She might marry an earl. The Duke of Seelands had inquired particularly who she was one day when he beheld her driving from the Disley Station. How would Phemie like the strawberry leaves? Norfolk began forthwith to wonder, while the man who had loved her so well was lying dead in one of the pleasant rooms at Marshlands. Concerning "that young man Aggland" the gossips had also something to say; they marvelled if, instead of marrying for

rank, Phemie's uncle would trap her into wedding her cousin. Where would she live? What would she do? She possessed a fine property of her own, and doubtless Captain Stondon had done well pecuniarily by his wife.

Was not this a dainty dish for a county to feast on and speculate over? while the flavouring was supplied by an all-devouring curiosity to know who was the next heir male. Remote relations, unheard-of before, came from the uttermost parts of the earth to claim the property. Stondons who had gone down in the world—Stondons who had gone up in the social scale—arrived at Disley when the news of Captain Stondon's death was noised abroad. There was no near heir, and every man of the connection consequently claimed to be next-of-kin. Who would be master? What would Phemie do? Whom would Phemie marry? What a pity she had no children—what a sad thing it was Mr Basil Stondon had gone abroad! These were the questions and remarks everybody made and everybody asked.

As for Phemie, she grieved for her dead husband with a sorrow which was neither conventional nor circumscribed. The best friend woman ever possessed he had been to her through all the years of her married life.

Through that part of her existence when she may be said to have lived he had stood beside her.

In sickness, in sorrow, in prosperity, he had thought of her, and of her only. No one in the after-time could ever be so fond or proud of her as he had been; no one could ever step in and fill his place. She had never had to think for herself—to take any trouble which his love could keep from her; he had been true and faithful and tender, and the return she had made would have broken the heart of the man who now lay so still and stiff, could he have known it.

“Better so,” she thought, “better so. I would rather see him thus”—and she kissed the cold brow and lips—“than imagine his grief, could he have guessed what I was—I whom he trusted—too well, too well!” And she wept through the hours beside his coffin till her friends forcibly removed her.

"I never loved him enough—I never knew till now how much I loved him," were the contradictory sentences she kept constantly repeating; and then Miss Derno, who could guess so well wherein the worst sting of this death lay, drew the poor weary head on to her breast and rested it there.

"And I was once very unjust to you," Phemie went on, sobbing out her confession. "There was a time when I thought I did not like you, and it was wicked of me to misjudge you as I did. You forgive me, dear, don't you? and you will not ask me why I misjudged you?"

"I forgive and I will not ask. Shall we be friends now—true friends for evermore?" And she bent down till her curls swept Phemie's face, and then the poor trembling lips touched hers, and the widow broke out sobbing more passionately than ever.

So the days wore on—the weary days with death in the house—till at last the morning came when all that was mortal of Captain Stondon passed out of the gates of Marshlands and on to the churchyard at the other end of the hamlet. He had gone for ever. Phemie realized that fact when she stole to the room where he had lain—when she understood that she had looked on his face for the last time in this world—when she turned desperately towards the future, and confronted it without his help—without his supporting hand—without his encouraging voice—alone—wholly and entirely, so far as the close companionship, as the watchful care given to her by Captain Stondon was concerned.

She had not valued him living, and now he was dead.

She had sorrowed for that man lying under the sea, and there was treason in her sorrow towards the husband just taken from her. Even indeed in that bitter hour she could not put the memory of Basil aside—could not help thinking how hard it was he had been taken in his youth and hope away from earth, away from Marshlands!

She thought this, and then, with a despairing moan, knelt down in the room where she should never more see her husband, and cried till the fountain of her tears seemed exhausted, till, for very faintness and weariness, she could cry no more.

When Captain Stondon's will came to be read it was found that he had indeed remembered his wife with the most generous and ungrudging trustfulness.

He had saved and purchased—purchased this little estate and that small farm; invested in some paying companies, and accumulated money for her benefit. With the exception of an annuity to Mrs Montague Stondon, and some few legacies, he left Phemie the entire of his personal property, all he had been able to put by during the years since he came into possession of Marshlands. There was no condition attached; he said nothing about a second marriage, he made no proviso, he attached no restrictions, he left almost everything he owned in the world to Phemie absolutely after his death, just as in life he had given her his heart and his substance, wholly and unconditionally.

As for Marshlands, of course it had to go to the next heir—but who was the next heir?

There were not wanting claimants in abundance. Stondons from Devonshire, Stondons from Perth, Stondons from Ireland, Stondons from abroad, were eager in pressing their separate claims. Old men and young, men who looked as though they had been buried for a hundred years and then dug up again, and let out for a day to state where they were born, and who had been their father—men again who were worn and haggard, to whom even a few acres of the great estate would have been ease and competence—men who had all their lives long been fighting the battle of poverty, and probably pawned some of their goods to defray the expenses of the journey—men fresh from their oxen and their ploughshares, who had come “parly,” with a sharp country practitioner: all these laid siege to Marshlands, and strove to make their title appear good; and whilst they were wrangling and disputing over the matter, Phemie still clung to the old walls like a cat, reluctant to quit the place where fires had once blazed cheerfully for her.

She wrote to her late husband's lawyers, begging them to give her timely notice when the new owner might be expected, and the

answer which came back sounded to her like the voices of the dead.

They enclosed a letter which, "as she would perceive," Captain Stondon had instructed them to forward to her a month after his decease, whenever that might occur, and they begged to assure her she should have full information whenever anything definitive was settled. They (Messrs Gardner, Snelling, and Co.) thought it was useless considering the claims of any other person until the fact of Mr Basil Stondon's death was proved past doubt.

"Proved past doubt." Oh, heavens! is it not hard to think that what is evidence sufficient for love is not evidence sufficient for law? Till that instant Phemie had never for a moment doubted the accuracy of the tidings which had reached England, but now, with a bound, hope sprung to life again.

It had been so easy to remain true to her husband with Basil dead; but Basil living! Over and over and over she coned the lines suggesting this probability, while the other letter—the enclosure, the message from the newly-made grave—lay unheeded beside her.

To do Phemie justice, she did not couple together the sentences—Basil is living, and I am free. She had never thought of marrying him, and she did not now; but she had loved him, and, as I have said, the old love never dies; it is the one thing in this mutable world which is immutable; it is the one temporal possession of our mortality which is immortal. She could not kill it, she could not bury it; the winter's frosts and the winter's snows had lain upon it, yet here it was, springing up fresh and green and fair and beautiful as ever.

If he were but alive! and then all at once her eyes fell on her black dress, and she remembered with a shock the man who was but too surely dead. There lay his letter, with this written on the outside—"To be given to my wife one month after my death in case she survives me; to be burnt in the event of her dying before me."

It always seems a solemn and a strange thing when the idea of

his or her own death is presented as a precautionary possibility to the mind of a person in health.

Insurance forms, for instance, appear to put a matter about which most people, I suppose, think sometimes after a fashion, in a new light before the senses of an intending insurer.

There is a regular debit and credit statement. You may die—you may not die; you are such an age, and inasmuch as you are such an age, the chances are against the length of the years to come; on the other hand, you are healthy, active, temperate. It is not a sermon, it is not a warning, it is not a mere possibility; it is a rule-of-three sum worked out, not very accurately it may be, but still calmly and dispassionately. You may die, you may not die, and you are rated accordingly; you may live, you may not live, and the law and common sense take precautions in consequence.

When that letter was written the future lay shrouded from view, that future was the present now, and he had died; but she might as well have died, and then—why that letter would have been burnt, and she never a bit the wiser.

Life's firmest ground is insecure, its strongest fortresses powerless against the touch of the great destroyer. Vaguely this idea took root in Phemie's mind as she read the lines I have copied, ere breaking the outer seals and taking out the letter folded inside.

"Mrs Stondon" was the direction on the cover, but on the actual envelope were traced the words—"To my dear wife," and the paper that envelope contained began—"My dearest Phemie." His! The hand that penned the sentence, that had been warm when the letter was folded, sealed, and directed, was cold enough now.

Well-a-day!—ah, well-a-day!—there are many bitter hours in life, and one of those hours was striking for Phemie then. In the twilight she sat reading, while her tears fell fast and hot on the paper; in the twilight she understood at last the nature of the man she had loved so lightly—the man who, in the time of his fiercest trial, wrote thus to the wife whose heart he found had never throbbed with love for him.

‘MY DEAREST PHEMIE,—When you receive this I shall be lying in my quiet grave, and you will be my widow. To you, my widow, I write that which I could never have said to my wife. It seems to me at this moment that I am almost writing these words from another world, for the old things bear new forms, and life itself is changed to me within the last few hours. My love, my wife, my child, I know all now—your strength, your weakness, your secret; and if I could give you happiness at this moment by any personal sacrifice, God is my witness—God in whose presence I shall stand when you read this—that I would try to do so; but, my darling, it is impossible. I cannot undo the past: let me try to make amends in the future.

“I did wrong, Phemie—I did wrong; but it is only within the last twenty-four hours that I see this. I was old, and you were young; I was rich in money and love, and you in youth, beauty, virtue, the power of winning affection. In your inexperience, my darling, I took you unto myself, away from all chance of happy love—away to the temptation to which I have exposed you. Blind! blind! blind! I thought I could have made you so happy, Phemie, and I have learned that it was not in my power to do so. Forgive me, dear—forgive,—for I am very penitent, and very miserable!

“What I want to say to you, my darling, is this. If, when you read these lines, you think Basil can be to you all I tried to be, marry him after what the world thinks a prudent and fitting interval. Let no thought of me come between you and him, save this, that if it seems good to you to cast your lot with his, I wish you to do so. You have done your uttermost to give the old man your love. I know by what I heard last night that you have not hurt his honour, and I would in the years to come you should give your hand where your heart is now. Give it, remembering that if I had any need to pardon I have pardoned; that I have done my best to repair my error, and secure for you freedom from temptation during my lifetime, and happiness after my death. I never suspected you; I never spied upon you; all my knowledge came from others. The enclosed told me of your

intended meeting with Basil this evening. I leave it for you to see, as perhaps you may guess who sent it (I cannot), and be on your watch against a secret enemy when I am here to guard you no longer. This is the last thing I can do for you. God grant it may turn out for your welfare here and hereafter.

“H. S.”

In the twilight she read it; when the summer night came, she still sat on thinking with a terrible despair, with a sickening remorse about the irreparable past—about the hopeless future. He had known—he had known how fond she was of Basil; but he could never know now how fond she had been of him! And Phemie would have given all the years of her future life for ten minutes from the past—ten minutes to explain, to confess, to weep out her repentance, and then, if need be, to part.

But amid all her grief there was another and perhaps a stronger feeling—anger against the person who enlightened Captain Stondon, who had driven Basil across the seas.

She could have fought out her fight alone, she thought. Had she not done so? She could have spoken herself to her husband when she found the burden of the day too much, the heat of the battle too fierce. How came it she had never suspected interference before? How could she ever have forgiven Miss Derno, and varied in her opinion concerning her?

“She wrote that letter.” Thus Phemie ended the mental argument. “She fancied she would get him for herself, and she did not care what misery she brought to any one else—a double-faced hypocrite! Well, Miss Derno, you have played your last game out with me.” And Phemie folded up the letters, and put them aside in a drawer, resolving to make no mention of their contents to any one.

She felt wretchedly ill. Her head was burning, her hands and feet were cold as ice. When her maid came to know if she would wish her tea brought up into her dressing-room, she said “No,” and bade the woman say to Mr Aggland that she desired to see him.

“Uncle,” she began, when he obeyed the summons, “I have had a great shock to-night, and I fear I am going to have a bad illness. “Count that,” and she laid his fingers on her pulse; “promise me that if I should be delirious you will get a nurse from London. I do not want Helen nor any of the servants to come near me, and, beyond everything, keep Miss Derno away.”

Whereupon Mr Aggland went down-stairs, and sending off straightway for a doctor, told Miss Derno he thought Phemie must be “light-headed;” acting upon which information, Miss Derno went up-stairs, and knocked at Mrs Stondon’s door, which was opened by Mrs Stondon’s maid, who said her mistress had gone to bed with a bad headache.

“Is that Miss Derno?” cried out Phemie; “let her come in—I wish to speak to her; and you may go away, Marshall. Are you there?” she exclaimed, as the door closed behind the woman. “Come near to me. That will do. Now, then, what do you want?”

“I want to know how you are, dear,” said Miss Derno, approaching the bed, and trying to take one of Phemie’s hands in hers, but Phemie pulled it away.

“I will be fair and frank with you, Miss Derno,” she began; “I will speak freely to you now, as I once thought never to speak freely to mortal. Within the last few hours I have learnt all; I have learnt who sent Basil Stondon to India; who told my husband that I—that he—”

“That Basil loved you,” supplied Miss Derno. “If you mean that, I certainly plead guilty; but, Mrs Stondon, was I wrong?”

“Wrong or right, what business had you to come between my husband and me?” retorted Phemie, sitting bolt upright in bed; while the loosened waves of her hair, that she wore ordinarily braided so closely under her cap, rippled down over throat and shoulders and pillows. “Could you not have left *me* to deal with Basil without breaking the heart of as good a man as ever possessed an unworthy wife?”

“I never told Captain Stondon that I thought you loved Basil,” was the reply.

"But you sent him where he could hear it for himself," answered Phemie. "You told him to go to the pine plantation that night when Basil and I parted."

Here Mrs Stondon stopped: there seemed to come around her as she spoke the twilight of the autumn evening, the moaning of the wind, the leaves beneath her feet. She could not go on, and so she paused, while Miss Derno said—

"I never did—I never even knew till this moment that Basil and you had a parting interview, or that Captain Stondon was present at it."

"You cannot expect me to believe that," was the retort; "you wanted Basil for yourself; you thought if once he were separated from me he would marry you. No means seemed too treacherous to secure such a prize."

"Now heaven help the woman!" broke in Miss Derno. "Mrs Stondon," she continued, "are you mad? Can you think that I should scheme to win Basil Stondon? I, who refused him twice before he ever lost his heart to you?"

Hearing that, Phemie fell back on her pillow.

If Miss Derno thought to make peace by such a sentence, she mistook the nature of the woman she was speaking to.

There was no balm in Gilead for a wound like this. To have given her own love, to have deceived her husband, to have wasted her affection on a man who had loved another before her! It seemed like the very bitterness of death, and Phemie struggled against conviction.

"If you did not wish to marry Basil; if you did not write that letter, who did?" she said, half turning her face towards Miss Derno.

"I cannot tell; I cannot be sure, though I may guess—"

"That is only half an answer," persisted Phemie.

"Well, then, I guess Georgina Hurlford wrote it. She would have had no objection to become Mrs Basil Stondon; and I believe she was capable of committing any meanness, if by so doing she could compass her own ends."

For a moment Phemie paused; then she said—

“You confess you told my husband Basil cared for me?”

“I do; and I told him so in all honour and honesty of purpose. I knew you would not tell him. I saw Basil would never leave Marshlands of himself, and it was best I did speak to Captain Stondon. Though going to India cost Basil his life, it was best for you both that he did go. You cannot deny the truth of what I am saying.”

“I do deny it,” retorted Phemie, fiercely. “I would have gone through fire and water; I would have suffered tortures; I would have died myself cheerfully before letting him guess the miserable truth he learnt that night among the pines. It is no use my making any secret of what you already know. I tell you, hating you all the time for your knowledge, that I did love Basil Stondon—God forgive me—more than I ever loved any man on earth. I loved him, detesting myself for loving him; I loved him more than my husband, but I loved my husband better; and because I loved him better—because he trusted, idolized, and believed I was as good and true as a wife ought to be, I had rather have fought my own battle out to the end. I would rather have borne twenty times as much as I did bear than that he should have come to share any part of the trouble with me. Oh, Lord!” finished Phemie, passionately, “will my punishment never end? will there come no day that shall see the last of this my sin?”

“Mrs Stondon!” And Miss Derno laid a beseeching hand on Phemie, but Phemie again shook it off.

“You put division between us—you meddled in that which did not concern you—you sent Basil to India—you embittered the last days of my husband’s life. I know now, I know now,” she wailed out, “what made him look at me as he often did, and I will never forgive you, never—if you were dying this minute I would not—if I were dying I would not; and I do not believe Basil ever cared for you much, and I do believe you wrote that note. If you meddled in one part, why not in the other?”

“It is of no use, I suppose, striving to argue with you,” answered Miss Derno. “There is only one thing I will say, however: not very long ago you told me you were sorry ever to

have misjudged me. You are misjudging me now, and you will be sorry for having done so hereafter."

"I shall have to bear that sorrow then as I have had to bear others," was Phemie's reply. "You came here professing to be fond of me—professing to like me better than any other woman in the world, and all the time you were scheming against me and mine; you were trying to put division between me and my husband; you thought perhaps nothing would kill him so soon as to tell him I was too fond of Basil; very likely you hoped to get Basil and Marshlands together. I am saying exactly what I think—I cannot be a hypocrite, though you are one."

"Mrs Stondon, I never told any one you were too fond of Basil, and I never sent Captain Stondon to any place where he was likely to hear that fact for himself. What is the cause of all this excitement? who has been putting ideas into your mind? from whom have you heard?"

"I have heard from the dead," answered Phemie; "and they, I suppose, may be trusted to speak the truth. You came spying here, watching my every word and look and movement, and then, having somehow guessed the truth, you went and informed my husband that Basil loved me. That is on your own confession—out of your own mouth I convict you. After that you expect me to believe you did not go further, and tell him I loved Basil. Do you imagine I am an idiot? do you think I have lost my senses altogether? No, no, Miss Derno, there is a point at which credulity ceases, and you could never make me credit Georgina Hurlford wrote that note, unless I heard it from her own lips."

"Which it is not very probable you will do, in this world at all events," said Miss Derno; "for I have not the slightest idea that she is still living. Let that be as it may, however, I can only repeat what I have said, I did not try to do you any harm. I did not desire that Basil should marry me. I have tried to be your friend, and though you will not be my friend, I shall never change to you. Do not let our last word be one of anger. Good-bye."

But Phemie only turned her head aside, and the great mass of her hair was all Miss Derno could see of her.

"Good-bye," repeated Miss Derno, putting her hand over Phemie's shoulder, but Phemie would take no notice.

"Good-bye," she said for the third time, and she stooped and kissed the shining tresses which had first caught Captain Stondon's fancy. "God knows whether or not we shall ever meet again, but may He keep and bless you!"

And turning away, she left the room slowly, and returning to Mr Aggland, told him his niece was not at all delirious.

"But she has taken offence at something she fancies I have done," added Miss Derno; "and it will be best for me to leave here to-morrow morning. Do not try to make peace between us; in time she will discover her mistake, and till then I can be patient."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MEETING.

SPRING came round again ; and Phemie, walking about the grounds at Marshlands, saw the crocuses and the snowdrops blooming, the daffodils rearing their gaudy heads in triumph, the violets peeping modestly up from amongst their thick covert of green leaves, and the primroses blossoming in the hedgerows and beside the wood paths.

In due time the wild hyacinths opened their blue and white bells, and perfumed the air with a delicious fragrance ; in the copses the wood anemones shone like stars in shaded places ; there was fresh foliage on the trees, the grass felt soft and velvety under foot ; there was a stir of life throughout all nature—nature so recently awakened from her long winter's rest. And Phemie, looking around her—looking back at the years which were past, and forward at the years which were to come—thought sadly that for all inanimate nature there is a spring-time as well as an autumn, but for man no second youth, no returning April wherein the flowers of his former existence can blossom and bloom as of yore.

She had passed through grievous sickness since the night she and Miss Derno parted ; she had suffered mentally and bodily, and she was only now just crawling out again into the air and the sunshine, to see what the sweet sights and sounds of spring could do for her—she whom the world thought so fortunate a woman.

For was not she young, well dowered, well cared for ? She had

Roundwood to fall back upon whenever Marshlands came to be claimed by its rightful owner. Her husband was dead, but people said if she could not please herself again, supposing she desired to do so, who could?

Society felt it was the proper thing for her to live in strict seclusion, to receive no visitors, to be in a poor state of health and in low spirits; but at the same time society concluded that when the days of mourning were expired, Mrs Stondon would feel that it had been the will of God for Captain Stondon to die, and that as he was to die, she ought to be thankful it had likewise been the will of God to provide her with a satisfactory portion of this world's goods.

Many people were already making inquiries as to the amount of personalty Captain Stondon had left behind him, and how he had disposed of it—whilst the value of Roundwood was known to a shilling. Those ladies who had brothers or sons anxious to marry a wife able to contribute her share towards the expenses of a household, ventured finally to remark to Mr Aggland that they thought dear Mrs Stondon was leading too much the life of a hermit, and that a little society, “not exactly society, but merely seeing a few intimate friends, would be extremely good for her.”

To which Mr Aggland replied, in all truthfulness, that he thought the shock had been almost too much for his niece. “They were so much attached,” he added, “she seems to feel his loss more and more every day.”

(Which was not encouraging to the young men.)

“She will be better perhaps when we get her away from Norfolk,” went on Mr Aggland; “change of scene will, I hope, work wonders. It is her first great sorrow in life, and you remember, madam, ‘Every one can master a grief but he that has it.’ Few are able to say just at the first—‘The hand of the Lord hath wrought this.’ In time, I have no doubt but that her present anguish will—

‘Settle down into a grief that loves
And finds relief in unreprieved tears;

Then cometh sorrow like a Sabbath, and, last
 Of all, there falls a kind oblivion
 Over the going out of that sweet light
 In which we had our being.' "

"What a wonderful memory you have, Mr Aggland," said his visitor, with a simper; and then she drove down the avenue, and called at half-a-dozen houses, and whispered in each of them—"I do think there must be some little insanity in Mrs Stondon's family. That uncle of hers is as eccentric and odd as possible. His brain seems to me a perfect library, or rather a book filled with familiar quotations."

"It did not strike me that they were familiar at all," said Mr Ralph Chichelee; "quite the contrary, indeed."

"And, besides," put in Mrs Enmoor, who had rather an affection for Phemie, "he is not her uncle by blood, only by marriage."

"But it is so strange the way she goes on," persisted the first speaker; "she sees no one—she goes out nowhere—she is even 'not at home,' or 'too ill to receive,' to the clergyman's wife."

"Do you not believe she is ill, then?" asked Mr Chichelee.

"I met her out driving one day last week, and I am sure she then looked like a ghost," added Mrs Enmoor. "I was quite shocked to see her."

"But she adopts no means to get well."

"I hear she is having that place of hers in Sussex put into thorough order," said Mr Chichelee. "No doubt she will soon be leaving Marshlands now; and that reminds me—has anything been heard of the missing heir?"

"People seem convinced he is dead," was the reply.

"And who is the fortunate man in that case?" inquired Mr Chichelee.

"A Mr Haslett Stondon, I hear," answered Mrs Enmoor; "who was born in Canada—a great boor, I am told. Ah! Marshlands will never again be what it was—poor dear Captain Stondon!" finished Mrs Enmoor, with grateful reminiscences of all Phemie had tried to do for her and hers in that pretty draw-

ing-room which looked out over the flower-garden, and the walk under the elm-trees.

It was all true—Phemie was going away, and Marshlands would never again be bright and gay as formerly. Mrs Stondon had scarcely realized to herself how much she loved Marshlands till she was called upon to quit it. Roundwood might be a very nice property, but it was not Marshlands. And to leave Marshlands, to vacate the old familiar rooms in favour of Mr Haslett Stondon, a man who openly stated he should never reside there, and that with all his heart and with all his soul, and with a good many oaths into the bargain, he wished she would stay, as it would save him the expense of a caretaker!

Phemie wished so too; but still she could not continue to live in the house she had owned, as a mere tenant. It was best for her to effect her change of residence as speedily as might be, and try to get over all her troubles at once. The ray of hope that had illumined her life had faded away. No tidings came of Basil; there seemed no reason to doubt but that it was really he who had died on board the *Lahore*.

“We will leave this and go to Roundwood, uncle, before the summer is over,” she said one day. And Mr Aggland eagerly assenting—forthwith preparations for their departure were made, and bills were posted on every wall and paling in the neighbourhood, announcing that on the —th inst. there would be an auction at Marshlands of household furniture, carriages, stock, farming utensils, &c.

“I intend to have that inlaid cabinet,” said Mrs Hurlford to her husband.

“And I,” answered he, “that roan horse, if he goes at all reasonable.”

“It seems strange to me she can bear to sell the furniture,” remarked soft-hearted little Mrs Enmoor, never thinking that Phemie wanted to have done with all the old associations—that she wished to forget—to begin an entirely new life in a new place.

When once her own personal effects were off the premises, Mrs Stondon meant to proceed to Roundwood, leaving her uncle to

arrange all other matters for her ; and it wanted but a day or two of her intended departure when a special messenger arrived with a letter from Messrs Gardner, Snelling, and Co., stating that Mr Basil Stondon was alive, that he was in England, that he might be expected at Marshlands almost at any hour.

“Uncle!” She put the letter into his hands, and then fell back in a dead faint on the sofa where she was seated.

“My dear child,” Mr Aggland said, when the weary eyes opened once more and rested on the paper lying on the table, “my poor Phemie, I must get you away ; you must be kept quiet. These surprises and sudden tidings are killing you. Those men might have had more consideration, more sense. You must leave Marshlands.”

Then, as it seemed, speaking almost without her own will, Phemie cried out—

“Let me wait and see him—let me see the dead man alive again, and then take me where you will, away from this for ever. Let me stay,” she went on, with earnest pleading, “just to welcome him back, just to make him feel he has come home, and I will leave the next hour.”

That was her first prayer ; her second was to leave immediately—to have everything packed up, and ready for immediate departure.

Then a new fancy seized her : she would have all the bills for the auction taken down ; she would have every article of furniture put back in its place ; the mirrors refixed, the pictures rehung, the curtains re-arranged ; there should not be a chair out of place when the wanderer returned.

“My husband would have wished it so,” she said to Mr Aggland, and Mr Aggland gave orders to have the rooms they had already vacated put in order, the fatted calf killed, and the house got ready for the reception of the new owner.

He certainly inclined to the opinion that Phemie was a little out of her mind. He had long thought her odd—and now he was confident his niece was not merely odd, but also something more.

“Fainting and crying, and having the whole place upset on account of the return of a man whom she never could bear—for whom she never had a civil word!” Mr Aggland muttered; but he comforted himself a moment afterwards by recollecting that—

“—Good as well as ill,
Woman's at best a contradiction still;”

and thought that perhaps, when all was said and done, Phemie's eccentricities were matters not of mind but of sex.

“I am not sure that it is good for women to have their own way,” he reflected; “for if they have the guiding of themselves they are never content with one road for two minutes together. Likely as not, she will want the bills posted again to-morrow, so I won't have them taken down at any rate.”

“Do you not think it would be well for you to send a messenger, begging Mrs Montague Stondon to come down here to receive her son?” he ventured to propose next morning.

“Am I mistress here now?” Phemie angrily retorted. “Is the house mine, to ask or to bid keep away? I ought to be out of Marshlands at this minute. I shall merely remain to touch hands with Basil, and bid him welcome home, and then go when he arrives. Let the luggage be sent over to Disley, and it will be ready for whatever train we choose to start by.”

“But I think it most improbable he will be here for some days; he will naturally remain in London to see his lawyers and his mother, and—”

“Basil Stondon will come straight on to Marshlands,” she interrupted. “He will not lose an hour in hastening to—to—take possession of his property.” And her heart fluttered like a bird's as she spoke; while Mr Aggland answered—

“That she seemed to have a high opinion of Mr Basil Stondon and of his unselfishness. If he will feel no sorrow for your husband's death, and only rejoice at your having to leave Marshlands, why do you remain to receive him, why can you not travel to Roundwood at once?”

“Because it would seem hard to him—no matter what he may

be—for no creature to be here to say, ‘I am glad you are alive—God give you happiness as He has given you wealth.’”

“Well, suppose I stay here and say all that in your name?” suggested Mr Aggland, who had an intuitive feeling his niece would be better away. “I can tell him all your wishes—how you desire that he shall retain the whole or any portion of the furniture—how the cows and horses, the sheep and the pigs, are his to command, if he have any liking for any of them—how you have enough and to spare without stripping the house of its ornaments. I can say as well as you that ‘there is no winter’ in your generosity; can prove how good a steward you have been, spending your own money on another’s land. All that has occurred here since his departure I can relate for his benefit, and I can bring news to you at Roundwood where and how he has passed the time during which we have all thought him dead. Will you take my advice, Phemie, and go? The memories he will recall, the excitement of seeing a man risen from the grave, as one may say, will certainly prove too much for you. Will you go?”

“I have a fancy to stay, uncle,” she answered; “just as I said before, to wish him health and happiness before I leave Marshlands for ever. Most likely I shall never enter its doors again—let my last thought of the old home be a gracious one.”

And there came such a sad, wistful look into the sweet face that Mr Aggland could press the point no further. He only said it should all be as she wished, and entreated her to lie down and recruit her strength, so that when the journey had to be taken she might be ready for it.

“I hope to see the colour back in your cheeks some day, my dear,” he concluded. “We will all take such care of you when we get you among us once more, that you shall not have any choice left but to get well and strong again. With all your life still before you, it will never do for you to settle down into a desponding invalid.”

“Have patience,” Phemie answered; “let me only get this

meeting over—let me once begin a new existence elsewhere, and I will try to make a good thing of it.”

“Have you not made a good thing of it?” he asked; but Mrs Stondon shook her head.

“We will not talk about the past,” she replied; “the present is enough for us, surely. Let me go now, uncle,” she added; “I want to be quiet for a time, quiet and alone.”

Mr Agglard followed her with his eyes, as she ascended the staircase. He felt there was something about Phemie which he could not understand—which he had never understood—“and which *I* probably never shall,” he decided, when he heard a distant door close behind her. “I do think she is very odd, but somehow very sweet.”

Could he have seen what Phemie was doing at that very moment he would have thought her odder still.

She was standing before her mirror, looking at all that was left of the Phemie who had once been so beautiful; looking at the pale, wan face, at the sharpened features, at the dark lines under her eyes, at the lines across her forehead, at her figure, round and symmetrical no longer, at the ghastly whiteness of her cheeks, at the widow’s cap, which concealed her hair, at the black trailing dress.

Her beauty! Ah, Heaven! that had been a dream too, and it was gone—like her youth, like her gaiety, like her pride, like her vanity, like her innocence of soul—gone for ever.

She turned away from the glass, and covered her face with her hands. She was no heroine, only a woman; and she could not help mourning over the fact that her youth was gone and her beauty with it.

Yet what had youth and beauty done for her?—what? Had they not led her into temptation? Had she not wept such tears, whilst her eyes were bright, and her face round, and her cheeks blooming, as she hoped never to shed again till the day of her death?

Had her very loveliness not brought such suffering upon her as

had wrought the wreck she was? Why should she mourn because she had no attractions left to charm the man who once loved her so passionately? Why was it so terrible to her now to realize the full force of the truth which had glimmered across her understanding that night when she sat looking through the darkness down over Tordale?

She had owned one life—on this side the grave she could never own another. In the eyes of the world she had made a very good thing of it; she had married well, she had associated well, she had succeeded to the Keller property; her husband also had left her abundantly provided for; she had done well so far as money was concerned, but for all that Phemie knew, now when she sat looking—not through the darkness down upon Tordale, but back through the years to her girlhood—that her life had been a lost one, that although there were plenty more lives in the world still to be lived out and made much of or spoiled—enjoyed or marred—yet there could be no second existence for her, no return of the years, no retracing of her steps, no re-writing the book, no erasing the past.

Do you comprehend at last the story I have been trying to tell?—the story which has had in it so little variety or excitement, but yet that was after all the tale of a woman's life—of a woman who, like the rest of us, whether man or woman, had but one—and spoiled it! In the world's great lottery, as I said early in these pages, her little investment might seem a mere bagatelle; but it was the whole of her capital notwithstanding.

And she had lost! Looking back, this conviction forced itself upon her; she had lost, and it was too late for her to hope for a profit in the future.

Had she hoped? had she still clung to the idea of that man loving her? had she believed they might again meet for once, as of old, and then part? What had she thought? what had she hoped till she looked critically at herself in the unflattering mirror?

My reader, I cannot tell—though there was an hour when

Phemie tried hard to understand herself, to comprehend why she had wished to stay—why she now wished to go.

All that passed swiftly and sharply through her heart it would be well nigh impossible for any one to imagine. She could not have told herself aught save this—that her part was played out on a stage where every step had proved a failure; that there was literally nothing more left for her to do save walk behind the scenes, and leave the ground clear for those who had still to act out their life's drama—ill or well, as the case might be.

She rose and stood in the middle of her room irresolute. Should she go? should she not go? should she play the hostess in Marshlands for the last time? remain to greet the new owner, and then pass away like the old year? or should she follow the bent of her own inclination, and avoid this meeting?

Could she bear to see his look when he saw her changed face? could she assume indifference, or he forgetfulness?

“I will go,” she concluded; and the grey evening shadows were settling down as this idea became a fixed determination. “I will go!—better to seem unkind than to play the fool. My uncle will wait and welcome him—a fitter one to do so than I.” And she rang her bell, and bade Marshall pack the few articles still lying about, and prepare for their immediate departure.

“I think we can catch the night express,” she said; and she went down-stairs to speak to her uncle about it.

He was not in the drawing-room, and while she remained for a moment irresolute there was a noise in the hall as of some one's arrival.

She tried to move forward to the door, but the blood rushing back to her heart, took the power of movement from her. He had come—he had come from out of those great waters—from the grave—out of the past. She forgot the years—she forgot her widow's weeds—she forgot the dead husband lying in the churchyard beyond the village—she forgot the loss of her beauty—the time that had passed—she remembered nothing save this man whom she had loved, and who had come back again; and when the

door opened she stretched out her arms towards him, and cried—
“Basil—Basil!”

Then, as in a sort of fright, the dead alive, with a quick glance behind him, answered warningly, while he advanced to meet Phemie—

“And my wife!”

There are times when the very excess of their fear gives men courage; there are occasions when the very intensity of the suffering deadens sensation; and there are also moments in life when, out of the very depth of the previous humiliation, there arises sufficient pride to carry humanity over the most critical moment of its agony and despair.

Such a moment arrived to Phemie then. She had forgotten her pride—her dead—her resolutions; she had stretched out her arms with a great cry of joy to the lost who was found. Another second, and, God help her! she would have let him take her to his heart; but, almost before his name had passed her lips, there came crushing down upon her that cruel warning sentence—

“And my wife.”

Then she saw his wife. Standing behind him in the doorway, with her bright, mocking eyes fixed on Phemie’s face, was the woman he had married.

She was younger than Phemie; watching had not paled her cheeks, nor grief wasted her figure. The mourning dress which made Phemie look so white and worn and haggard only set off the other’s beauty to greater advantage; and there was a malicious satisfaction playing over every feature, as the new mistress of Marshlands heard Basil’s remark, and perceived the effect it produced on Phemie. But next moment Phemie was mistress of the position.

“You are welcome!” she said, and she held out her hand, which neither shook nor faltered, towards the woman who had supplanted her. “I have waited here to say this to both of you, Georgina; waited to wish you health, wealth, and happiness in Marshlands—before leaving it for ever.”

She was like a queen beside the new arrival—like a queen in

her manner, her carriage, her address ; and when she turned and spoke to Basil, and, looking him straight in the face, told him—with just that tremor in her voice which comes into most voices when people speak of a great pain endured—of a great peril escaped—how she had mourned for his reported death—how she had suffered much suspense and much sorrow concerning him—how even at that moment she could scarcely believe it was really to Basil Stondon, Basil raised from the dead, she was speaking—she still remained in possession of the field, and Mrs Basil Stondon, *née* Hurlford, gained no advantage over her.

Phemie speaking to Basil never tried to conceal how much the thought of his death had affected her ; never strove to explain away her cry at his entrance. She had sustained a grievous defeat, and yet she mastered her men so well, she displayed her resources so admirably, she addressed the wife with so gracious a courtesy, and the husband with such an earnest joy and sincerity, that Georgina could scarcely decide whether, after all, she was not the one worsted in the encounter—whether the former mistress of Marshlands had not the best of the day.

She could not even flatter herself into thinking her arrival was driving Phemie off the field ; for Phemie's preparations had all been made before she knew Basil Stondon had brought a wife back with him.

The departing combatant always, too, seems, like the Parthian, to be able to leave some stinging arrow behind him. There is a victory in the mere act of “going,” the greatness of which is generally felt, though rarely, I believe, acknowledged.

There is a grand moral power in walking out of a room, or driving away from a house, that produces an effect on the individuals left behind. It is action—it is force—it is doing what another person is unable to do. Their intentions are powerless to detain ; the will of the one combatant has been stronger than that of the other ; and perhaps it was some idea of this kind which made Mrs Basil Stondon so earnestly press Phemie to remain.

“You will not pain us—you will not be cruel?” she urged.

But Phemie had made all her arrangements, and was not to be turned aside from her path.

“I stayed but to bid you welcome—you, Basil, whom I knew were coming, you also, Georgina, whom I did not expect—it seems I remained to receive you both. Having done so, let me go, for this is my home no longer, and no kindness can ever make it seem home to me again.”

She passed by them, and walked towards her uncle. “Is the carriage ready?” she asked; adding, in an under-tone, “For God’s sake let us get away from here at once!”

And still Phemie kept moving forward, and next moment caught sight of Basil’s child.

The nurse was surrounded by a group of excited domestics, who, standing in the centre of the hall, were criticising and admiring the heir, a fine boy, who neither cried nor shrieked, but kept essaying to talk, and crowing mightily.

There are limits to all things, and there were limits even to Phemie’s self-command. From that group she turned aside and fled, up the wide staircase, along the corridor, to the room that had been hers, but which, like all the rest, must now be abandoned to strangers. She sent away her maid, she put on her bonnet, she threw her shawl around her, she took one last look out over the park, and then hurried away from the familiar apartment as though a plague were in it.

The carriage was at the door, her maid on the box beside the coachman; Georgina stood at the hall door, and Basil came out and assisted Phemie into her brougham. As he did so he whispered—

“I wanted to come down alone, but she would not let me.”

Then Mr Aggland took his seat beside his niece, and Phemie, leaning forward, bowed a farewell to Basil and his wife; and the horses sprang forward down the long avenue and through the gates, and were soon dashing along the level road leading to Disley, leaving Marshlands far behind.

So long as they were under the shadow of the pines and the elm-trees uncle and niece never exchanged a sentence; but once

they were outside the domain Mr Aggland laid his hand gently on the poor thin fingers, which were knotted and twisted together in a kind of convulsive agony, and said, "Phemie!"

No other word—but at the sound of that she flung herself on his breast and cried with such a frenzy of grief that he answered her inarticulate appeal for comfort with broken words of consolation and sympathy.

"Don't!" she cried—"don't! I deserve it all. Let me bear it. Oh, uncle, do you understand what has been the misery of my life at last?"

What was there to be said—what to be done—what?—but to secure a compartment all to themselves, and stow Marshall and the smaller effects into another. He felt thankful to have caught the express, even though Sewel's bays had been greatly distressed in order to compass that desirable end. He knew Phemie's grief must have its way; and so he let her lie back and weep out her trouble as they dashed on through the night.

He did not speak to her. He did not go near her. She sat in her corner, and he in his; and they both thought—thought—while the hours went by. They travelled the same mental course—he in his way, she in hers. He recalled to mind the girl who had come to him in his sanctum to ask his advice, and whom he had afterwards prayed might never know what it was really to love.

And this was the end. O God! this was the end. And the man's eyes were dim with tears as he bent forward and looked out into the darkness.

Whilst Phemie!—she was reciting to herself and preaching out of her own experience a sermon upon it.

She had gone back to Tordale too. She was sitting—unmarried—unwooed—in that little church under the shadows of the everlasting hills. The man whom she afterwards wedded came in at the porch, and entered the pew, and shared her book, and he was nobody to her then.

She had been dreaming of heroes of romance—lords and knights and young esquires. And what was that middle-aged tourist to

her? What concern was he of hers? What meaning had the text Mr Conbyr selected for her either?

“The wages of sin is death!” he said. And Pemie looked down at her faded muslin dress—at her poor finery—and thought of Lord Ronald Clanronald while the preacher proceeded.

Well, the years had gone by. And she dreamed no more of youths of high degree—of skirts of green satin—of the great future that might be in store for her. The old things regarded then were unheeded now; but the truth heard so many a long day before came home to her fully in the half darkness of that summer night.

“The wages of sin is death!” Had they not been death to her? death to every pleasant memory—to every innocent recollection—to every future hope—to every dream of happiness—to every plan—to every desire. There was nothing in her past she could look back to with satisfaction; there had been flowers, but there was a blight on them; there had been bright green foliage, but, behold, the trees were naked and bare; there had been a fair sunny landscape, but the clouds had come up, and in lieu of sunshine there was blackness—instead of rejoicing, despair.

She had given her love to that man—for his sake she had forgotten her husband, been cruel to herself. For his sake! Ah! Heaven! and he had forgotten her—forgotten all her tears—all her struggles—all her sorrow—and suffered his wife to come down and see her humiliation.

Wife and child—wife and child! had now taken possession of Marshlands. Where she had been much she was now nothing. Where she had been exalted she was brought low. Her day was declining, her reign over. “The wages of sin is death!” And the woman’s tears flowed fast.

On through the flat Cambridgeshire fields—on to the point where Hertfordshire and Essex shake hands—on to the marsh lands, and the nursery-grounds round and about Water Lane and Tottenham—on in the glad light of a summer’s morning across the Lea—and away within sight of the wooded heights of Clapton to Stratford and Mile End—and so to Shoreditch.

On! she had preached her sermon—she had conned her lesson. She had dried her eyes, and was looking over the fields and the river—over the house-tops and the sea of red-tiled roofs, at the life on which she was going to enter.

The hour before dawn is always the darkest; and that night was probably the blackest, in its deep despair, which Phemie Keller ever passed through.

Yet with the dawn came light; and this was the beam of sunshine which stole in on Phemie Keller's life—Duty.

Were there no sick to tend—no poor to visit—no sorrowing ones to comfort—no children to educate?

Though she had erred, she would yet try to do whatever work her hand found to do.

“I will not sit down in idleness, uncle,” she said. “I have sinned—I have suffered—but I will try—”

And as the train, with a shriek and a whistle, steamed into Shoreditch Station, her uncle bent down and kissed her hand with an intense pity, with an unutterable sympathy.

“‘Employment is nature's physician, says Galen,’” he remarked. “God in His mercy grant that it may bring you back to health.”

“I mean to try,” she repeated; and she drew her veil over her face, and passed out, with the bright sunlight of that summer's morning streaming on her, into the deserted London streets.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RECONCILED.

It was the height of the season at Hastings ; the yearly heaven of lodging-house keepers had arrived ; they could be firm about rent, linen, the use of plate, boot-cleaning, and kitchen fires ; the millennium of temporal prosperity had, after months of weary waiting, come at last, and the reign of the saints by the sea-side had begun. As for the sinners, they had a terrible time of it. At what hour they should eat ; the Spartan nature of the cookery they might expect ; the rooms wherewithal they must needs content themselves ; these things were announced to them by the powers in the ascendant with a severe composure.

Any man who had all his life entertained an idea that he was entitled for his money to money's worth, needed but to set foot in Hastings to be undeceived.

It was the harvest time ; and all the native population of Hastings—under the Castle [of Hastings, on a level with the Castle, of St Leonards-on-Sea, and the various regions lying back from the shore, but still studded with villas and terraces—put in the sickle.

The Egyptians had come down to the sea-side, and the householders forthwith set about considering how they should best spoil them. Rents were doubled—extras were put on—items were run up—bells were not answered—servants were harassed to death—every dwelling was crammed, from basement to garret—cooks were arrogant—housemaids breathless—and still the cry

went on, "They come!"—and still the place got fuller and fuller, and it was, as I have said, the height of the season in Hastings the romantic.

Was there ever a prettier bathing-place?—was there ever a more charming dwelling for a short time? Was there ever a town round and about which there were to be found lovelier walks and drives—sweeter bits of rural scenery—more enchanting views over the great sea?

Most people seemed to have thought Hastings perfection that year, for they came flocking to it as cattle go down into a pond to drink.

They came—the autocrats of the fashionable and the would-be fashionable world—to St Leonards, to the great houses fronting the sea, to Warrior Square, to the little houses up back streets, and to the terraces, hung up so high that ordinary limbs ached before the temporary home was reached.

Then there were old-fashioned folks who affected Hastings—who thought the old town seemed more home-like and pleasant than the new—who brought their money to spend within easy walk of the East Cliff—who loved the roads leading away to Fairlight—and the old churches in the High Street—and who declared the bathing was better at Hastings than at St Leonards.

Anyhow, Hastings and St Leonards were full—too full for comfort; but not too full for amusement to any one who knew London and its people well.

To the country squire, to the grand folks who, by reason of their great wealth and greater gentility, are far removed from all the pleasures of watching their commoner fellows and trying to understand their ways, these sea-side places must seem, as a rule, stale, flat, and unprofitable. It is the naturalist who loves to note the habits and instincts and modes of existence of the commonest animal; the bees going and coming—the ants busy at work—the mole heaps in the garden: the eccentricities of toad life have no charm to any one who does not understand something of the nature of bee, or ant, or mole, or toad: and in like manner, the person who does not comprehend the modes of life and habits

of thought of the men and the women he sees around him, cannot reasonably be expected to take much interest in observing their peculiarities.

There are those, however, who ask no better enjoyment than watching Jones, Brown, and Robinson out for a holiday; who delight in tracing Jones to his clique, and Brown to his, and Robinson to his; who luxuriate among snobs; who, watching them staring out of the windows at St Leonards, or airing themselves in the balconies at Robertson Terrace, or lounging up and down the Parade, or adventuring their necks on the backs of much-enduring horses, can classify the swell, the millionaire, the fortune-hunter, the pretender, the distant relation of some great house, the newly rich, the poor man of family, to a nicety.

And behold! there are all the men, women, and children he has become so familiar with in the course of his walks and residences round London.

There is Paterfamilias, drearily promenading with Materfamilias, and making believe to enjoy a holiday, which is a continual anxiety, and, as the poor man feels, an unwarrantable expense.

In the whole of his married life he has never before seen so much of his children, and he never—heaven forgive him!—wants to see so much of them again. He is tired of the objectless days passed in the unexciting society of the wife of his bosom and of his numerous progeny. On the whole, he wishes the holiday were over, and he back at business once again; while Materfamilias wages war with the landlady, and is pathetic concerning the price of meat.

There are the young ladies from No. 7, who will go out in the yacht twice a day, together with a friend, who has invariably to be relanded, if the sea proves rough, amidst the pity of the passengers and the secret maledictions of the crew. There is young Tomkins, the corn-factor, taking great airs upon himself, walking in sand-boots along the Parade, and staring in the face of every woman he meets; there is his future father-in-law, driving out his better-half in one of those pony-carriages that are a cross between a clothes and a plate basket, and charioteering the safest

and most docile of ponies, who could not run away if he would—as Alexander might have been supposed to manage Bucephalus, had that animal ever been harnessed to a modern dog-cart. In all Hastings there is nothing more amusing than to watch these amateur whips, who hold the reins wide apart, and with great skill manage to keep a firm grasp on the whip at the same time.

No young blood tooling his four-in-hand along the high road ever felt grander than a regular cockney at Hastings seated behind a slowly-trotting pony *en route* to Crowhurst.

I have often wondered what the ponies say to each other about their hirers when they get back to their chaff and their oats at night. Do they take any part of the hauling and mauling out in sneers and sarcasms?—do they curse the day when basket-carriages were invented?—do they make lamentation over their weary legs and roughly-handled mouths?—do they tell about how they are cantered up hill and rattled down?—do they scoff at the hundred-weights of flesh they have had to pull about?—do they recount their experiences, and do they, as a rule, consider mankind a mistake?

And as for the riding-horses—for the galled backs, for the broken winds—for the way they are mauled about, and pulled from side to side and harassed with curbs—and men who do not know what to do with either bridle or whip—and women who will hang on their crutches—and equestrians generally, who seem to think horses machines, incapable of weariness or aching bones—what shall we say of all this?—what of the great people who drive about in their own carriages, languidly surveying the commonalty through eye-glasses?—what of the little people who walk up and down for hours, and go to the beach to pick up shells, and sit on the benches and listen to the music?—what of the lonely men and the solitary women?—what of the excursionists who come down from London to stay for one day, and are taken back at a single fare, and who eat more apples, pears, and plums, and drink more beer in that time than an inexperienced person might deem possible?—what of the nobs who come down here, for any purpose, as it would seem, judging from their faces,

save pleasure?—what of the snobs, who ape the airs of the nobs, and enjoy themselves little accordingly?—what of the lawyer you have known so well in London, who mounts to the very top of the East Cliff, and lies down on the grass there, far away from men and the noise thereof—lies down, not to think, or to look, or to dream, but to rest!—what of the invalid, who gazes out from shaded window at the changing groups upon the shore?—what of the children and the nursemaids, of the lovers and the newly married, of the childless and the widowed? What? Dear reader, go to Hastings, and look upon them all for yourself; go, as Mrs Stondon did, and yourself a dispassionate observer, look over the throng.

It was in the height of the season that Phemie found herself in Hastings once again, and the waves broke against the Parade, and the sea kept up its perpetual murmur, and the wind went sobbing away out upon the waters just as she could remember it doing in the days that were gone.

She did not come to Hastings as a visitor. She took no furnished apartments. She had to listen to no dissertations on the subject of plate, linen, and boot-cleaning. She was in Hastings for a purpose, not for any pleasure. She had come quickly, and she meant to return without delay; for which reason she and Mr Aggland took up their quarters at the hotel which stands at the east end of Robertson Terrace.

Seated by the window, straining her eyes out over the sea, Phemie went back over the years that had elapsed since she first beheld the Castle, the Parade, the East and West Cliffs.

She had come to Hastings to see an old friend who was mixed up with every sad memory of her life. Of all places Hastings was, perhaps, the one she would most have shrunk from revisiting; but necessity is a hard taskmaster, and necessity had brought Mrs Stondon back to the sea, to the visitors, to the music, to the moonlight once again.

She wanted to see Miss Derno. On her arrival at Roundwood, immediately after her hurried departure from Marshlands, her first

act was to inquire at what time the post went out ; her next, to write a letter.

Writing letters being an employment to which, at this present age of the world, men and women are much addicted, the fact of Phemie inditing an epistle before she rested or refreshed herself would scarcely be worth mentioning, had it not chanced that the missive in question was one over which she wept many tears and breathed many sighs.

It was a confession that she had been wrong, that she had been guilty of grievous injustice ; it contained expressions of deep regret ; it concluded with an earnest prayer for forgiveness.

In the main Phemie was of a just and a generous nature. She never spared herself, and she could not let the sun set, after her discovery of Basil's marriage, till she acknowledged that Miss Derno's suspicions of Georgina had been correct, that her own suspicions of Miss Derno had been wrong.

She had let Basil Stondon come between her and everything she most esteemed and valued ; between herself and her husband ; between herself and her family and her friends ; between herself and purity ; between herself and God.

And fully aware of all this, in her deep self-abasement, in the first agony of her mortified pride and vanity, with the first smart of the dreadful wound spurring her on, with the past spread open before her like a book, Phemie wrote such a letter to her old friend as caused Miss Derno, when at length it reached her, to mourn with an exceeding sorrow for the misery of the woman whom she had first met so young, so guileless, so shy and unsophisticated.

She had always loved Phemie ; loved her spite of her faults, her whims, her injustice, her variableness ; and she tried, when she answered the letter, to convey some assurance of this love to Mrs Stondon.

The letter had been forwarded to her by Mrs Hurlford. She said—"I would have answered it in person, but I am ill, dear, and I cannot go to you. I hear your health is far from good, or

I would pray you to come and see me. If you are strong enough to travel here, I should like to see you, as it is scarcely probable I shall ever be able to leave Hastings again."

That was the errand which brought Mrs Stondon to Hastings, to see her old friend, to look in her face, and touch her hand once more. That! Phemie sat and thought about it, till at length, turning to her uncle, she said—

"I think she must be back by this time. Shall we go and see?"

He took his hat in silence, and they passed out of the hotel side by side. The radiant beauty of old was gone, and yet many a man turned to look after the fair widow as she swept along the Parade, turning her eyes neither to right nor to left, but looking straight forward, like one who sees something away in the indefinite distance.

They had inquired at the house in Robertson Terrace where Miss Derno lived, if she were come in, but the servant said she had not yet returned.

"Very likely, ma'am, she is on the Parade. She generally goes out about this time in a Bath-chair, to listen to the music and to watch the tide coming in."

Along the Parade, therefore, Phemie walked, as I have said, with her black dress trailing behind her, with her eyes fixed on every advancing group, on every approaching figure.

There had been a time when on that same Parade she felt dreamily, dangerously happy; and as she walked along the past was very present with her, and the woman's heart bled, remembering the sweetness of the hours gone by, and contrasting that sweetness with the bitterness of the hours which were then passing.

Lonely and widowed, childless and deserted, with the man who had loved her so truly dead, with the man whom she had loved so passionately married to another woman, whose son would hereafter be master of Marshlands—no wonder that the people who looked admiringly at Phemie's stately walk, and turned back for another glance at her queenly figure, felt instinctively that the

widow's dress, that the sweeping garments, covered a sorrowful story; that the new comer had wept bitter tears, kept weary vigils, passed through much sorrow, and seen bitter suffering.

She was an old actor now on the stage which she had once regarded from afar off as a mere spectator; she had gone through the tragedy, she had played out the most important scenes in her own life, and she listened to the moaning and murmuring of the sea with a comprehension clear and distinct of its meaning.

She felt that although she might still have to appear on the boards of existence, and act in other men's pieces, appear in the comedies and tragedies of other people's lives, still that her own was over.

At thirty her spring-time and her summer were gone. They had not been sunshiny or genial seasons to her; and the early blossoms which might have brought forth fruit in the autumn had died away and withered and rotted, and the rain had beaten down her roses, and withered the buds of promise, and cankered the root of every pleasant flower.

Her wounds were fresh, and Phemie felt them opening again with every step she took. There was not a foot of all that place but she knew and loved. There was not a spot of ground round which there did not hover some memory of the olden time. She could remember the airs and the waltzes they had listened to in the days before Basil went over the sea. She could recollect where they sat watching the waves come rushing up on the shore; the sight of the East Cliff standing out against the sky affected her like a sudden pain.

She had rejoiced here and she had lamented—she had been happy while he walked by her side—she had hearkened to the moaning of the sea—to the voices of the night when they came evening after evening and spoke to her—through the whole of the winter she passed at Hastings with her husband—about the depths wherein she then thought Basil was lying.

Was his death one half so bitter as his resurrection? Was it not easier for her to mourn him dead than behold him lost to her? Yet—no—no—the woman's love was stronger than the woman's

pride. Life for him—life at any price—at any suffering to herself. He would be happy and she could bear; and she looked out seaward as she thought this, and the waves came murmuring gently up on the shore—gently and peacefully.

“Phemie, I think this is Miss Derno.”

It was Mr Aggland who spoke, pointing to a lady seated in an invalid-chair, which was turned so as to catch the rays of the setting sun, that were streaming over town and castle, over cliff and sea.

“Miss Derno—surely not!” exclaimed Phemie. “That skeleton Miss Derno!” And she went forward doubtingly, and looked in the sick woman’s face.

“Mrs Stondon!”—“Miss Derno!”—they exclaimed at the same moment, and the two had met once more.

That was no place for loving greeting, for tender inquiry, for affectionate discourse; and it was not till Miss Derno had been wheeled back to her lodgings, and, assisted by a gentleman who was introduced to Mrs Stondon as Major Morrice, had walked into the house, that the friends could speak to one another—heart to heart, and soul to soul.

“Forgive me, dear!”—that was the burden of Phemie’s entreaty.

“I have nothing to forgive,” was the reply; “and I am so glad—so glad to see you again—to have you near me before I go.”

“You are not dangerously ill though, darling, are you?”

“Mrs Stondon”—Miss Derno raised the head which was resting in her lap, and bade Phemie look in her face—“do you think I am much like a woman who has long to live?” she asked, earnestly. “And I have so wished to live—so wished it, God forgive me.”

Then in the quiet twilight, while the sound of voices floated to them from the Parade—while the music rose and fell—while the visitors walked up and down—while the feet of many people hurried by—while the moon rose over the East Cliff—while the waves came washing up on the shore, and the sound of the waters fell on the ear like a subdued accompaniment to the noisy melody

of human fears and hopes which was still being sung on the strand, just the same as formerly, Miss Derno told the story of her life to Phemie.

It was the old story of a mutual love which yet could not end in marriage—of a rich father desirous that his only son should marry well, and unwilling for him to choose beauty and goodness and youth when money formed no part of the lady's dower.

It was the old story of the girl who would not endanger her lover's worldly prosperity—who would not let him be pauperized for her sake.

It was the old story of rings exchanged, of vows breathed, of an engagement entered into, of eternal constancy promised—then they parted. He went to India, she remained with her aunt.

After that there was foul play; she was represented to her lover as faithless, as married, as happy.

“My letters never reached him, his letters never reached me,” she proceeded; “and though I knew, though I was confident there had been treachery somewhere, still I could not go on writing when I got no reply. A woman cannot force herself on a man,” said Miss Derno, with a slight return of the light, easy manner which Phemie had so much admired in former days. “Even if she believes he wants her, it is a difficult matter for her to press so valuable a possession on his acceptance—I could not, at all events. How was I to know the falsehoods he was told concerning me, and unknowing, I argued, ‘If he wants me he will come back for me; he will come back some day.’ And he has come back,” she finished, “to find me the wreck you see.”

“Was Major Morrice then—?” began Phemie.

“He was my first love and my last,” said the dying woman, and the tears came into her eyes and rolled down her cheeks as she spoke. “I could have married often,” she went on. “I say it in no spirit of idle vanity, but merely to show that I did not remain faithful, as many a woman does, simply because she has had no chance of being otherwise than faithful—I could have married often, I could have married well, as the world talks about such things, but the love of my youth was the love of my life,

and I could take no second love into my heart for ever. He has never been in England since we were parted till now. He would not have come back yet, only that his father is dead, and there were many things requiring his presence. He returned at the same time as Basil Stondon; they were fellow-passengers in the steamer, and they landed together at Southampton. From Basil he heard I was not married, that I had always remained true, and he came to me here—came to pray me at last to be his wife. Think of it—think after the years of waiting, and to have to die and leave him.”

She covered her face with her hands, and sobbed aloud, while Phemie said, gently—

“And can nothing—”

“Nothing can save me,” added Miss Derno, completing her friend’s sentence, “and I am not going to fight against the unconquerable—I am not going to try to avert the inevitable. Nothing worse can come to me than the look I saw on Gordon Morrice’s face when we first met. My fate was reflected there as in a glass. He has learned to disguise his thoughts since that—to speak hopefully of the future, but I know—I know—”

And she turned her head towards the window, and looked out at the groups standing on the Parade, at the young girls walking up and down, squired by attentive cavaliers. Her life had been full like theirs once—full of bliss and joy and happiness—full as the tide at its highest; but now the waves were ebbing, ebbing, leaving the sands of time, receding from the green shores of earth, rolling back—slowly, surely—into the depths of the mysterious sea.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE LAST ENEMY.

It did not require any very great amount of pressing to induce Miss Derno to exchange her lodgings in Robertson Terrace for rooms at Roundwood. She was ready enough to make the attempt, at all events, for there is something in human nature which rebels at the idea of dying among strangers, and paying extra rent for a death.

"I shall only be a burden and a trouble to you," she said, in answer to Phemie, "only be a nuisance in your house—you had better leave me where I am." But still her eyes belied her lips; they looked wistfully at Mrs Stondon, while she replied—

"I had not better leave you, and I will not. It is but little I can do for you now, but let me have the satisfaction of doing that little. Say you will come—it is all I ask, we will manage everything else, if only you can bear to leave Hastings and come with us?"

"But I have so many belongings," hesitated the other; "my cousin, and maid, and—and—have you mentioned the matter to Major Morrice?"

"Yes, and he has agreed to make Roundwood his head-quarters for the present too," answered Phemie, cheerfully; but as she said this, Miss Derno looked first in the sweet face bent down over her, and then turned away and sighed.

Would it ever come to that?—when she was lying cold and dead—would Gordon Morrice grow in time to love Phemie, and

would Phemie learn to love him? The possibility of such a result flashed upon the poor invalid's mind in a moment; and if tears did blind her eyes, who can wonder?

She had loved the man, and he could never be anything to her now; but another might be much to him, and if that other should be Mrs Stondon, why better Mrs Stondon than any one else, for then her memory would not quite pass away; they would think of her sometimes in the quiet eventide—remember the woman who had loved them both.

There is many an idea that seems unpleasant enough at first, which yet grows, as time passes by, familiar and agreeable; the face of a possible contingency appears strange when it looks in suddenly through the windows of our soul, but by degrees that strangeness wears off, and we become accustomed to its presence, and should miss it were it to leave its wonted place.

Our plans and our ideas come to seem to us finally like friends; we sketch them, we fill them in, we add a touch here, make some improvement there, and then when we have finished and perfected them, we cannot bear to part with our ideals, cannot endure that the touch of reality should level our dream-castles with the ground.

Miss Derno found this to be the truth, at any rate. At first the idea of Phemie and Gordon Morrice growing near and dear to one another disturbed and troubled her; but as the days went by—as she beheld the objectless routine of Mrs Stondon's life—as she saw how the sorrows she had passed through were graven on her heart—how deep the iron had entered into her soul; as she watched her flitting hither and thither, anticipating every want of her sick visitor, and moving heaven and earth to compass her recovery, Miss Derno began to hope—she who had done with hope in this world for herself—that some day Phemie might marry Gordon Morrice, and put the irremediable past, with its sin, its suffering, its repentance, away from her like a garment which, having been worn, is laid aside for ever.

That Phemie should not marry again—that in the very prime of her life she should thrust hope and love and joy aside—that

she should live for other people's children, and preside over a desolate and lonely household, seemed to Miss Derno terrible, and she took many an occasion to talk to Mrs Stondon about the past and about the future, trying her mind on various subjects, but finding that only two strings in the instrument returned their full tone to her delicate touch.

She would speak fully about the past, about her husband, about—well, there is no use in standing over-nice in the terms one employs—her lover; repentance, and affection; her regret for her husband, her regard for Basil.

“Why should I tell you any falsehood about the matter?” Phemie said, one day; “it is all dead and gone—the love, the shame, the struggle, the remorse. I did love Basil Stondon, but I love him no longer; the moment I saw his wife I was cured, and being cured I wonder how any man can love another man's wife. I could not love another woman's husband. I could not,” she repeated, seeing a look of incredulity in Miss Derno's face.

“And yet you say you have done with life?”

“What has that to do with the matter?”

“Much. No person has done with life till he has met with some fatal disappointment in it. If you shut yourself up here, seeing no one, visiting no one, receiving no one, not even your intimate acquaintances—both Basil and his wife will be apt to think you are a disappointed woman, and after a while the world may think so too.”

“What would you have me do?” Phemie inquired.

“I would have you act as if your life were before, not behind, you; as though there were still some happiness left in existence, even though Basil be married, and Georgina mistress of Marshlands. I would not have you leave the world and take a kind of social veil, burying yourself among these cousins of yours, and forgetting that a woman of property has scarcely a right to reside in such strict privacy as you propose. When your time of mourning is over, go out, see people, visit, take an interest in what is going on around you, and you will find as the years pass that happiness comes with occupation, and that the worst remedy

in the world for a wound is always to be keeping your hands upon it and pulling the sore open."

"I have occupied myself," Phemie answered. "I have planned schools. I have visited the poor. I have relieved the sick. I have devoted myself to my family."

"My dear Mrs Stondon, you must do more. You must amuse yourself. You must devote yourself to the good work of getting strong, mentally and bodily; of taking joy out of the days as they come and go; of being interested—really interested—in your fellows. Do it at first from pride. Put it out of any one's power to say Mrs Stondon is a broken-hearted and a disappointed woman."

"That can never be said with any truth of me," answered Phemie, "for I am not disappointed, and I am not broken-hearted; and if Basil had never seen Georgina Hurlford, it would not have made any difference between us. After that—after that letter, I would never marry any one—I never would." And Phemie covered her face with her hands, and sobbed aloud.

"What letter are you talking about?" asked Miss Derno.

"I am talking of the one my husband left for me. I will show it to you. I have never shown it before to any person." And Mrs Stondon rose and left the room, returning in a few minutes, however, with the letter, which has previously been copied into these pages.

"Read that," she said, "and never speak again as if I could marry a second time. Oh! if I had but known; if I had but known!"

If she had but known! Ah, Phemie, not alone by you have those words been spoken. Tremblingly, despairingly, when it was too late, white lips have murmured that sentence—faltering tongues uttered it hopelessly.

If she had but known! Is not that the burden of most human lamentations, of most mortal regret? What might we not all, men and women alike, have made of our lives, which are now past and gone, squandered and lost to us, if we had but known—oh, God! if we had but known!

Silently Miss Derno folded up the letter and gave it back to her friend. Quietly and thoughtfully she looked out at the landscape which lay before her, clad in its autumn robes of gold and russet, of red and brown ; then she said—

“Dear Phemie—let me call you Phemie—if he could speak to you now he would bid you be happy ; and you will try to be happy for our sakes—for his and for mine—for love of your dead husband and your dead friend.”

“I will try.”

“And supposing, Phemie, that in the future some good and faithful man should come praying you to be his wife, and that you hesitate whether to say yea or nay, will you think of this letter and of me, and remember that both told you it would be no treachery to those you loved in the past for you to be happy in the future?”

Then in a moment Phemie’s grief broke out again.

“You will have it, then?” she said. “Well, then, you shall ; only never mention the matter to me more. If I had loved less, I should have suffered less. Basil Stondon was so dear to me, that no man could ever win my heart again. This is the simple truth ; and it is the truth, also, that I would not marry Basil Stondon were he single to-morrow, and came praying to me—praying as—”

She could not finish her sentence. The memory of all he had prayed—of the grief he had tried to bring upon her—of all the shame he had striven in his selfish recklessness to compass—rushed in a full tide through Phemie’s heart, and choked her utterance.

“She will think differently some day,” Miss Derno mentally argued ; but the sick woman felt disappointed, nevertheless. She would have liked to join their hands, to speak out fully to both of them, to bid them be happy, yet not quite forgetful of her, and then, as such was God’s will, to go.

It was not to be, however ; though Phemie grew to like Major Morrice greatly, though he learned to watch her coming and going and made such inquiries as induced Miss Derno to believe he sus-

pected the truth, so far at least as Basil Stondon was concerned—it was not to be. The sick woman's disease went on apace, but never a bit nearer to one another came the pair. The months went by—it was the dead time of the year, the days were dull and dark, and the roll of the sea as it came in on the shore could be heard all the night long at Roundwood. There were many storms, and it was a trying season altogether—trying even to those in health, to the dwellers in great cities, and doubly trying to the ailing and dying far away in the country, who had nothing to do save think about their ailments, and nothing to look at save nature dressed in her deepest suit of mourning.

At last the year turned: and one day, when the sun came struggling forth, Phemie said—

“We shall soon have spring here.”

“I wish I might live to see it—oh, I wish I might,” answered Miss Derno.

“Why, surely, dear, you have no expectation of leaving us so soon!” Mrs Stondon began; but a look in her friend's face made her stop and hesitate. “I had hoped,” she went on, “that the mild weather would do you good—that we perhaps might go abroad—and—”

“Ah, Phemie, love, you must go abroad alone; only I wish I might live till the spring. I think I should go away more certain about the next world if I could only once again see the flowers springing and the leaves budding in this.”

Greatly Miss Derno took, in those days, to Mr Aggland. He could supply her with a verse or an extract at any instant. He had the whole Bible almost off by heart, and was able to finish out whatever thought was trembling through her mind with text and quotation.

Sometimes Phemie would say, half-reproachfully, “I think you like better to have my uncle with you than me.” To which Miss Derno was wont to reply,

“You know you do not believe what you are saying; but still it is very pleasant to have everything put into shape for one in a moment. There is not a thought crosses my mind, not a doubt

perplexes me, but I find the same thought has occupied and the same doubt perplexed some other human being long before I was born. Your uncle makes me not feel so lonely in my mind, Phemie—that is the secret of my liking to have him near me.”

And it was but natural that this should be so—that the texts, the quotations, the scraps of poetry, the verses of pathetic songs, should, as Miss Derno said, render the mental road she was travelling less solitary and weary.

Long time had passed since Mr Aggland led the quire at Tor-dale, and his voice was not so true or full as formerly ; but still, in the evenings, the invalid loved to lie and listen to the hymns and the songs with which his memory was stored.

It is one thing to hear religious and serious subjects spoken of at great length, till the brain grows weary and the mind wandering—to have a full meal forced upon weak digestion at stated intervals—and another to have the cup of refreshment touch the lips whenever they are parched and feverish.

When there is too much thrust upon the patient the power of assimilation ceases, and the food which was intended to nourish turns to poison in the system ; and, more especially when the act of dying is spread over a long period, the sufferer wearies of the constant recurrence to spiritual topics and longs for rest—longs for time to think out one fact ere another is placed before him for consideration.

This was Miss Derno's case at all events. She could not have borne any one beside her who would constantly have been praying or constantly reading. This excitement, beneficial doubtless in some cases, would have driven her distracted ; but she loved to talk in the evenings to Mr Aggland on those subjects which had always dwelt next to his heart.

He had thought under the shadow of the everlasting hills about that land “where sorrow cometh never.” Walking round his farm, he had reflected on many things besides wheat and turnips, sheep and harvest time. He had considered his life, and felt, though at the period Carlyle was as a sealed book to him, life

was no idle dream, but a solemn reality—his own—all, as the great writer says, “he had to front Eternity with.”

A man of this nature was just the person Miss Derno needed to be near her in the hour of her bitterest trial: one who could remind her that “God is better than his promise, if He takes from man a long lease and gives him a freehold of a greater value;” who never remained silent for lack of words, as so many of us do, but could always fit in the right sentence in the right place; whose “mynde to him a kynglome was,” and who felt himself monarch over every idea it contained.

Who was more fitted to remind the dying woman that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever?” Who could better bring in the quotation, “Religion troubles you for an hour—it repays you by immortality?”

Did she shrink from the path before her—he was able to quote Moir—

“When spectral silence pointeth to decay,
How preacheth wisdom to the conscious breast?
Saying—‘Each foot that roameth here shall rest.
To God and Heaven, Death is the only way.’”

Were she wavering and doubtful, he would say—

“Oh! my friend,
That your faith were as mine—that thou couldst see
Death still producing life, and evil still
Working its own destruction—couldst behold
The strifes and tumults of this troubled world
With the strong eye that sees the promised day
Dawn through this night of tempest.”

He could assure her, when she felt loth to leave the world—

“That there is nothing beautiful in this,
The passioned soul has clasped—but shall partake
Its everlasting essence—not a scent
Of rain-drench’d flower, nor fleece of evening cloud,
Which blended with a thought that rose to heaven,
Shall ever die.”

Never weary was he of talking about the fair land where—

“Unbroken droop the laden boughs, with heavy fruitage bent ;
Of incense and of odours strange, the air is redolent ;
And neither sun, nor moon, nor stars dispense their changeful light,
But the Lamb's eternal glory, makes the happy city bright.”

Never did he tire when his theme was of that City “whose inhabitants no census has numbered ; through whose streets rush no tides of business ; that City without grief or graves—sins or sorrows ; whose walls are salvation, and whose gates are praise.”

Softly, in the firelight, while she leaned back in her chair, and listened to his voice, he would recite—

“There is rest without any travaille,
And there is pees without any strife,
And there is bright sommer ever to see,
And there is never winter in that countrie,
And there is great melody of angels' songe,
And there is preysing Him amonge,
And there is alle manner friendship that may be,
And there is perfect love and charitie,
And there is wisdom without folye,
And there is honestie without vileneye.”

Was she timorous—“Death,” he assured her, “is but a shadow from the rock eternity.”

But why multiply examples ? why go on to tell at greater length how the whole burden of his discourse was—

“But since our souls' now sin-obscured light
Shines through the lauthorn of our flesh so bright ;
What sacred splendour will this star send forth
When it shall shine without this vail of Earth ?”

She had to travel a darksome road, but he brightened the way for her. He was so sure himself concerning the certainty of the truths he uttered, that it seemed impossible for her to doubt. A man himself who had never much regarded the ways, nor manners, nor fashions of this present world, he was able to give her, who had lived in the world all her life, many hints as to where she was going astray, in what errors she was indulging.

He brought her the first snowdrop that put its head above ground ; he searched all the banks and hedgerows for the “pale

primrose;" he told her when and where the birds were building, and how many eggs there were in the blackbird's nest.

Well, she had her wish! She lived to touch snowdrops and primroses; to hear the birds singing, and see the trees putting forth; she lived till nature put off her winter clothing, and the sun shone over the earth once more; then—

"Gordon, I feel I shall soon have to go now," she said, one morning. "Thank you for staying with me to the last."

She put her arms round his neck, and drew his face down to hers.

"If all had gone well," she whispered, "we should now have been man and wife for sixteen years. I wonder would that have made this parting any easier?"

Over and over and over again Major Morrice kissed her, but it was a minute before he could steady his voice sufficiently to answer—

"You know I wanted you to be my wife even at the end."

"I know it," she sighed; "but Gordon, if you marry, as I hope you may, you will not feel it so hard to put another in the place I did not quite fill, as—"

"Oh, my love, my love! was it for my sake you refused?" and the man's tears fell upon her like rain; "as if I could ever put another in your place; as though my life were not over to all intents and purposes now."

"I want Phemie," was the only answer she made, and Phemie drew near. "You will be friends when I am gone," she went on, speaking thickly and with difficulty. "You will not grow to be quite strangers to one another as time goes by. You will let Gordon talk about me to you, won't you, dearest. And Gordon," he stooped his head, and Phemie drew back—"if ever you think—in time—do not let any thought of me—remember I wished—"

Fortunate was it for Phemie that she had no idea of what caused Major Morrice's face to flush so painfully in an instant—what made him look aside as she arranged the pillows for her who would so soon have done with earth—for her who was passing swiftly to that land where no kindly offices avail—where love, and ten-

derness, and regret, and unselfishness are equally useless and vain.

All the day long they never left her ; all the day long she lay waiting for death to come, and it was quite evening ere she went.

Beside her were some flowers, fresh gathered in the morning, withered and dying.

"The flower fadeth," she said, feebly, turning towards Mr Aggland ; and, answering her thoughts, he answered—

"But the word of our God shall stand for ever." A few minutes more and it was all over.

"Comfort him for me, Phemie," were her last words ; and with her hand clasped in that of the man she had loved so faithfully, she fell asleep.

She lived, as she had desired, till the flowers sprang and the trees budded ; and she left this world certain about the next.

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," said Mr Aggland, thoughtfully, as he lingeringly left the room.

CHAPTER XXXV.

OLD FRIENDS AND OLD PLACES.

TIME went by, and still Phemie remained unmarried.

Suitors had come, and suitors had gone; but to each and all the widow's answer was the same. She would never take a second husband. And so time went on, and she was still, as I have said, unmarried.

But the years had in other respects worked great changes in her. She was not the Phemie we have seen in the pages that have been written. She was outwardly a changed Phemie; a woman who, finding that neither work nor solitude availed to bring her peace, went in for distraction, and was to be met with at every concert, flower-show, pic-nic, what you will.

It was Duncan Aggland who had greatly contributed to bring about this alteration; Duncan, who, seeming to imagine he owned a kind of reversionary interest in his cousin, had wanted her to cast her fortunes with his, and when she declined to do so, remarked that she was staying single for the sake of Basil Stondon—that he knew she was, and that everybody said (oh! the horror of that everybody) no young woman would mew herself up at Roundwood as she did if she had not been disappointed by some one; and that further, he (the speaker) had not been so blind as perhaps she imagined to the state of affairs at Marshlands.

Mr Duncan Aggland was very angry, or perhaps he would never have uttered such very disagreeable truths; and, like all people who are angry, he got the worst of the encounter, for

Phemie thanked him for his engaging frankness, and begged that for the future he would not consider Roundwood so much his home as formerly.

"Because," she finished, "I purpose taking a house in town, and I might see more of you then than would be at all agreeable if you continued to visit me as often as you have done."

"But I am doing so well, Phemie," he pleaded, becoming submissive in a moment. "I am to be taken into partnership next year, and—"

"No one can be more delighted to hear of your worldly advancement than I," broke in Phemie. "I am charmed to know you are doing so well, and I have not the least doubt of your ability to maintain a wife; but on principle I object to the marriage of cousins, and whomsoever I may choose hereafter to marry, be quite sure it will not be you."

"That is plain at any rate," said the young man.

"I meant it to be so," she answered; "obscurity can serve no good purpose on either side; you have made a mistake, that is all, and it would be unkind in me not to undeceive you. Now, good-bye, and when you meet with any one you consider worthy to become Mrs Duncan Aggland, I, as the female head of your family, shall be most happy to call upon her." With which speech, Mrs Stondon dismissed her admirer, and from that day forth devoted herself, as far as any mere observer could discover, heart and soul to amusement and frivolity.

People who had seen the widow during her time of mourning marvelled to behold her, when that time was over, emerging from her seclusion, accepting all invitations, appearing here and there and everywhere, seeming to care very little what was thought about her, providing only she could pass the time and make the hours fly quicker.

"What a flirt that woman is," some one said, casually, to Basil Stondon, when speaking of his relative.

"Yes," thought Basil, as he walked home, "what a flirt! Hang her, she never was anything but a flirt. If she had, my life might have been a different one."

So, when men stumble over a pebble they are apt to blame the pebble instead of their own stupidity ; so, when they fall into a hole they are in the habit of anathematizing the hole for being there instead of their own blindness which was unable to see it ; and so, on precisely the same principle, Basil accused Phemie of causing misfortunes which had been brought about entirely by himself.

As for the life she led—the heartless, purposeless, unsatisfying life—what can we say but this, that there are some people who when they are in trouble take to dram-drinking, while others prefer opium ; and in like manner there are men and women who mentally seek the oblivion of excitement, while others court the deadening monotony of seclusion. Which is worst—providing the patient must run to either extreme—to one the wine cup, or to another the opium ? They are both so injurious, you answer, that it would be impossible to make a choice, and yet for Phemie I think the intoxication of society was the least hurtful of the twain. To a temperament like hers—secure against disappointment, against love, against expectations that could never be realized—excitement was surely less fatal than inaction, the round of gaiety than the round of endurance.

The world was, as usual, critical and not over kind in its remarks upon her : some people saying she was seeking for a coronet, others that a title would content her, even if the title were no higher than that of baronet.

As to her views and wishes, if she had any, all her own relatives were at fault, even Mr Aggland, who only once ventured to say—

“ Be cautious, my dear, remember,
 That lovely face will fail ;
 Beauty's sweet—but beauty's frail—
 'Tis sooner past—'tis sooner done,
 Than summer's rain or summer's sun ;
 Most fleeting when it is most dear,
 'Tis gone while we but say 'tis here.”

To which Phemie answered by putting her hand over his mouth, and saying—

“Ah, uncle, it went long ago ; no need to remind me of how fast youth and beauty pass away.”

They were rather unique, this uncle and niece, and much sought after in London society accordingly. Every grace of manner, every art and conventionality, Mrs Stondon had acquired so dearly, she put forth now to win her popularity and regard.

Her little affectations were brought out once again—brought out and aired after years. She fenced, she rallied, she retorted, she laughed, she looked grave, according to the rules she had taken so much trouble to learn.

Well, well, life is strange, and women are the strangest part of life, and Phemie could not have given a reason for what she did save this, that she hoped some day to meet Basil Stondon and his wife in society, and astonish them with her cold bright wit, her unimpassioned manner, her worldly ideas, and her unromantic views of life.

And so the years went on, as I have said, and still there was only one suitor who hung back, one man who felt that a woman like this was not calculated to make his life happy, his home a peaceful one.

Obedient to the last request her lips had framed, Major Morrice never through the years lost sight of his dead love's friend, but visited her, talked with her, walked with her, and had been so near proposing many times that the world had almost ground for its gossip when it said at last they were engaged.

Never, however, even within sight of that shore came they : the woman was serious—she really did not intend to marry again. When her friends fancied she was in jest, she spoke in sober earnest.

Had she been as one of those with whom she was associating, she might have buried not one but twenty husbands, and assisted at the obsequies of the last with cheerful resignation. But life, with its sorrows, was an earnest affair to Phemie, and its troubles were matters of serious import to her.

“I suppose you think I like this whirl,” she said, one day, to Major Morrice ; and he answered,

"It is impossible for me to think otherwise, seeing how thoroughly you seem to enjoy it."

"One must live," Mrs Stondon asserted, a little defiantly.

"True; but is it necessary always to live in public?" he replied.

"It is to me," she said; "it is to me."

"Would it be impertinent if I asked why?" and he spoke with a tone of pity in his voice such as Phemie had not heard previously in the voice of any one unconnected with her by blood or kinship.

"Because I have no home ties," she returned; "because I have neither father nor mother, brother nor sister, husband nor children; because I am lonely—lonely beyond all power of description. There, you have made me talk about myself; now forget me. Let us talk about something else."

"May I talk about myself?" he asked, drawing a little nearer to her.

"Yes; that is always a welcome topic," she answered. And he went on—

"I, too, am lonely in the world. Why should we not cast our loneliness together. Will you take me—knowing all the past—for your husband? I will strive to prove myself worthy of the trust—"

She was astonished—too much astonished perhaps at first to answer; but at last she slowly said—

"Major Morrice, you do not know what you are saying; you do not know what you are asking—"

"I am praying you to be my wife," he replied. "Having loved your friend as far as man can love, I am beseeching her friend to make me happy."

She laid her hand on his shoulder, and looked steadily in his face while she answered—

"Major Morrice, you may know how much the past has taken from me when I say I cannot accept a husband even like you. I think I may truly affirm that I love and honour you more than any man on earth; but I cannot marry you. I would not give one

like you the mere husk of a love out of which the heart was eaten long and long ago."

Very tenderly he talked to her, but it was of no use. Very earnestly he pleaded that he had affection enough and to spare for both. Phemie was resolute.

"You are worthy a better fate," she said. "I have done harm enough in my life, let me be fair and true and honest now."

And she was all these, though it may have been that for the moment she felt tempted to flee from the awful loneliness of her purposeless existence—from the cold selfishness of the world to the warmth and the welcome of his love.

But it was not to be—it was never to be. She had toiled for her wages in the years which were gone, and her wages were now being paid to her by no niggardly hand.

That which we contract for we must fulfil—that which we agree blindly, or with our eyes open, to receive, we must content ourselves withal.

"The wages of sin is death." She had sinned, and death fell on every blade of grass near her—on every shrub—on every flower.

It was the summer time, and a great longing came over her to see the hills and the mountains and the valleys and the wild dale country once more.

"I should like to go to Cumberland for a month," she said, one day; and accordingly she and her uncle and Helen set forth together on that long northern journey, which wearied Phemie even before she reached the old "Salutation" Inn, which has greeted so many a tourist entering the Lake District.

But, spite of her weariness, she could not rest in the hotel. Tired and exhausted, Helen went off to bed, while Mr Aggland and his niece walked along the road which leads from Ambleside to Rydal.

They walked in silence; he was busy with his thoughts, she with hers. They had come back to the old country again, though not to the old place. They had crossed the frontier and passed out of the flat, rich southern lands into the lake district, where

mountains rose to the sky and streams came down the hill-sides ; and the traveller, wandering solitary over the fells, heard the splash of distant waterfalls alone breaking the desolate silence.

They had come back from the bustle of great towns, from intercourse with many men, from the life which always grows more rapid and more exciting the nearer people draw towards London—to the old quiet home, to the tarns, to the heather, to the mountains, to the valleys, which were all the same as when Phemie had dwelt among them, the adopted daughter of the owner of the Hill Farm.

She had left the wild mountain country when the sun was shining brightly ; in the noontide, in the light ; she returned to walk through it once more, but the grey evening shadows were settling down over the landscape, as the shadows had settled upon her life. She left it to become a great lady, and she had achieved that object. She had gained wealth and position, and she was now wondering, as she looked to right and left, what wealth and position availed.

They walked on, and the pure sweet air coming down from among the hills seemed to put fresh life into her, to restore something of the elasticity of her youth. Side by side, still in silence, they passed by Rydal Hill, through Rydal village, and so on till they came within sight of a house which most tourists in that part of England must have paused to admire. It is a cottage set back a little from the road, looking over Rydal Lake, with Nab Sear and Helm Crag overshadowing it, with the sweet greenery of that lovely country swelling away from it on all sides, with the summer flowers giving forth their sweetest perfume around it, with climbers and creepers trailing over it—a delightful spot in which to live, a sad place in which to die.

There are nooks on the earth that seem too beautiful to leave ; there are seasons when everything in nature is so perfect, when her skies are so soft, her woods so leafy, her sunsets so gorgeous, her mornings so bright and gladsome, her streams so clear, her lakes so calm, her flowers and shrubs so fragrant, that it seems impossible for man to go away from all this beauty and bright-

ness, to close his eyes on the face of this lovely world, and never to open them in time again.

Some thought of this kind came across Phemie's mind as she stood looking at the lake and the landscape, which now lay bathed and steeped in moonlight. For the first time for years she felt that there was a happiness in the mere fact of existence; that no human being can have quite done with life so long as he remains in the flesh. It came upon her suddenly that she had been wrong, that she had done wrong, in suffering herself to grow so weary of so beautiful a world; and as out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh, so out of her heart dropped the sentence,

"I think one might grow almost happy again, uncle, living in a place like this."

Then they turned and retraced their steps, talking as they went, talking under the moonlight of many things about which they had held their peace for years; and it was getting late when they found themselves in Ambleside once more, and entering the Salutation, at the door of which hotel some excursionists were just alighting.

"Mother, and father, and children," decided Phemie, as she passed them by; and she would have gone up-stairs and thought no more of them but for a voice which she fancied she knew, exclaiming,

"Don't run in so rudely, Harry; keep back, sir." Whereupon at once the lady said, "You are always snubbing that boy, Basil."

The person so addressed never turned to answer; he caught the child, who was rushing past Phemie, with one hand, while with the other he raised his hat and apologized for his son's forwardness.

"You need not apologize to me," answered Phemie; "we are too old friends to stand on ceremony." And she put out her hand and clasped his again after years—after years.

"Well, I declare," cried Mrs Basil Stondon, while they all stood grouped together in the hall; "if this is not a pleasant surprise. Who would have thought of meeting you here?"

"There is nothing extraordinary in meeting me," Phemie answered; "the wonder is meeting you."

"It was a fancy of Basil's," that gentleman's wife replied. "He wanted to come north—and so we came north; we have been here, in Westmoreland I mean, ten days, and I for one was getting terribly sick of it; but now you are in the same place it will make a difference. It is so horrid being among strangers, not having a soul one knows to speak to."

Pheimie agreed that to be so placed must indeed be distressing; and they all adjourned up-stairs, and having arranged to spend the evening together, the ladies took off their bonnets while the gentlemen ordered tea.

"And you positively look younger than when I saw you last," remarked Mrs Basil Stondon, querulously; "but it is easy for you to look young: free from care and without children, and surrounded by every blessing and comfort, why should you not keep your beauty?"

"I have not kept it," answered Phemie, and she sighed as she spoke; though the past with its vanities, and its temptations, and its sorrows, and its repentance seemed like a dream to her at the moment. "I have not kept it, and there is no reason why I should have kept it. Youth cannot stay with us for ever, Georgina; if it did, girls would have small chance of ever being either wooed or wed."

There was a little side-blow in this sentence, and Georgina felt it. Her youth had helped her to secure Basil, a prize she often told him was scarcely worth the trouble, to which remark he had a habit of retorting—

"You did not think so at one time, at least, judging by the trouble you took," for Basil never hesitated to remind his wife of the efforts she had made to win him, and was not over-delicate about recapitulating to her all the advantages she had gained for herself by the match.

They lived such a life that the presence of any stranger seemed a relief; and accordingly both husband and wife eagerly pressed

Mr Aggland, and Phemie, and Helen to join them in their various excursions, and to make up parties for visiting Keswick, and Coniston, and Ullswater, and many a lovely spot much more accessible from Ambleside than those just enumerated.

Day after day they passed together, evening after evening they spent, talking in the moonlight or across the tea-table; but the more Phemie saw of Basil and his wife the more wretched she felt satisfied they were.

Georgina had not found the game all profit, and was disappointed in some way. Basil did not care for the woman he had married, and took no pains to conceal that the only creature for whom he now lived, and moved, and had his being, was Harry, his son and heir, whom his mother spoiled past redemption, and encouraged in all acts of disobedience and rebellion, possibly to annoy his father.

As for the little girl, she went to the wall entirely; neither father nor mother seemed to recognize her as belonging to the same species as Master Harry, who was for ever up to some mischief, and being perpetually called to account for his misdeeds by Basil, who "snubbed the child," so said his wife.

"And I do hope," exclaimed Georgina, when the day of separation came at last, "that you will come and spend a long time with me in Norfolk. It would be a real charity, for Basil is scarcely ever in the house. He leaves me alone from morning till night. Now do come, will you?"

"Do you really wish me to come, Georgina?" asked Mrs Stondon, who had latterly begun to doubt whether she heard and saw correctly. "Are you speaking honestly and truly, when you say you wish I would do so?"

"Honestly and truly, and there is my hand on it," laughed Georgina.

"And your husband?"

"Oh! my husband must answer for himself. I never presume to understand what may be the state of Basil's mind on any subject. If you wish him to invite you also, I will ask him to write

you a letter requesting the honour, et cetera; but I should have thought my invitation sufficient. You are such a great lady now, though, there is no knowing how to deal with you."

"I will come," answered Phemie, suddenly, "some time in the autumn, when the trees are looking their best."

"That is a dear good creature," remarked Mrs Basil Stondon, mentally adding, "now that will drive Mrs Montague away; and if I once get her out of the house, I will take precious good care she never enters it again."

From which speech it will be perceived that Georgina Stondon was not a particularly different individual from Georgina Hurlford, but rather that she was capable of planning and scheming a little still.

Late in the season Phemie returned to Roundwood; but she had not been long settled there before a letter arrived from Marshlands entreating her not to forget her promise, but to come as soon as ever she could, and bring her uncle with her.

His part of the performance Mr Aggland emphatically declined, and he could not quite resist saying to his niece—

"Phemie, do you think it is right for you to go? Are you safe—are you strong—are you not mad, think you, to fling yourself into such peril again?"

They were standing in the drawing-room at Roundwood as he spoke thus, he on one side of the centre table, she on the other; and the light of the wax candles fell full on her face as she remained for a moment silent ere she answered—

"I am safe—I am strong—and I am not mad—and I place myself in no peril. I am speaking the truth," she added, with a smile. "I have no feeling now for Basil Stondon except that of friendship and pity. Seeing him as he is—not as I fancied him, but as he actually is—has done more towards curing me than all my punishment—than all my resolution."

And she put her hand in his, and he felt that it did not tremble—that every finger lay passive—that every nerve seemed still.

"A woman's mind is one of the inscrutable mysteries of this

earth to me," decided Mr Aggland, as he thought over the puzzle of Phemie's conduct in his own apartment. "I reared that woman—I watched her in childhood, girlhood—and best part of her womanhood I have spent by her side—and yet I know no more about her than if she were the greatest stranger upon earth. Well, she seems resolved to put herself in danger, but it is not my fault. Now, heaven and earth," finished the perplexed philosopher, "is it?"

Down to Disley Phemie travelled—over the old familiar ground the train swept on; and she took off her bonnet, and, drawing the blue curtain so as to shade her eyes from the glare of the light, looked out across the country just as she had done that day when she returned to Norfolk after her long sojourn abroad.

The fields were the same—the stations—the towns—the hedgerows—the poplars. Everything seemed unchanged excepting herself.

There was a great hush in the still autumn afternoon—a strange quietness in the air. Phemie thought of that journey afterwards, and remembered how often a calm precedes a storm. She was travelling down into Norfolk, all unconsciously, to fulfil a mission; and as the train sped on she tried to account to herself for the desire she felt to revisit Marshlands and to spend a few weeks with Basil and his wife.

It was no love for Basil. She knew that. She had examined her heart, and found the idol in possession no longer. Her youth had gone, and the passionate attachment of her youth with it. And yet something remained—some tie of memory, or association, or affection, or pity, which was strong enough to bring the woman back to Marshlands—to the dear home where she had been so happy and so wretched.

There came a point in that journey, however—at Cambridge, I think—when Phemie, unable fully to analyze her own sensations, turned coward, and would fain have gone back again.

She dreaded the sight of the old place, of the familiar rooms, the resurrection of the thousand-and-one recollections. She did not know whether, after all, she could be quite brave when the pines

and the elms appeared standing clear against the sky as of yore. One by one the details of the picture which had been blurred and destroyed a little by the lapse of years came out clearly and distinctly before her view.

Only one thing she could not realize fully. Basil master of Marshlands, Georgina mistress, she herself their guest; children's voices echoing about the place, and those very children leaving their games and their amusements, their father and their mother, to come to her.

Was that the bait which lured the lonely woman back to her old home? I do not know how she could have blinded and deluded herself into ignorance on this point when she knew that the only gentle, womanly tears she had shed for years fell over the face of Basil's little girl.

She had never desired children—she had always held them away from her at arm's length, and yet now she would have liked to carry "Fairy," as she called her, back to Roundwood, whether for love of the little creature, or for love of its father, or simply because she wanted to have something all to herself, who can say? Only one fact is certain—the only pleasant hours she passed in Marshlands were those when she and Fairy wandered about the grounds hand-in-hand—when the child came to her room and listened to story and legend and song—when the little feet came running to meet her, making sweet pattering music by the way—when the soft arms were stretched out to "Mamma Phemie," to "dear, dear Mamma Phemie," who came at last to the conclusion it was best for her to leave Marshlands before Basil saw what an idiot she had grown.

But Basil saw it all—saw how his children turned from his wife to the woman he still loved better than his wife, and he grew angry at Georgina for having asked Phemie to the house, and words at last waxed hot between them on the subject.

For ever and for ever they were quarrelling, so far as difference of opinion was concerned, and wrangling over their differences. Phemie's presence or Phemie's absence signified little, only the quarrels became more vehement. Basil accused Georgina of

striving to hurt and annoy him, Georgina declared that he had by his temper driven away every old acquaintance they possessed, and that she was determined to have somebody to speak to.

"If Mrs Stondon were the devil," she remarked, with somewhat unladylike vehemence, "I would cultivate her. I mean to go and stay with her. I intend to be asked to her house in town, and I do not intend to live any longer with your mother."

"If you mean to have your own way in everything, then," retorted Basil, "you had better put in your list that you will have to live without me."

"That would be no loss—a decided gain," replied Georgina. And thus the battle terminated for the time, only to be resumed the next day about Harry, who, young though he was, should, his father declared, be sent to school forthwith, unless his mother would have him kept out of the stable-yard, and away from the horses' heels.

"I tell you now what it is," said Basil, collecting all the men and women servants together, and addressing them *en masse*, "the first time I find Master Harry in the stables, or out about the grounds anywhere by himself, I will discharge you every one. Take this for notice, for by — I will keep my word."

"What a milksop you would make of the boy," sneered Mrs Basil Stondon. "What must the servants think of you?"

"They cannot think less of me than I do of myself for ever having been such a cursed fool as to marry you," retorted Basil. Whereupon one word led, as usual, to more, and the quarrel terminated in Basil flinging a few things into a portmanteau and starting for a friend's house, as was his wont whenever matrimony and the cares thereof grew too much for him.

Fain would Phemie have followed his example and taken flight also, but Georgina entreated her so earnestly to remain, that Mrs Stondon yielded, and wrote to her uncle not to expect her at Roundwood for a week or ten days.

"Now I hope to heaven," was Mr Aggland's secret thought, "she is not getting too fond of that place again, nor of its owner." And his hope was fulfilled.

Phemie had grown perfectly sick of the place, but she stayed on as a matter of kindness to Georgina, and perhaps, also, with some faint hope of opening the misguided woman's eyes, and making his home more comfortable for Basil.

"It is of no use talking," remarked Georgina, one morning; "he ought to have married you, that is the whole secret of the affair, and—and—" She turned her head sharply away, and Phemie heard her sob. She had packed the cards, she had won all she asked for, and this was the result—a wretched home, a neglectful husband, a cat and dog existence. How could Phemie help—spite of all the misery Georgina had wrought her—feeling sorry for the unhappy wife?

"You might surely make a better thing of your life still," she said, gently, "if you would only agree to bear and forbear; if you would only bring up Harry as his father wishes; if you would only just try for a little time the effect of meeting his views instead of thwarting them, I am certain you might be a great deal more comfortable. I am confident Basil would pay back every concession with interest."

"He would not," she answered, slowly. "You may think you know Basil, but you do not. He has never forgiven me, and he never will. He might not have cared much for you had you been married to him, but as you were not, he thinks he only required you to make him the happiest man on earth. I thought I could have made him love me once," she went on, speaking more rapidly; "but I was mistaken. The way to make a man like my husband hate you is to belong to him. I ought not to show you what an escape you had," she added; "but I owe you a good turn for the bad one I did you when I was a girl; and for all the rest, I have forgiven you long ago, I have indeed."

"You are very kind," answered Phemie; "but I have not the slightest idea what you had to forgive."

"Have you not? I may tell you some day, but not at present." And Georgina walked, as she spoke, to the window, opened it, and stepped out on the balcony mentioned in the earlier portion of this story.

She remained leaning over it for a few minutes, turning every now and then to address some sentence to Phemie, who stood behind her in the drawing-room. She talked much about Miss Derno, and how greatly she had disliked her, how firmly she had believed in her designs on Basil.

"I really thought at the time," she was proceeding, when she suddenly stopped.

"What—what is it?" she broke out. "What are they bringing? Mrs Stondon—quick—look, do you see that?"

Phemie ran, at the words, into the balcony, and then as instantly left it, and rushed from the drawing-room, and out at the front door, and round the house, and through the shrubberies, to a point where she met the men who had attracted Georgina's attention.

"What is the matter?" she asked, with a quick look behind to see if Georgina were following. "What is it?" And the group parted in silence and let her look for herself.

Involuntarily she cried out, and the cry was repeated at her elbow by the wretched mother, who shrieked—

"I knew it was Harry. Bring him in and send for the doctor. Ride for your lives. Why do you all stand there doing nothing?" she went on fiercely, for the men never moved, but looked either down to the ground, or else each in his fellow's face. "Do you hear me? Go for the doctor. Give me my son."

"Give him to me," Phemie said, and they put the child into her arms. His little hand dropped limp as they did so, and his head fell back.

"Ride for the doctor," Phemie ordered, "for your mistress." And she led the way into the house, carrying the dead heir of all those broad lands, of all that fine property, while the men lifted Georgina from the ground, where she had dropped, not absolutely fainting, but down in an incapable heap, and bore her in after the boy, for whose sake she had once forgotten her pain and her travail, and rejoiced that there was a man-child born into the world!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PHEMIE'S JOURNEY.

FOR hours Mrs Basil Stondon lay in that merciful stupor.

While tender and pitying hands dressed the child for his long sleep, dressed him all in white and left him on his little bed—while the servants went about the darkened house with quiet tread, and asked one another under their breath what their master would say, and whether they should all be dismissed, and if an inquest would have to be held—while the few remaining leaves on the elm trees fell one by one off the bare branches—while the late autumn day drew to its close—Georgina still lay without speaking a word, without moving hand or foot.

By her side Phemie sat thinking, not so much of the miserable mother or of the dead boy, but rather of what Basil would say—of how Basil would feel.

Once she went halfway down-stairs intending to send a messenger for him ; but long before she reached the bottom of the flight she changed her mind and ascended the broad stairs again.

Two or three times she took up a pen and drew paper and portfolio before her, thinking to write and break the news.

She began—“My dear Mr Stondon,” and tore that up ; then she commenced, “Dear Basil,” and tried to go on and tell him of the disaster that had happened.

But it would not do. When a person thinks, words flow like water ; when he writes, they freeze on the paper ; and Phemie tore up that epistle likewise.

Then she went and looked at the child—at the glory of golden hair—at the round smooth cheeks—at the body which had been so full of life and health but a few hours before. He had been a troublesome imp when living—a restless, noisy, daring, unmanageable boy; but he was quiet enough now. He had been wont to push “Fairy” away from Phemie’s side, and to strike Phemie when she took his sister up in her arms and comforted her. There was not a dress in Mrs Stondon’s wardrobe but bore testimony to the strength of Master Harry’s hands, but the child was quiet enough now; and when Phemie looked upon all that remained of Basil’s son—when she felt what he would feel when he came to look upon his dead also, she fell on her knees beside the boy, and her heart seemed to cry in spite of her own desire—“How will he bear it! how will he ever endure this sight!”

Any one entering that room would have imagined Phemie to be praying, as kneeling on the floor she remained with her arms stretched over the snowy sheet, and her head resting upon them; but in reality Phemie was not praying—she was thinking—going over the weary past—traversing the old roads over again—wondering when the end would come, and what the end would be.

As she had suffered, was he to suffer? As she had wept, was he to weep? Had the hour for settlement come at last, and was this part of his temporal wages?

Sin! He had sinned, and while Phemie knelt there in the gathering darkness she recited to herself that story out of *The Book* which begins,—

“There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up.”

She never knew why that pathetic tale—so terribly pathetic that the sinner’s sin is almost forgotten in the sinner’s misery and humility—should come back to her memory then.

Was it for the sins of the father that the child which had been born unto Basil, and become to him as the very apple of his eye, was taken away thus—the fruit of his body for the sin of his soul.

Was it? Phemie had enough of the old Covenanting spirit in her religion to say, in answer to her own question, "Lord, it is just;" and yet her softer, weaker, human nature trembled to think of that inexorable justice which seemed never to forget to remember sin—which seemed never weary of awarding punishment.

"O God, let me bear—let me;" and Phemie prayed at last. All the dross had been taken out of her nature, and I think she was pure and unselfish at that moment as the angels in heaven. "Punish him no further—but let me bear all;" and then she bethought her of the words of Solomon the son of David.

"If they sin against Thee (for there is no man that sinneth not), and Thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy; yet if they bethink themselves and repent, and make supplication, saying,—We have done perversely; we have committed wickedness: Then hear Thou in Heaven, and forgive the sin of Thy people."

"Hear, O Lord," Phemie added, and her tears fell hot and fast. "Hear and pity, and enable him to bear this trouble Thou hast laid upon him."

"Who will tell Basil?" she marvelled, as she rose from the ground—"who?" And she wished her uncle were with her, feeling that he perhaps might have been the best bearer of bad tidings possible to find under the circumstances.

"I can telegraph for him at any rate," she considered, and the idea gave her immediate relief.

He would advise and assist. There were a dozen things he could see to, and his presence would be a restraint—a man's presence always was.

Pheimie decided to send for him, and half-an-hour afterwards one of the Marshland servants was galloping to Disley in order to despatch her telegram.

He had not been gone ten minutes, however, before Georgina spoke.

"Is it true?" she said, faintly; and Phemie answered, "It is true."

"He is dead, then?" and Mrs Stondon replied, "Everything

that could be done was done ; but he never moved after the horse kicked him."

There ensued a silence ; then the wife uttered her husband's name.

"Shall I write to him?" asked Phemie. "I have not done so till I heard what your wishes were."

"You must go to him," was the reply.

"Go—I—" repeated Phemie.

"Yes, he will never come back if you do not—never ; and you owe it to me," went on the wretched woman, "to do what I ask. I told you this morning I had forgiven you long ago, but it was not the truth. I thought it was then ; but I must have been mistaken. If you go, and bring him back, and keep him from cursing me, I will forgive you—I will kiss the ground you walk on—I will love you as I have hated you. Go!"

"What shall I say to him?" asked Mrs Stondon.

"What you like. You used to be able to wind him round your finger, try your power now. Go, go, for God's sake, before he hears about it from any other person—go."

Phemie rose and stood irresolute, then—"It is not fitting I should do this thing," she said. "I will write to him if you like, or I will telegraph to my uncle to go to him direct, but you ask too much of me, Georgina, you do indeed. Basil is certain to return to see his child, and then you can tell him about—about—the accident. I cannot interfere between man and wife."

"Cannot you?—give me the medicine, or wine, or water, or something ; and let me speak out my mind. Have you never interfered between us?" she went on, after swallowing the wine Phemie poured out for her. "Have I not felt you stepping between us every hour since my marriage. Did you not lay it on him as a curse—that he should never love any one as he loved you. Did not you, and has not the curse stuck? Has he ever loved another since—has he ever loved me?" and the unloved wife broke out into a fit of such passionate weeping as took Phemie totally by surprise.

"Dear Georgina," she began soothingly, but the other inter-

rupted her with—"You need not try to smooth the matter over; if it had not been for you he might have loved me (I have been lying thinking over it all the while you were out of the room), but as it was, he never loved me, and he will hate me now. He will say I did it, and perhaps he will say true. Whatever he wished Harry not to do I encouraged Harry to do, and now—and now—he will never speak to me again; he never will."

"He will not be so cruel, so unmanly," Phemie said; but Georgina answered, "Ah! you do not know Basil Stondon, he can be both when he likes," and she buried her face in the pillows, and sobbed aloud.

"I will go to him," Phemie murmured; her soul travelled back at that instant over the years, to the days when Basil had been cruel and unmanly towards her, and she accepted the errand which was now put upon her, as she would any other that had risen out of the mad foolishness of that wretchedly happy time. "If I were to telegraph though to him to return, as Harry was ill, and then break it to him on his return, would it not do as well as my going?"

"The people at the station would tell him."

"But if I met him at the station."

"He would hear about it on the line."

It was thus Georgina answered every argument, and at length, worn out by her importunity, Phemie yielded, and was about leaving the room to make the needful arrangements for her departure, when she was stopped once more.

"Whom were you thinking of taking with you," asked Georgina.

"Either Harris or Marshall," was the reply. "Harris, if you could spare him, would be the best."

"Take neither," was the reply; "Basil would get the truth from them."

"And do you absolutely wish me to travel to a strange place by myself?"

"Yes—to serve me—to do me such a kindness," and she took Phemie's hand and kissed it humbly.

Within an hour Mrs Stondon drove out of the gates of Marshlands, and started, all alone, to find Basil. Less than most women of the present day had she ever been thrown on her own resources, and the journey, which no woman would have regarded as a pleasant-one, seemed formidable in the extreme to her. All night she travelled on main lines or cross lines; now the compartment she occupied was shunted on one side at a junction; again she had to get out at some hitherto unheard-of station and change carriages in order to reach her destination, which was a little out-of-the-way village in Yorkshire, where she arrived cold and stiff and weary, next morning at nine o'clock.

Quarry Moor boasted neither hotel nor station, nor town nor village. Passengers who desired to alight there communicated their wishes to the guard at the previous stopping-place; and, accordingly, Phemie found herself dropped at a gate, without a house in sight, or a living being to speak to, except the man who made signals that passengers were to be taken up, and who resided during business hours in a wooden box beside the line.

With some difficulty Phemie made this individual understand her position, and after a little hesitation, he gave her what probably might be regarded as sound advice.

In a wonderful accent he said, "she had better go straight on till she came to Mr Urkirs' farm, and if you tell him what you want, happen he will spare one of his labourers to take your message over to Goresby Manor."

Very patiently Phemie plodded on, with the moor stretching to right and left, the straight unfenced road before her, and the cold grey sky above. It did not seem to her that it was really she, Phemie Stondon, who was walking all by herself through Yorkshire; who had been travelling by night till she was frozen and stupefied; the whole performance appeared so like part of a dream, that she had to stop occasionally to realize she was hundreds of miles from her own home, and half way across Quarry Moor, on her way to tell Basil of his son's death.

On her arrival at the farm, Phemie found Mr Urkirs out, but Mrs Urkirs received the stranger very graciously, and at once promised to send one of the men over to Goresby.

"Mr Goresby is our landlord," she explained, "and very likely the gentleman you want is one I saw riding past here with him yesterday. If you would like to go on, William shall put the horse in the chaise and drive you over—but perhaps you would not—"

Mrs Urkirs stopped; the thought in her mind was—perhaps the lady might not care to drive in a chaise with William for charioteer, but there was a look in Phemie's face that told the worthy woman she would have gone in a wheelbarrow had any necessity existed for her doing so.

"I need not go on," Phemie answered, however. "If you would allow me to remain here, I should much prefer doing so. Can you let me write a note to Mr Stordon. He may not understand a verbal message."

Considering the present price of paper, considering the millions of steel pens that are manufactured, and the rivers of ink which flow annually out of London, it is wonderful to consider that there are hundreds of thousands of houses in the United Kingdom where a letter never seems to be written, where ink might be made of attar of roses, and pens sold at a guinea a piece, judging from the specimens of each which are presented for a visitor's benefit.

Even in the midst of her sorrow and anxiety, Phemie could not help some idea of this sort passing through her mind.

Mrs Urkirs brought her first a quarter of a sheet of letter paper, then a bit of blotting paper about an inch and a-half square, then one of those penny stone ink bottles which were invented for the confusion of mankind, together with an old steel pen—which she rubbed "soft," as she said, on the hearthstone—and a quill that had apparently been in use for a couple or so of generations.

Out of these materials Phemie constructed her epistle. It seemed easier to write in the lonely farm-house than it had done

at Marshlands—besides, she had no time to lose, no paper to waste; as the words were set down, so they had to stand.

“Dear Basil,” she began, and she wrote closely, that she might not run short of space. “Dear Basil, I have come all this way at Georgina’s request to say Harry is very ill, and to beg you to return home with me at once. I entreat of you not to let anything prevent your coming. Mrs Urkirs kindly allows me to remain here till the messenger returns. I have directed him, if you are not at the Manor, to follow and give this to you.

“PHEMIE STONDON.”

It was the first letter she had ever written to Basil, and while she folded it up she thought about that fact.

After William had mounted and departed she still went on thinking, and sat by the fire considering how strange it was she never should have written to him before—that no necessity had arisen through all the years of their acquaintance for her to send him even the merest line. How wonderful it was that on her should devolve the duty of making the man she loved wretched!

“I do not know how I shall ever tell him,” she thought. “I do not.”

“And the child is very ill, ma’am, you say,” remarked Mrs Urkirs at this juncture.

“He is dangerously ill,” answered Phemie.

“And what a journey it was for you,” went on the farmer’s wife, who—the excitement of looking up writing materials and of despatching William over—was beginning to think the business odd.

“A fearful journey,” was the reply, and Mrs Stondon shivered.

“Could no person have come but you, ma’am,” was the next question.

“His mother thought not,” answered Phemie.

“You are the gentleman’s sister, I suppose,” suggested Mrs Urkirs, after a pause, devoted to considering how she could possibly get at the bottom of the mystery.

“No,” Phemie said; “I am only a very distant relative of Mr

Stondon," and she rose as she spoke and leaned her head against the stone mantel-shelf, and thought how she could best stop the woman's questions.

"Mrs Stondon had a very special reason for wishing me to carry the message instead of intrusting it to a servant," she began at last. "I will tell you what that reason was before I go, but I cannot do so until after I have spoken to Mr Stondon."

From that moment the two got on admirably. They talked about farming, about Yorkshire, about children, about London, about Norfolk, about Marshlands, about every conceivable topic, including the health of Mr Urkirs and his "one fault," as his wife styled it, namely a disinclination to leave a "drain of spirits in a bottle."

Phemie had gone in a little for model farming at Roundwood, and was able to discourse gravely concerning stock and milch cows, soils and rotations.

The lessons she had learned among the hills were applied practically to the lands in Sussex, and Mrs Urkirs told her husband subsequently that, to be a lady, Mrs Stondon knew more about cropping than any woman she had ever met with.

Mrs Stondon, on her part, was thinking all the time they conversed of Basil's child and the Hill Farm. Could she really ever have lived in a farm-house? Was it true that Basil's boy was dead? In a vague kind of way she began to wonder whether, when he and she returned to Marshlands, they might not find it was all a mistake—that the doctor had done something—that Harry would yet be restored. Mercifully, death, when we are away from it, is hard to realize; till the first force of the blow is almost expended we never seem quite to lose hope; and thus it was that Phemie had to rouse herself occasionally in order to remember that the life was gone past recovery—that Basil could never hear Harry's voice again—that it was to his dead not to his sick she had come to summon him.

"I wonder how soon your man can return," she said at last.

"Well, ma'am, it depends on whether he would have only to go to Goresby or further. If Mr Stondon was at the Manor he

might— But here is the gentleman himself," she added, as Basil came galloping along the road and up to the farm, where, flinging his bridle to one of the labourers, he threw himself from his horse and came hurriedly into the house.

"What is the matter with Harry?" were the first words he spoke.

"He has met with an accident," answered Phemie, while Mrs Urkirs discreetly withdrew.

"How—when—where?" he persisted.

"Yesterday; somehow in the stable-yard."

He muttered an oath, and took a turn up and down the farm kitchen before he broke out—

"Weren't there enough of you about the house to have kept him out of harm's way? Sometimes I cannot think what women were sent into the world for at all."

She did not answer him. She knew what he did not know, and it kept her tongue quiet, otherwise Phemie was not the one to have endured such a speech quietly.

Her silence had its effect, however, for he said next moment—

"I beg your pardon; of course I was not thinking of you, but of my wife."

"Say what you like to me," Phemie replied, "but spare your wife. She has suffered enough; she is very seriously ill."

In answer to which appeal Basil said something under his breath, to the effect that she could sham illness when it suited her purpose, and impose on doctors as she had once imposed on him.

"She is not shamming now, at any rate," Phemie answered, and Basil continued his walk.

"Is he badly hurt?" he began again, after a pause.

"I am afraid so."

"Is he in danger?"

"He is."

"Was he insensible?"

"Yes; he had not spoken when I left."

"And why did you leave him? Why could you not have sent one of the servants?"

"Because I know everything that could be done for him would be done, and I wished you to return to Marshlands immediately. I wanted to telegraph, but Georgina would not hear of it; so I started to find you as soon as possible."

"You have travelled all night, then?"

"Yes; I arrived here at nine o'clock this morning."

"You must be very tired,"—and he came up to where she stood, and looked in her face.

"If travelling for a year could do you or yours any good, Basil, I should not mind being tired!" she exclaimed, and her eyes filled with tears, to remember nothing she could do might be of any use now, to him or his.

He remained silent for an instant; but then, putting out his hand, he touched hers, and said, piteously—

"What a fool I was, Phemie!—oh, what a fool!"

"Do not be one now then, Basil," she answered, and she drew her hand away from his and stepped back a pace or two.

"When does the train start?" she asked, and the question brought Basil to his senses.

"We have not much time to spare," he said; "there is a train at one o'clock. If we catch that we can then get a special, once we reach the main line. But how are you to get over to the station? How did you come here?"

"I walked," she answered, "but Mrs Urkirs will allow one of her men to drive me back, I know." And so it was settled that they should start immediately, and while Basil went out to speak about putting-in the horse, Phemie talked to Mrs Urkirs, and with that individual's assistance equipped herself for the journey.

When everything had been prepared for their departure; when Mrs Stondon, duly wrapped up, was seated in Mr Urkirs' light cart; when Basil was mounted, and the boy whom he meant to take charge of his horse to Goresby had nestled down into the body of the vehicle, behind Phemie and the driver, the former stooped over the wheel and whispered to Mrs Urkirs—who had come out to see that the rug was so disposed as to keep her visitor's dress from being splashed—stooped and whispered—

"The child is dead, and I want to break it to him gently as we go home."

"I would rather she had the breaking of it to him than I," remarked Mr Goresby when Mrs Urkins, an hour subsequently, communicated to that gentleman the piece of information she had gained.

Mr Goresby was a fresh, hearty, middle-aged squire, of the men-who-have-no-nonsense-about-them stamp, and he did feel most grievously sorry to hear of the misfortune that had fallen on his friend.

"Was this Mrs Stondon a young woman?" he asked—standing beside the door of the farmhouse, with his arm through his horse's bridle, and his foot keeping turning—turning a loose stone as he spoke.

"Over thirty, I should think, sir," was the reply. "Tall and stately looking, and proud, seemingly, till you came to speak to her, but then she was just as pleasant and homely as yourself. She sat there in that corner by the fire, and cried when she talked about the child as she might if it had been one of her own. It was wonderful of her, coming all this way by herself; there are few ladies, I am thinking, would have done it."

"You are right there, Mrs Urkins," answered the squire, and he mounted his hack and rode leisurely home to Goresby Manor, wishing to himself he had seen Phemie, and marvelling whether she was the former love he had once heard the mistress of Marshlands twitting her husband concerning.

"I suppose there is a woman at the bottom of every misfortune that happens to a man, if we could only search deep enough," decided Mr Goresby, who, being a bachelor, had always felt an intense curiosity to know the ins and outs of whatever love affair it was in Basil Stondon's past which had, as he mentally rounded the sentence, "put his life all wrong."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RETURN.

WHILE Mr Goresby was trotting back to the Manor, over the Yorkshire moors, Phemie and her companion were travelling southward as fast as a train which stopped at every station and kept time at none, could take them.

They had the compartment to themselves, and each five minutes Phemie looked at her watch, and said to herself, "Now in a quarter of an hour I shall have told him," but when the quarter came and passed, Basil still thought his child was living.

He talked continuously about Harry and about his wife; he let the whole history of their wretched experience drop from his lips, sentence after sentence. He said it was Marshlands she had wanted, and Marshlands she had got; he declared she thwarted him in his every wish—that it was enough for him to express a desire, and straightway she opposed him.

"As for her children, she never cared for them—not in the least," he went on; "she never cared for me either. Give her money and dress, and equipage and servants, and she would not fret if she never saw me more. She shall have her wish now; she may live in London or any place she likes, so as she leaves me and the children in peace at Marshlands. The children!" he broke off suddenly. "Oh! Phemie, do you think Harry will recover?"

"I am afraid there is no hope," she answered, trying to steady her voice.

"She must not let me see her if anything happens to him," he said, doggedly, and he went on to ask his companion whether she thought they would be in time, and then he broke into a rage about the slowness of the trains, about the folly of not telegraphing for him instead of coming, about the certainty that whatever Georgina planned was sure to be wrong, about his conviction that if Phemie had stayed at Marshlands more might have been done for the boy.

"Who would sit up with him last night?" he went on; "who would attend to everything that the doctor directed? The idea of leaving the place with only servants under the circumstances, and Georgina even not being able to see to things! I think she is mad, I really do."

"I sent for my uncle," remarked Phemie.

"That is what she never would have thought of," was the husband's comment. Phemie drew back in her corner, feeling she could not tell him the worst, that he was impracticable, that he was selfish beyond anything she could have conceived of, that his affection for his child was but another form of affection for himself.

What good had her coming wrought, then? Had it done any one of the things Georgina had prayed of her to effect? They would speak indeed, but there would be a quarrel—possibly a separation, for that was evidently the result Basil desired to bring about.

Never before, never, had Phemie felt herself so powerless as with this man, who once professed to love her; and it was for him—oh! Heaven, it was for one like this—she had broken her husband's heart, and nearly brought dishonour on an honest man.

"How I loved him—God of mercy, *how* I loved him," she murmured to herself, while her companion still kept rhyming out his complaints, and then, thinking of all the misery of the past—of the terrible trial in store for him—of the fearful contrast between his thoughts and hers, her self-command gave way, and covering her face with her hands, sobbed like a child.

In an instant Basil ceased his lamentations ; the very tone of his voice changed as he asked her what was the matter—what he had said to vex her—why she was weeping. He drew her hands from before her eyes with a gentle force, and prayed her to stop crying, or, at all events, to tell him what she was crying for.

“I was thinking about the years gone by,” she answered.

“Those happy years,” he said,—and the voice was tender as the voice she remembered so well.

“Were they happy to you?” she returned. “They were not so to me. Can you bear to look back upon them?—I cannot,” and then, urged by necessity, Phemie made a speech which brought the colour to her cheeks and dried the tears in her eyes.

“You said you loved me in those days, Basil—was it true?”

“True as sorrow,” he answered ; but he felt there was something behind her question, and he kept his hand on her arm, and prevented her turning completely away from him, while she proceeded—

“I do not want to go back and tell of all the misery you caused me then, but I do want you to promise me something now, for the sake of that old dead love of the long-ago.”

“Not dead, Phemie!—not dead!” he replied.

“Do not say that, or you stop me,” she returned ; “or say it if you can, remembering everything, and I will frame my request differently. For the sake of the man who forgave you and me, both of us, will you promise to grant me one favour?”

“I will.”

“I want you not to speak harshly to your wife. I want you not to reproach her. I want you never by word or look to lay this—this accident at her door, whether Harry lives or whether he dies.”

He remained for a few moments looking down at the carpet on the floor of the carriage ; then he answered—“You do not know everything, and your request is harder to grant than perhaps you can imagine, but still I will keep my promise—I will not reproach her ;” and he got up from his seat and went to the opposite window to that at Phemie's left hand, and looked out over the

country, and stamped his foot for very impatience at the slow rate of travelling, and wondered if they ever should arrive at the junction, and how long it would take to get a special train ready.

She let him run on for a time in this manner, while she searched about for some form of words in which she might convey an idea of the worst to him. Over and over again he said—"nothing ever really hurts children; that they were like cats and had nine lives;" he wondered if Mr Aggland would think of having a surgeon down from London; he mourned about his own absence from home, and then he began abusing the railway arrangements once more, and finally, pulling out his watch for the hundredth time, declared they ought to be at the junction in ten minutes.

"Once there, instead of waiting for the express, we must get a special, and push on at a very different pace to this."

He flung himself into the seat by the window as he spoke, and Phemie having at last made up her mind that she would tell him, left her place, and took the one opposite to that he occupied.

She had been thinking over the words she should use for hours, and yet now no word she had intended to employ was uttered.

"Basil."

"Yes, Phemie."

"We need not hurry so much."

"What do you mean?"—he asked the question as though there was no necessity for him to do so.

He read the answer in her face.

"Oh! Basil—Basil!" she cried; and after that there was a great silence, while the train swept on.

She did not dare to look at him—but she felt blindly about for his hand, and took and held it in hers;—and he let it lie there passive.

When they came near to the junction she resumed her old position, from which she stole a glance at Basil.

His face was shaded by his hand, and she could tell nothing of how it was with him.

With a great shriek and bustle, the train rushed into the station.

“He was dead, then, when you left,” Basil said, without lifting his head, or turning his face, or moving his hand.

“Yes,” she answered; and the train stopped, and the junction he had desired so earnestly to reach was gained.

Through the darkness Phemie and Basil travelled on together, not by any special train, but by the express, in which once again they were able to have a compartment to themselves. By the time they left the junction the short day was drawing to its close; and before they had got twenty miles nearer home it was quite dark, and the stations through which they shot were lighted up and bright with gas.

They never spoke to one another. Greatly that journey reminded Phemie of a former one she had undertaken, when, through the night, she and her uncle hastened away from Marshlands to seek a new home. Then it had been Mr Aggland who sat beside the window looking out into the summer night; now it was Basil who never turned his head away from the contemplation of the blackness, which was no darker than his own thoughts.

Through the night the train dashed on through the hours he and she never opened their lips to speak to one another.

She would have given anything to hear his voice—to hear even the sound of lamentation and the words of mourning, but Basil remained obstinately mute.

He was thinking of his boy—his first-born—the child whom he brought from India with him—thinking of him, and of his wife, and of the woman who had carried the evil tidings to him.

For the first time, also, he was thinking of his life—of his past—of the sin that past held.

Every idea seemed vague and shadowy—the only one certainly he appeared able to grasp being that Harry was dead, and that he was travelling home to see him.

Home—what a mockery the word sounded!

At Disley they found Mr Aggland waiting for their arrival on the platform.

“I brought the carriage over on chance,” he said, “hoping you

might return by this train. Mrs Stondon is very ill," he added, addressing Basil. But Basil paid no attention to the sentence.

"Does he know?" whispered Mr Aggland to his niece, who nodded an affirmative. After they reached Marshlands Basil stood in the hall for a moment, like a man trying to collect his senses; but when Phemie was going to leave him with her uncle, he detained her, saying—

"I want to see—"

"Had you not better wait a little?" she asked.

He only answered her with an impatient gesture, and motioned that she should lead the way.

She ascended the staircase, he following; they passed by the door of Mrs Stondon's room, and at the end of a long corridor crossed the threshold of the chamber in which the child lay.

Almost involuntarily, as it seemed, Basil caught hold of Phemie's hand, after the fashion of a frightened girl; and so, together, side by side, they walked towards the bed.

He let her draw back the sheet, and then, trembling violently, looked upon his boy.

Till that moment it seemed as if he had not fully realized his loss. But whenever his eyes fell on the face—which was the face of his first-born and yet that of a stranger,—when he touched the little cold hands, and pressed his lips on the icy cheeks, Basil Stondon gave way, and his grief burst out wild and uncontrolled.

Phemie moved back and closed the door. Then, standing at a distance from him, she let the trouble flow on unchecked,—only, with folded hands and bowed head, prayed for him silently.

There are few things in life harder to look upon than a man's violent sorrow;—and Phemie found it hard to witness Basil's. But yet she never tried to comfort him; she never crossed the room and laid her hand on his shoulder, and spoke to him words of sympathy. She knew the passion must find vent;—she felt that such an outburst was better for him than his former silence; and so she let the grief take its course without check or comment.

"Tell me about it," he said at last; "tell me all you know."

And, thus entreated, Phemie told him how the child had given his nurse the slip, and got round to the stables during the men's dinner hour.

"Sewell saw him, but not in time," she went on. "He saw Harry striking the young grey horse with a leather strap across the hind legs—so"—and Phemie imitated the boy's heedless stroke. "Sewell shouted to him to come away, and ran across the yard to catch him, but before he could reach the stall the animal kicked out, and Harry never stirred again."

"I have punished him for that very trick a dozen times at least," said Basil; "and his mother has called me cruel for hindering him. What have they done with the horse?"

"I do not know," answered Phemie.

He went away along the corridor, and down the staircase, and so into the servants' hall; where, finding Sewell, he desired him to have the grey killed at once.

After that he returned to Harry's room; and neither persuasion nor remonstrance could induce him to move from it.

"Do you remember your promise, Basil?" Phemie asked at last, seeing that he made no movement to go and speak to his wife.

"Perfectly," he answered.

"And do you mean to keep it?" she persisted.

"I am keeping it," he said; "and shall keep it all the better if I stay away from her. I cannot go and see her; I cannot. If you will have it, I shall say something you would be sorry for. Do not ask me. Phemie—Phemie—for heaven's sake, leave me alone."

But she would not leave him alone. She prayed and entreated of him to go and see his wife. She persisted that unless he did so, he would be but quibbling with his word—breaking faith with her. She reminded him that it was Georgina's child as well as his who lay before him; and at last, finding her words had none effect, she left the room, and tried to soothe his wife with such excuses for his absence as she could invent.

After a time, however, a message came from Basil, desiring to speak with her.

“I will go and tell her I shall never reproach her, if you wish me to do so,” he said. “You have been very good to me, Phemie—very good, and kind, and patient; and you have gone through much for my sake, and I will pleasure you in this matter if you like.”

“God bless you, Basil,” answered Phemie—“God bless and comfort you;” and she stood aside while he passed into his wife's room, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BASIL'S COMFORTER.

THERE is a story told of a boy who, journeying through a thick wood, prayed diligently that Providence would deliver him from the dangers of the forest, until at last the trees were left behind, and the open country reached. Then said the lad, breathing a deep sigh of relief, "That will do; I can take care of myself now."

What the boy said we feel—not merely in our relations with the Almighty, but day by day in our dealings with our fellows.

While the danger is imminent we are glad of any assistance, of any help; but the moment the wood is left behind, and safer ground reached, we mentally echo the lad's cry, and exclaiming, "We can take care of ourselves now," are glad to be rid of our benefactors, and think we never can get the pilot fast enough off our decks—on to his own.

It was not long before Phemie discovered that Georgina, having got back her husband and escaped his anger, desired to be rid of the instrument who had brought about this result.

Prospective gratitude, as I have often before remarked, is one thing—retrospective another. Prospectively, Mrs Basil Stondon had promised wonderful things to Phemie, if she did her bidding; retrospectively she rather underrated her services, and felt in the present jealous of her influence and power over Basil.

In those days if Phemie said "Go" to Basil, he went. The more he thought of the woman whose life he had made so poor in

happiness the more he loved her—not with the unholy love of old—not with the passion which had scorched and blighted the green verdure, and the fair flowers of their once sweet Paradise—but soberly and purely as a worshipper might love a saint.

He was not afraid of being with her now. He did not feel her presence torture—the sight of her a snare. No great human passion, unless indeed it may be revenge, can live within sight of death—and the way in which Phemie told him of his calamity had cured Basil, and changed him for life.

In his vigil beside his boy the past came and kept him company, and he repented him of the evil, and wished unavailingly he could go back through the years, and live them over again.

He had made her a lonely, desolate woman—a woman who in her widowhood could not even take to her soul the poor consolation of having done her duty faithfully by a husband she never loved. He had broken Captain Stondon's heart—he had wakened him from a pleasant dream. He had shown him the gold of the crown he wore was to him but as valueless tinsel—the gem he had prized so highly but glass in his possession. From the old man he had snatched away the last precious thing life held for him—faith in his wife's love—belief in her perfect truth and purity. He was taken home and warmed beside his hearth, and when he had eaten his bread, and shared his affection, he turned and stung his benefactor; and then he left England, and the years had come and the years had gone, and he was rich and respected—yet—should he escape?

If he had forgotten, had God? If his sin had passed from his memory, like breath from the surface of a mirror, did it follow that the sin was forgiven? Though he had buried his fault—though he had hidden it away from sight—though the turf was green, and the roses blooming—there was still the body of his fault lying waiting for that resurrection which comes, even in this world, at an hour men least expect it, for the sins, and the follies, and the short-comings, and the commission and the omission of their youth.

Trouble makes a man reflect: like adversity, it is a great

teacher—and in the weary, weary hours that elapsed between his son's death and the funeral, Basil Stondon learned more than he had ever done before all his life long.

Hitherto the tale which experience traces on the memories of each of us had been to him as a narrative in a strange tongue; but now he got by degrees the clue to the mystery—the key to the cypher, and read the story day by day painfully and carefully. It had not been all a confused jumble of events, sorrows, temptations, joys, trials. Neither did it prove a disjointed puzzle that would not piece together and make a finished and perfect whole; but rather it was the fulfilment of a great truth which, once forced upon his attention, he had still neglected to make light of—"The wages of sin is death."

Painfully he patched the map of his life together, and found those words traced across it.

Death—not such death as had come to his boy, not such peace and quiet, not such repose and freedom from trouble, but death like what had fallen upon Phemie—living death—death to happiness, to hope, to the future. For wages are paid that they may be spent; and there can be no spending, no buying; no eating and drinking of the bread of bitterness, of the waters of affliction, in the grave.

It was clear to him at last. He should have to bear as she had been forced to bear. She told him this truth herself—not hardly or pharisaically, not with the air of one who having been a martyr glories in recounting his sufferings, but pitifully and tearfully, across his son's body; and when the agony of this new light proved too much for him, when he bowed his head and covered his face and wept anew, she repeated to him the burden of that which she had said to herself before she went forth to seek him—

"Would God I could bear it for you; if it might be, I would bear all gladly."

"I wish the punishment had fallen entirely upon me," he answered humbly.

He was much changed in those days—changed towards his wife

more especially, and yet Georgina did not feel satisfied. She knew who had wrought this alteration, even at her own request; and that knowledge woke to life the old jealousy, the old dislike, the old hatred of her successful rival.

"It is quite time we were back at Roundwood, uncle, I think," said Phemie to her uncle, as they walked together about the grounds on the day preceding that fixed for the funeral.

"We will go to-morrow if you like, dear," he answered. "You have done all you can do here. Mrs Basil Stondon is, doubtless, greatly attached to you, and you have been of much use to her; but yet I believe—

‘Of honey and of gall in love there is store,
The honey is much—but the gall is more.’"

"I am sure there is more gall than honey in her love for me," replied Phemie; "and therefore, although I do hope I have been of use here, I will pack and go."

"I would, Phemie, I could see you packing up and making preparations for happiness on your own account," he said, significantly.

"You speak in enigmas," was her reply.

"Do I? Let me try then to speak plainly to you, Phemie. I would see you married, sweet. I would have you try to give back love for love to a worthy man who loves you dearly."

"Who is he?" she inquired.

"One who is much at Roundwood, who misses no opportunity of visiting you, or talking with you—who—"

"You mean Major Morrice, I conclude," she interrupted. "He is certainly much at Roundwood, but for once your penetration has been at fault. It is Helen he wants. I am forestalling his petition, but you need take no notice of that when he comes to present it. Only cease connecting the idea of marriage and me, uncle, for I wed no more till death woos me."

"Phemie, you grieve me."

"Grieve you! when I tell you a good man and a true wants to marry your daughter, and will ask you for her in due time.

Uncle, it is you who grieve me. I did not think you so selfish and short-sighted."

She spoke laughingly, but he answered her seriously.

"Phemie, was there one of them I ever loved better than you? Had you been my own flesh and blood a hundred times over, could you have been nearer to me than has been the case?"

"I think not—I am positive not," she said; "but what then?"

"Then, dear, because you are so dear to me, I would see you happy."

"Happiness, uncle," she answered, "is to be compassed by the widow as by the wife—by the childless as by the mother. I am happy now—believe me, I speak the truth."

And she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek as she said this.

"I told you I would find work to do," she continued; "and I mean to try and carry out my idea: the girl's lovers shall be mine—to paraphrase the old Scotch song—their husbands mine;—their children, my sons and daughters. There is a child here I love very much," she went on, with a little hesitation; "a poor, neglected child, I wish I had for mine very own."

"Do not wish for her, Phemie;—other people have more need of her than you," Mr Aggland replied; and before Phemie left Norfolk she knew he had advised her well.

Next morning the child who so lately had been regarded as heir to Marshlands was borne from its gates and laid in the Stondon's vault, close beside Phemie's husband.

Dust to dust—ashes to ashes. The words were spoken, and the mourners returned.

"We will go by the last train, and stop in London for the night," Mr Aggland suggested; and as he suggested, so Phemie agreed.

When it was growing dark she went to Georgina's room, and bade her good-bye.

"Good-bye," said Mrs Basil Stondon, who felt, it might be, some qualms of reproach at seeing her unloved visitor depart

according to her secret desire. "Good-bye, and thank you a hundred times over."

"Good-bye," answered Phemie; "and if ever you want my help again, come to me, Georgina, for I shall never come to you."

"Why?" asked the mistress of Marshlands; and Phemie replied—"You know why as well as I do. Because you do not wish to have me here; because it is well we should walk on our separate paths, apart."

"You always were peculiar," observed Mrs Basil Stendon.

"Was I?" replied Phemie. "At all events, I always (un-availingly perhaps) tried to be honest;" which retort silencing her enemy, she put her lips to Phemie's face and bade her farewell—not sorrowing.

Phemie then went to perform a harder task, that of taking leave of Basil.

He had shut himself in what was called the library after his return from the funeral, and remained there the whole afternoon, refusing to be comforted.

Time after time Phemie gently knocked, but still obtaining no answer, she went up to the nursery, and taking "Fairy" in her arms, came downstairs again and rapped on the panel loudly.

"I want to speak to you," she said. "I must speak before I go."

He came across the room and unlocked the door and gave her admittance, and then she walked to a chair near the table at which he had been sitting, and tried to induce him to take the child from her arms, but he motioned her away.

"Mamma—Mamma Phemie," sobbed the little girl in a passion of grief, hiding her face on Phemie's breast, "is he sorry it was not me? Nurse says he is."

Phemie looked at the father, who had heard his child's words—looked at him—and as Basil stretched out his hands, rose and gave him his daughter.

"Fay! Fay!" he cried, sobbing like a woman; and he took the little creature to his heart, who nestled there.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CONFESSIONS.

THE months went by, and there were changes at Roundwood; such changes as Phemie had prophesied. If Major Morrice's wooing was long, his wedding was speedy; and early in the ensuing year he took his wife to her new abode.

Was Olivia Derno forgotten? you ask, and I answer No; but the man had his life to live though she was dead, and he felt it no slight on her memory to marry one who had known and loved her.

It was a very good match for Helen. "Very wonderful," said Mrs Keller, with her nose in the air, "for a poor farmer's daughter."

"Never mind, Mrs Keller," observed Phemie, with that terrible knack of reading people's thoughts which her relative had noticed on the occasion of her first visit. "Major Morrice would have been almost too old a husband for any of your girls, and we will see what we can do for them yet. I think I have been a rather successful match-maker."

At this Mrs Keller bridled, and wondered what Mrs Stondon was talking about.

"About your daughters," answered Phemie quietly. "You do not want them to live single all their lives, I suppose; and if eligible husbands offer, you will not say them nay. Had I daughters, I should give them every opportunity of falling in love I could devise—"

“My dear Mrs Stondon!”

“My dear Mrs Keller!”

“Is it not time enough,” said the latter lady, “to consider these matters when a gentleman proposes?”

“And treat marriage as an alliance between two high and mighty powers, instead of an affair between man and woman,” answered Phemie. “Just as you will. Let the girls come down here and stay, taking their chance of meeting a good husband, as they might of meeting a desirable acquaintance; or keep them away, it is immaterial to me; only, had I girls, I should give them an opportunity of making their choice, and deciding whom they loved best, before the irrevocable words were spoken—the matrimonial Rubicon crossed.”

Mrs Keller laughed, and said her hostess was eccentric; but for all that she let her girls be among the number of Helen’s bridesmaids, and felt quite a maternal flutter when she heard a bachelor baronet was one of Major Morrice’s dearest friends and his nearest neighbour.

To the surprise of every one interested in the matter, however, Duncan Aggland conceived a most violent affection for the second Miss Keller, and begged her mother to consider his request favourably.

He was not a baronet, and he was in business, but still the lady consented to ignore his trade for the sake of his income.

“There are many engineers Members of Parliament,” she remarked meditatively to Mrs Stondon, at which observation Phemie laughed till she was weary.

“Pray do not put that idea into Duncan’s mind,” she said, “or he will never attend to his business;” and Mrs Keller took the advice, and held her peace.

“The birds are all on the wing, uncle,” she said to Mr Aggland one day, “and we shall soon be left solitary;” but it was in a more cheerful tone than formerly Phemie spoke. The days brought their duties with them, and the due discharge of daily duties ultimately ensures happiness to the man or woman who tries to act aright.

"And it will soon be summer again," Phemie proceeded; "where shall we go this year?"

They sat in the twilight of the spring evening talking about this place, and about that; and then as the darkness drew on the night became cloudy, and the rain began to patter against the window-panes. The wind rose also, and they could hear the angry rush of the waves as they came rolling up louder and louder upon the shore.

"Heaven have mercy on those who are out at sea," said Mr Aggland, looking forth into the gathering darkness, "for it is going to be a wild night;" and at the words Phemie shivered with the strange shivering of old.

She moved to the piano and played the first few bars of Handel's "Lord, what is man?" then she rose again and stirred the fire into a blaze, and pulled the chairs into comfortable positions, and turned the lamp up to a desirable height, and then stood before the hearth meditatively.

"Sing for me, Phemie dear, if you are not tired," said her uncle, who knew that when these restless moods came on, music was the best and, indeed, the only sedative. Sing for me a song or a hymn, a ballad or a psalm—what you will, only sing."

Obediently she walked across the room, and began making melody. Now she sang, and again she played; now it was "*Are Verum*," and then she stopped abruptly and drew her hands from the instrument, only to commence that sonata of Beethoven's which contains within its leaves the Funeral March upon the death of a Hero.

"What a night it is!" she broke off at last to say, "do you hear the rain?"

"And how the wind is howling!" answered Mr Aggland; "it puts me in mind of the way it used to come up the valley at Tor-dale, running like a racehorse between the hills, and then flinging itself against our door. Do you remember how it beat for admittance—how it rattled against the windows—how it screamed and shrieked, as if it were a living thing, to be let in—only to be let in?"

“Yes,” Phemie said, pursuing the same idea; “and how it used to go away, sobbing and moaning like one in great pain, across the moor to Strammer Tarn. I often thought in those days I should have loved to be beside the Tarn when the night wind came home there; I always felt as though it lived among those great rocks and boulders. Do you not wonder whether it is as rough a night up in the Cumberland Hills as it is down here by the coast? Do you wonder who is living in the old place now, and whether they are gathered close round the fire as we had a way of gathering when the wind was howling at the door?”

“I often think about the old place, Phemie,” he said. “When I am sitting quietly here by your fireside, dear, in such peace and comfort as I once thought never to know, my fancy turns many and many a time back to Tordale; it was a sweet spot—ay, you might travel far to find one lovelier—beautiful as Roundwood is, I never can fancy it so perfect as Tordale. I wish we had a drawing of the valley. I think I shall ask Duncan, next time he is in the north, to bring me a sketch of it.”

She turned a little from the piano, and, leaning her elbow on the keys, bade him go on and talk to her about their Cumberland home—

“Which I suppose we shall love best of all,” she finished, “to the end.”

“Yes,” Mr Aggland replied, “probably, for—

‘This fond attachment to the well-known place,
Whence first we started into life’s long race,
Maintains its hold with such unfailing sway,
We feel it e’en in age, and at our latest day.’

—But, mercy on us! how the rain is coming down! I do not think I ever heard heavier rain even in Cumberland;” and he rose as he spoke, and, putting the curtains aside, looked out into the night.

Just then there came a ring at the front door—a peal hurried, loud, and yet conveying the idea of the bell having been pulled by an unsteady hand.

“Who on earth can it be at this hour, and in such a storm?”

Phemie had started up as the peal echoed through the house, and uncle and niece stood looking apprehensively in each other's faces for a moment, wondering what could be wrong.

"It must be a message from one of the boys," said Mr Aggland, hurrying next instant to the drawing-room door; but before he could reach it a servant announced Mr Basil Stondon, and that gentleman entered.

"What a night for you to choose!" exclaimed Mr Aggland.

"What have you got there?" asked Phemie, pointing to something which lay hidden under Basil's coat.

"A trifle for you to take care of for me," he answered, "if you will;" and he put the rough covering gently aside, and showed her Fay lying fast asleep in his arms.

"Basil"—Phemie could not find another word to say to him.

"What is the meaning of it?" Mr Aggland asked. "Is your wife ill—are you mad—or is she dead?"

"She is dead to me," Basil answered; "take my child, Phemie, and let me go; I only came to ask you to be kind to her."

The water was absolutely dripping off him as he spoke—he stood in a little pool in the centre of the room—outside, the rain was pouring down in torrents, and mingling with the noise of the rain was the howling of the wind and the rushing sound upon the shore, of the not far distant sea.

"Go up to my uncle's room and change your clothes directly," was Phemie's unromantic comment on this explanation; "give me the child. Basil, you are mad."

For some time he stood it out with her that he would neither change his dripping garments nor remain in Roundwood even for the night.

"Where are you going?" asked Phemie.

"I have no plan; I am not sure; I do not know."

"Well, then, I do," she interrupted. "You will go direct off to bed, and take something at once to prevent your catching your death of cold."

"He was not cold," he persisted. "He was burning with heat—he had walked over from the station carrying Fay—and—"

“Took off your top-coat to keep her dry,” again interrupted Phemie; “the consequence of which will be that if you do not take immediate care of yourself, you will be seriously ill.”

“He did not mind that—he should like to be ill—he should like to die. If it had not been for Fay, he would first have shot Georgina, and then himself.”

“What has she done?” asked Phemie, hushing the child, who, having been awakened by the light and the talking, had begun to cry.

“She has been false to me,” he answered.

“Nonsense,” retorted Phemie. “Basil, you are mad, as I said before.”

“Perhaps so; but a thing like that is enough to make a man feel a little discomposed;” and he thrust a letter into her hand, which she held unopened while she said:—

“Now be reasonable, and listen to me. Standing in your wet clothes, or wandering about the country, will not mend matters in the least. Unless you do what I ask you, I will not take care of Fay; I will not even put her to bed, nor take charge of her for a single night.”

“But why should I remain?” he began; which sentence Phemie cut short by directing a meaning glance towards her uncle, who at once laid his hand on Mr Stondon’s arm and led him from the room.

Then Phemie rang for her maid, and gave Fay into her charge, after which she unfolded the missive Basil had left with her, and read one of the most glowing and tender love-letters it had ever fallen to her lot to peruse.

Her first idea was that her senses must be playing her some trick; her next was a purely feminine wonder as to what manner of man could have become so desperately enamoured of Georgina Stondon.

“After that,” said Mistress Phemie to herself, “I will never disbelieve in witchcraft again;” and she remained standing beside the fire, not so much shocked as astonished—lost, in fact, in such a labyrinth of amazement and conjecture as completely bewildered her senses.

"I would not have believed it, Basil," she said, "if I had not seen it ; and I do not believe it yet."

Mr Aggland brought their unexpected guest down-stairs again to the drawing-room, and then left him and his niece to talk the matter over together.

"I quite agree with you, Phemie, that he is mad," he whispered ere he went ; "but he will be better in the morning if you can only induce him to eat something and go quietly to bed. Let him talk—it will do him good."

Having received which piece of advice, Phemie went back to the man she had once loved so passionately, and spoke to him the words I have written.

"I would not have believed it had I not seen it, and I do not believe it yet."

He looked up at her with a sad, hopeless expression in his face.

"She did not deny it, and I gave her the chance of doing so."

What could any one say in reply to this? Even Phemie stood mute ; while he went on angrily :—

"What did I ever do, that she should have played me false? Have I not been a good husband to her? Has she not had wealth and standing? Was she not poor, and did I not make her rich? If we did quarrel at times, it was all her own fault. Since—since Harry died, I swear to you, Phemie, I never have spoken a cross word to her—never. I have tried to live at peace with her. If I had been like other husbands—"

"Oh, Basil, stop!—oh, Basil, stop!" Phemie cried out shrilly, like one in some bodily pain ; for, as he spoke, there came up before her the memory of another husband very unlike Basil indeed—a husband who had taken a young girl from poverty and drudgery to raise her to wealth and station—a husband who had never looked coldly on her—a husband who stood between his wife and the world—who had been so careful of her reputation that he would not acknowledge even to her that her purity was in peril—who removed the stumbling-block from her path, and the snare from her feet—and then grew suddenly old and infirm, and

died bearing his burden of sorrow to the grave with him patiently.

Till she heard this man vaunting himself—this poor, weak, selfish sinner thanking God that he was not as other sinners—it had never fully come home to her what a great heart it was he and she had mutually broken—what a grand nature they had tricked and deceived.

But the dagger had found the vulnerable point at last, and every nerve in Phemie's body thrilled with pain as she implored of him to stop.

For a moment he stared at her in surprise, but then he knew how he had hurt her—how and where ; and a dead silence ensued—a silence like that which fell between them when she took her place opposite to his in the railway carriage and told him there was no need to hurry.

During that pause each fought out a mental battle, and then, when they had waged their conflict, beaten down separately the phantoms that came up to reproach them, Phemie turned to Basil and said calmly, as though that cry of irrepressible agony had never escaped her lips :

“There is no name. Have you any idea who it is?”

“Not the least,” he answered ; “but I will know ; I will find out ; I will free myself and my child from her—I will.”

“No, you shall not,” Phemie interrupted. “Let Georgina be what she may, you shall not do this thing until, at all events, you have had time to think over the matter calmly and justly. You shall hold your peace about her ; you shall make no scandal ; you have been mad enough in coming here in this fashion to-night, and bringing Fairy with you, and talking before the child as you have done ; but that is all the more reason why you should be quiet and prudent now.”

She calmed him down by degrees, and after a time, although she could not get him to go to bed, she did induce him to eat something, and to sit down before the fire, “like a rational being,” as she observed.

When he thought Mr Stondon must have had ample time to

say his say, Mr Aggland re-entered the room, and urged upon him the desirability of his at once swallowing a certain decoction of herbs, which would, so that gentleman assured him, prevent his having to retire into what Charles Lamb calls "that regal solitude, sickness."

"I should like to be sick," retorted the other, pettishly.

"Should you?" said Mr Aggland; "'twould be a pity, then, to balk so reasonable a fancy;" and he leaned back in his chair and gave over the patient, who remained looking steadfastly at the fire, while from a little distance Phemie contemplated him.

He was a young man no longer; his youth, like her own, had flitted by, leaving no outward traces of its former presence. He was not the Basil Stondon who had come to her beside Strammer Tarn, brushing his way through the heather to the spot she occupied. He was middle-aged, and worn and haggard, not in the least resembling the dream-hero who had crossed the hills too late—too late.

When she thought of that hero, Phemie could see the man no more for the tears that blinded her.

Dreams, friends—dreams! I wonder if we ever shed such bitter tears when the realities of our lives are destroyed and the once sure earth cut from beneath our feet, as we do when, in a mist-wreath, the air-castle vanishes—when the once limitless lands of our fairy kingdom disappear in the depths of the ocean, and are lost to our sight for ever.

Prosperous as her life had proved, Phemie at any rate found it hard to look back upon the dreams and fantasies of her girlish days with equanimity.

She had been thinking much of Tordale and the Hill Farm—of the old, old life—of the beauty of that secluded valley—of the Church, of the waterfall, of the mountains and the fells—before Basil broke in upon her reminiscences; and now she could not help bringing his figure as she remembered it into the mental picture likewise—she could not avoid recalling *that* day—when, among the glorious sights and sounds of summer, he crossed the hills in order to tell her all his love.

Strammer Tarn at that moment was more real to her than her luxuriously furnished room at Roundwood. Basil—the dream-hero Basil, the careless, handsome, thoughtless, wicked, and yet not intentionally wicked sinner—was more real to her than Georgina's husband. She, herself, was for the moment no widow—no worn, changed woman—but a wife in the full flush of her beauty, resisting the temptation to which that very beauty had exposed her, trying to stand firm against his love and her own.

It was all like a story to her that night, like a real tale of another person's life, and I think the Phemie who was no longer young, and who had passed through much suffering, and who knew that no temptation could come to her to shake her more, felt sorry for that far-away figure which, crouching among the heather and the grass and the wild thyme, wept passionately.

Does the tale grow wearisome, reader?—are these particulars too minute?

If they be, bear with me still a little, I pray, for the story is drawing to its end; the last page will soon be reached, the final touch given to the figures we have been studying, the volume completed, the book closed and laid aside; and before that end is reached, I would have you take in the retrospect of Phemie Keller's life as she took it in, and regard her, as for one moment she regarded the girl, and the woman, she beheld standing young and fanciful and foolish—young and beautiful and tempted—pityingly.

But not one half so much pity did she feel for that former self as she did for the man who sat by her hearth, whose punishment had fallen upon him so late.

Thinking of the Basil she had known—thinking of all he might have made of his life—of his opportunities—of his position—of his friends—of his winning manners—of his frank, free, generous disposition—Phemie thought her heart must break for very pity, for very remorse, to remember she had ever a hand in bringing about so poor an ending to a once promising story.

How might a woman like herself, had she only been true, and kept him from loving her, or changed his unholy love into respect and trust and admiration, not have moulded such a nature.

He had loved Miss Derno, and yet Miss Derno came in time to be the best friend, the most faithful adviser his manhood ever knew.

“Oh! if I had only loved him less, or loved my husband more,” thought the poor soul, as a finish to her own bitter reflections; “*this* need never have come upon him; he might have stayed in England and married a different wife, and been happy instead of wretched; useful in his generation, instead of a mere cumberer of the ground.”

When she had arrived at this point in her argument, Basil came back from his mental journey, wherever it had taken him, and speaking like a man awakened suddenly from sleep, said that he thought he should like to bid her good-night, that he was beginning to feel very chilly.

“You had better take my prescription,” observed Mr Aggland; and Basil did take the dose, which proved impotent, however, to work the cure its discoverer promised it should effect, for next morning he was so ill he could not rise, and before the following night fever set in, and for a time all his troubles were forgotten.

He raved frantically indeed, but not about his sorrows; as is often the case, his mutterings contained no reference to the cause of his illness; he wandered in imagination, not through the night, carrying his child with him, not across the seas to seek his fortune, not over the hills to find Phemie, blue-eyed and auburn-haired; but backwards and forwards—to and fro in a land full of strange fancies—of mad vagaries—of unreal horrors—of fearful delusions—of horrible spectres.

Very rapidly he got worse, so rapidly, indeed, that before Mrs Montague Stondon could be written to and arrive from Paris, which capital she was then honouring with her presence, the doctors had begun to look very grave, and, to adapt an old saying to present use, although they hoped the best, evidently believed the worst.

When it came to that, Phemie declared that, let the consequences be what they might, she should send for his wife; and Georgina was sent for accordingly.

Almost before Phemie thought it possible she could arrive, Mrs Basil Stondon reached Roundwood, reached it with the cold hardness, with the insolent sarcasm beaten and pinched out of her face.

“Why did you not write to me before?” she asked, almost fiercely.

“Because I was not certain whether I ought to write at all,” Phemie replied.

“Then he came straight to you? I might have known he would; and Fay is here also, I suppose; and—he showed you the letter.”

“He did, but we will not talk about that now.”

“But we will talk of it, if you please. You believed in that letter, I suppose—you mourned over my short comings—you sympathized with a man who was tied to so wicked a wife—you dreamed perhaps of a divorce, and thought it within the bounds of probability that Basil Stondon and Euphemia Stondon might one day stand before the altar. Did you? I hope you did, for the letter was a sham? Ay, you may look at me,” she went on with a hysterical laugh. “I wrote it every word myself, and I left it in his way on purpose to see if I could rouse any feeling in him.”

“What an idiot you must be, Georgina,” exclaimed Phemie, indignantly; “what a senseless, wicked, foolish, childish trick it was. If he dies, his death will be at your door. How could you do it?—how came such a plan ever to enter your mind?”

“One cannot live near ice and not desire to thaw it,” was the reply; “may I see him?” she added, more humbly; “would it do him any harm if I spoke to him for a moment?”

“He will not know who you are,” the elder woman answered; and she led the way to where Basil lay, his wife following.

Then for the first time Phemie understood that Georgina loved her husband with all her heart, and soul, and strength; that all through their married life the attachment had been on her side, that she would have done anything to secure his affection, had she known how; that it would, as she declared, kill her if his illness proved fatal.

"I did more to win his heart than ever you could have done," she said, when at last Phemie had dragged her from the sick chamber. "I would have gone through fire and water for him, but he never loved me—never!"

"He must have loved you, or he would not have married you," Phemie answered.

"I made him marry me," was the reply. "He married me because I loved him; do you understand that, Mrs Stondon—you, who were so cold, and so prudent, and so selfish? If I had been in your place, if I had been married fifty times, I would have left my husband for his sake. If he had loved me as he loved you, I would have quitted Marshlands had he held up his finger for me to come. I nursed him,"—she continued, speaking hurriedly and excitedly—"I nursed him all through that illness he had in India. I brought him back from death. He could not have lived but for my care. It is no light thing, let me tell you, tending a man through a long sickness out in that climate, and when he got better I was like a ghost; but he knew I loved him,—knew no woman could have done what I did had she not loved him, and he married me, and I thought I had won the battle at last."

"And afterwards," Phemie suggested, as the speaker paused.

"Afterwards!" repeated Mrs Basil Stondon. "You want me to go on and tell you how you beat me at every move—how it was your men on the board prevented my winning the game. So be it. The game has not been all profit to you either, so I must rest satisfied."

"For pity's sake," entreated Phemie, forget that he ever was fond of me; let the dead past lie: it was never so fair or pleasant that you need be continually taking off the coffin-lid to look at it."

"Don't talk to me about coffins," exclaimed Georgina, with a shudder, "and he so ill; and as for your request, I would let the past lie if I could. I would bury it half a mile deep, and never desire to hear of it again, if you and he would only let me; but

is it in a woman's nature—cold as you are, I put it to you, would it be even in yours—to see a stranger preferred before you—to feel that she is seated in the innermost chamber while you are shivering outside on the doorstep?”

“It would not,” Phemie answered; “but then I am not in the innermost chamber, so there is no use in making yourself miserable about the matter.”

“If you are not, who is?” demanded Mrs Basil Stondon; and Phemie remained silent for very want of the ability to answer the question. “If you had not been, would he have come to you with that letter?—would he have rushed straight as he did from me to you? Go back over your own life. When Captain Stondon found out that you and Basil were so fond of one another, what did he do? Did he fly from you as he might from a pestilence? Did he publish the story to Miss Derno, or any other miss or madam in the kingdom? Did he?”

“No,” replied Phemie; “but then my husband was a very different man to yours.”

“True,” said Mrs Basil Stondon, “he was a very different man, and a very much better. You had a good husband, if you had only known how to value him; but still, good or not, different or not different, had Basil loved me he never would have come to you. It was my last attempt; now I throw up the cards.”

And when Georgina concluded, she made a movement as of flinging something from her, and turned sullenly aside.

Finding, however, that Phemie did not speak, she faced round again and asked,—

“Have you got nothing to remark on all that? When Basil gave you his version you were surely not so dumb?” But still Phemie made no reply.

She was wondering whether she should ever be able to reconcile this pair—whether any interferences of hers might produce some good result—whether, if he lived, she could bring about some better understanding—whether, if he died, he would first recover sufficiently to speak kindly to his wife ere he departed.

“Are you going to open your lips again to-day?” persisted Mrs Basil Stondon; and at last Phemie answered, while she rose and laid her hand gently on Georgina:—

“Yes. I am going to ask you, why you will persist in regarding me as your enemy? When I followed Basil into Yorkshire—when I brought him home with me—when I broke the bad news to him in such a way that he never had an angry feeling towards you in consequence, was I your enemy? Was I not, at all events, only doing your bidding—only trying to accomplish what you wanted, to the best of my ability?”

“Yes; but it seemed so hard for such interference to be necessary,” said Georgina, softening a little.

“Was that my fault? He married you; why he married you is quite beside the question; he did marry you, and for years you had him all to yourself. I should not care if a man had loved fifty women before he made me his wife. If I could not turn them all out, and keep the citadel against them, I should say I did not deserve to have it.”

“And does the same rule hold good with regard to husbands, Mrs Stondon?” asked the other, maliciously.

“We were talking of wives, not of husbands,” answered Phemie; and continued: “Feeling as you did towards me, why did you ever ask me to Marshlands?—why did you press me to stay there?”

“Because I was weary of my life—because you were better than nobody—because it looked well—because it tormented Basil—stop; let me go back to the beginning, where you interrupted my story. I do not mind showing you my hand, now the game is over. We were married, as I told you; the mutiny broke out, and we were bound still closer by the feeling of a common danger; besides, he was grateful to me. Oh! yes, he was grateful, for he set great store by his life, and I had saved it! My father was killed, as you heard, and Basil was sorry for my loss. Altogether, though I knew he did not love me even then, still we got on very well for a time, and the only quarrel we had

originated in his obstinate refusal to write to Captain Stondon and tell him of his marriage."

"'You are afraid of *him* letting *her* know, I suppose,' I was provoked at last into saying. That was my first downrightly bad move, and you were the occasion of it.

"'It was your doing, then, that I had to leave Marshlands,' he answered on the instant, almost indeed before I had time to wish my own words unspoken, 'how did you manage it?'

"I told him all—I did really—all that you have assured me came to your knowledge after you were left a widow. I could not help writing that note. I would have done anything to part you—anything to get him out to India with us—I was so fond of him; but he put it all down to love of Marshlands; and so, when at last news came to us of your husband's death, he turned to me, and said, 'You have got that which you schemed for so well and so long; I wish you joy of it.'

"There was something else, though, in his mind at the moment,—something I read out of his face that I knew he would not have put into words for anything; but I did for him. I said, 'You are thinking she is free, and I am bound. I am bound, and she is free!'

"Have mercy, Georgina!"—It was Phemie who entreated this boon. She was turning faint and sick at such a thought being put before him in its naked deformity; but Georgina's answer made her stand erect and defiant once more.

"Do you think, if I had not mercy on him, I am going to take pity on you?" she asked. "I told him his thought in so many words. I taunted him with it, and then we had a fearful quarrel—the first of our new series, which has never ceased from that day to this. It was then he informed me of the pleasant ban you had laid upon him—almost exultingly he spoke of how your words had come true—of how, although you might never be to him what I was, yet that still you would always be something nearer and dearer by far. He did not spare me a pang, you may depend upon it. Then I learned what was in my husband; I have never unlearned that knowledge since."

"I am very sorry,"—Phemie uttered this sentence humbly—"forgive me, Georgina, my share in your misery. What you tell me is very terrible—it must have been dreadful for you to bear."

"I did not bear it," was the quick reply; "I did not even regard it as payment for breaking the heart of a better man than ever you were a woman. I battled against it; I was hard, and he was harder; I would not accept my position, and he scoffed at me when I tried to alter it. We came back to England, and he wanted to travel down to Marshlands alone; but I had a suspicion we should find you there, and I was resolved not to lose the sight of that interview at any rate. I had the advantage, so far as he was concerned, for he really felt afraid to meet you, and it was a triumph for the time being. Next to getting the thing one wants for one's self, the greatest pleasure in life is seeing another disappointed in getting it also. Altogether," proceeded Mrs Basil Stondon, "I fancy I got the best in that matter. Had I not been present there would have been opportunity for some tender passages between Basil and yourself. What is wrong, now?" she added, as Phemie suddenly moved aside, and drew her hand away, and shook her dress, seeming to think there must be contagion in the very touch of her companion's garments.

CHAPTER XL.

PHEMIE EXPRESSES HER OPINIONS.

“WHAT is wrong?” repeated Mrs Stondon, her indignation breaking bounds at last, “only this, Georgina, that if you marvel why you have never been able to win Basil’s love, I do not. How one woman could speak to another as you have spoken to me this day I cannot comprehend. † What you must be made of to say the things, to utter the taunts, to inflict the wounds you have done, passes my understanding. I used to blame your husband for his neglect and unkindness. I do not blame him now. My sole wonder is that he has stayed with you at all. I should not have done it had I been in his place.”

“You know nothing about me,” returned Georgina, who was more astonished and subdued by the foregoing speech than she would have cared to acknowledge—“and therefore you cannot understand my feelings. ‡ You never loved him as I did.”

“No, I never did,” Phemie answered, “and I thank Heaven for it. All the love you are capable of feeling for any one is very poor and mean and selfish; and, as I said before, if you think a nature such as yours is one calculated to win love from man, woman, or child, you are greatly mistaken. The man is not in existence, at least I hope he is not, who would not come in time to hate a woman that could deliberately inflict such suffering on another woman as you have forced me to endure to-day, and many a day before—many and mazy a day.”

Was it true—were these words, which, in the very extremity

of her passion and anguish, escaped from Mrs Stondon's lips, as true as Heaven? Georgina had heard similar words before spoken by her husband, and the very remembrance of the fact lent additional bitterness to her tone as she exclaimed—

“And have I endured nothing at your hands? Is it nothing to have had you standing between me and him every hour since we were married—to know he has never regarded me save as an encumbrance, a burden; to feel he loved your little finger better than my whole body?”

“I could not help that,” Phemie returned. “If, knowing what you knew, you chose to marry him, I am not to be held responsible for the unhappiness of either of you. Had it been in my power to make him give affection to you, he should have done it. I did not want to keep the heart of any woman's husband. I would not have taken from you a grain of his love could any act of mine have prevented his wasting it upon me. I have never asked for it. I have never sought it.”

“Not even when you stayed at Marshlands to welcome him home, I suppose,” remarked Georgina; and there was a moment's pause ere Mrs Stondon replied—

“It was foolish for me to stay; foolish and weak; but yet, when the grave gives up its victim, when the sea returns its dead, can we stop to argue about wisdom and propriety? I did wrong in remaining, but I did not remain with any purpose of trying to revive the past between us, I only waited to bid him welcome home before I left Marshlands for ever.”

“Of course,” remarked Georgina drily—“you told us that at the time, and made your exit with singular felicity, I admit; but still it strikes me that had it not been for my appearance—Shall I go on, or will you supply the rest of the sentence for yourself?”

“You can go on, or you can remain silent, whichever seems most agreeable,” answered Phemie. Remaining at Marshlands was the one part of her conduct since her husband's death which she had always feared to analyze too exactly, which she could neither explain to another nor defend to herself; it was the weak

point in her armour, and she could not hinder this woman stabbing her through it, again and again. She remembered all she had felt when she beheld Georgina's bright mocking eyes looking at her distress. She was never likely to forget the dull horrid shock of that apparition, nor the first sight of *their* child, nor the despairing misery of her heart as she travelled away through the night, reciting to her own soul every line of the weary story which I have endeavoured throughout the course of the preceding pages to tell.

But for that one error of stopping to greet the man whom she ought to have avoided, his wife could have had no power over her now. Even as it was, however, Phemie fought out her fight bravely, and continued—

“You can put any construction on my conduct that pleases you ; it is perfectly immaterial to me whether you believe I stayed for the purpose of winning Basil, as you would have done, or remained for the simple reason I have before stated, as was really and truly the case. You can think I am like you or like myself, whichever you choose. I shall enter into no further explanation or discussion, but only repeat what I said at first, that I never sought Basil's love, and you know in your heart that I speak the truth.”

“It is a truth difficult to grasp,” was Georgina's reply.

“Most truths are difficult to grasp,” agreed Mrs Stondon ; “it is very difficult for me now to believe that, feeling as you say you have always done towards me, it was of your own free will you asked us to join our party to yours at Ambleside ; of your own free will you renewed the acquaintanceship which had been allowed so completely to drop ; of your own free will, and at your own special and earnest invitation, repeated over and over again, not merely verbally but in writing, I went to visit you at Marshlands ; of your own free will you almost forced me to remain with you when I really desired to return home ; of your own free will you sent me a long journey into Yorkshire to bring back the husband you have since then alienated again from you by your senseless, childish folly. Truths such as these are hard to grasp, but still they are truths for all that.”

And Phemie, as she concluded this pleasant sentence, reared up her head with a certain haughty defiance, and looked down on Georgina, who, remembering at the moment all this disdainful woman might still be able to do for her, stretched out her hand and tried to draw Mrs Stondon back into her former position.

Mrs Stondon's temper was up, however; and she therefore disengaged her dress, and moved a little farther away from her visitor, —who said, deprecatingly,

“I always liked you for yourself;—that may explain much which has seemed to you inexplicable. When you did not come between me and Basil I was as fond of you as I ever was of any one, except him; but it is not easy—no wife ever does find it easy—to endure a stranger's interference.”

“Did I want to interfere?” Phemie retorted. “Whose doing was it that I ever had the misfortune to meddle in your affairs at all? Did I kill your child? Did I wish to go running about the country after your husband? Do you think it was any pleasure to me travelling by night, and walking over those horrid moors, and begging at strange houses for help, horses and messengers, from the hands of strangers, in order that I might find and bring him to you speedily? Would any woman on earth have started on such an errand of her own inclination? Do you imagine I enjoyed that return journey with him? Can you not conceive that it was torture—absolute torture—telling him about his son's death?—that the task you set me was a very difficult one, and proved by no means easy of accomplishment?”

“If you could only imagine what he has been like since!” observed Georgina.

“Why, he told me he had never spoken a cross word to you from that day to this;—that he had given you no ground, not the slightest, for—”

“I know what you mean—the letter. He spoke truly—and yet—and yet—is there not a worse unkindness than harshness? I would rather have quarrelled with him fifty times a day than live with him as we have lived together lately. He never has said a cross word. He told me he had promised you he would

not. He only grew perfectly indifferent. I never, in fact, saw him from morning until night,—and then all at once I thought I would see if nothing could move him—if I could not work him up into a fury, if I could not wring one word of affection from him. I grew sick of seeing him and Fairy,—he so fond of her—she so fond of him. If he had only given *me* a little love, I should not have minded—I should not, indeed, so much.”

She turned her eyes, as she finished this sentence—not on Phemie, but out upon the lawn; and Mrs Stondon could not avoid seeing the pained worn look there was in her once bright countenance—the pinched expression I have mentioned before, about her cheeks and mouth.

“All my life long,” she began again, and the tears came trickling slowly down her face, “I never loved anything but him—never. Whom had I to love?—neither brother nor sister nor mother: perhaps I should not have cared for them, had I possessed them all; but I was never tried. There was no one in the world to care for me excepting my father, and he lived in India; and if he had been in England, you know what he was. Often and often I wonder what you would have been like had you been brought up like me;—what I should have been like had I been born and lived my life among those Agglands. I think I might have been different. I am confident you would.”

“It is not impossible,” said Phemie, coldly.

“I was always at school—always either there or with my father’s sisters, who were, I do think, the most horrid old women on earth. When I went down into Norfolk, and stayed with the Hurlfords, it was like getting into Paradise—they were so different to the people I had been used to; and yet still you know they are nothing very particular in the way of amiability either. I had met Basil before. I was so happy to be near him: but I hated Miss Derno; and afterwards I hated you.”

“Thank you,” said Phemie; “truth is best, even if it be disagreeable.”

“I loved you; indeed, indeed I did, till I found out Basil cared for you. Believe it or not, just as you choose—I did love

you, if it was only for the opportunities you gave me of meeting him; but when I saw how it was between you, I thought I should go mad. I could have torn your hair out by the roots, I was so jealous of it. I felt glad when everybody said you would be disfigured for life after that accident. It was so hard—oh! it was so hard—when you had such a husband, and after Basil had paid me attentions. Do justice to me in that matter, Mrs Stondon. Might not any girl have thought—”

“He was in love with her—certainly,” answered Phemie. “I never saw Basil speak to a girl *excepting* tenderly; but I do not think he was more tender to you than to others. If he had, I believe I should have noticed it;” and the speaker adjusted her white linen cuff with an appearance of careless indifference, while Georgina exclaimed—

“Do not be cruel, too—do not—do not! What is the use of being superior, as people call you, to our weaknesses and foibles—what is the use of standing where you do, if you cannot afford to forgive and be generous with a woman like me?”

“What is it you require, Georgina?” asked Mrs Stondon. “What is it you want? I told you when we parted at Marshlands I would help you if I could, and I will help you; but I cannot be your friend. I can forgive, but it is no such easy matter to forget.”

And the cuff was buttoned over again. She unfastened it while she was speaking, and then employed her leisure in settling it to her satisfaction. It was an aggravating piece of apparel to Basil’s wife, for somehow it placed her at a disadvantage in the *tête-à-tête*.

“You will allow me to remain here—till—he is either better or worse,” she said.

“Assuredly. Did I not write, requesting you to do so?”

“And when he gets well, you will tell him about that letter, and—”

“No, I cannot do that. I will not meddle in your affairs any more. I will never place myself again in such a position that I

can be accused of making love to any woman's husband. Besides, you will tell him a much better story than I could."

"Surely you believe me when I say it was all my own doing."

"My knowledge of your skill in letter-writing is so great that I feel no difficulty in crediting your singular statement. The fact is," proceeded Mrs Stondon, suddenly changing her tone, "you have placed yourself in a most difficult position with a man whom it is well-nigh impossible to persuade, and you must try to get out of this scrape for yourself. There is time enough, however, for you to think over the matter; for there is no possibility of any immediate change; and even when he does get better, you must not harass him with your confessions till he is strong enough to bear them."

"And if he speaks to you on the subject—"

"I shall tell him what I think—that a woman who could act as you have done is only fit for Bedlam. And now," added Phemie, "had you not better go to your own room for a little while and rest after your journey? I will send Marshall to you in case you require anything."

"Do not send her. I require nothing—except—except—"

"What?" asked Phemie, icily.

"Your forgiveness and your friendship."

"Nonsense!" returned Mrs Stondon. "You want neither one nor the other, Georgina. There is no use in trying to impose upon me. When you can wipe out the memory of the words you have spoken this day, you will then perhaps be able to persuade me you value the friendship or affection of any woman, but not till then. Nay, do not go on your knees to me—it is perfectly unnecessary and extremely ridiculous. Pray get up," she entreated; "some of the servants may come in, or my uncle, and it does look so excessively absurd. Pray get up;" and almost by force Phemie raised her visitor from the floor, and went with her to her room, and left her in an easy-chair with—to quote Mrs Stondon—"an embroidered handkerchief smelling of millefleurs held to her face, and an evident inclination to weep abundantly."

"I told her it would be the very best way possible for her to employ her time," said Mrs Stondon to her uncle, as they stood together in the dining-room. "Of course, she thinks me a hard-hearted Goth; but I mean to teach Mrs Basil Stondon that she shall not be insolent to me with impunity, and that I will not endure such speeches as she has made to-day patiently from any one on earth."

"Phemie, Phemie, the woman is in great trouble."

"She has brought it on herself."

"Does that make it any easier to bear?" asked Mr Aggland.

"And after all I did for her," went on Mrs Stondon.

"You ought to forget your own good deeds, dear."

"Uncle, you are unreasonable—you expect me to be more than human; you think I should bear—bear—and never give back an answer—that I should endure to be put upon, and trampled under foot, and made use of, by any one who likes to come and say, 'I have need of you.'"

"Because, Phemie, it may be that they only come as messengers—that it is really God who has need of you. My child, did you not once say you would try to do whatever work He gave you? And is not endurance oftentimes as much His work as leading armies or commanding fleets? Be patient with this poor wayward soul, who goes wandering on, making herself and other people wretched—unknowing how to compass what she wants. Remember that charity not only 'suffereth long and is kind,' but that it 'is not easily provoked; that it beareth all things; hopeth all things; endureth all things.'"

"I am no saint," she said a little sullenly; for Georgina had "put her out" thoroughly—had chafed and angered and hurt her.

"Did anybody ever think you were, Phemie?" he asked; and the naïve question made her laugh a little. "I am positive I never did," he continued; "but I tell you what I do think, Phemie—that you ought to stand far above such petty annoyance. If you cannot bear indignity patiently, who can? If you will not be generous, where shall I turn and seek for magnanimity?—"

‘ It behoves the high,
For their own sake, to do things worthily,

You ought to follow Coleridge’s advice, and

‘ Gently take that which ungently came,
And without scorn forgive.’

And further,—

‘ If a foe have kenn’ d,
Or worse than foe, an alienated friend,
A rib of dry rot in thy ship’s stout side,
Think it God’s message, and in Lumble pride
With heart of oak replace it.’

I will not quote any more of the lines, because I do not much approve the spirit of those that follow. My dear,” he added, speaking very earnestly and very pathetically, “you have been mercifully dealt with: will you not deal mercifully by another?”

She bent her head till her brow touched the marble chimney-piece, but did not answer for a moment. Then—“You are not going to be hard and unforgiving, are you?” he said.

“No, uncle; I was only thinking,” she replied—“thinking of a remark Georgina made.”

“I should forget it at once,” he recommended.

“It was nothing unpleasant—nothing disagreeable,” answered his niece. “She only said she often wondered what she would have been had she been brought up like me. She seems to imagine her education has made her what she is.”

“Ay, poor thing, ay!” exclaimed Mr Aggland, pityingly. He always felt very sorry for a woman who had been brought up, as he phrased it, “in the world,” and was quite willing to be of Mrs Basil Stondon’s opinion.

“There is a reverse side to the question also,” he said, continuing the idea; for education was a hobby it delighted him to ride. “Had you been brought up as she was, Phemie, how would it have fared with you?”

“Better perhaps, uncle,” she replied; but he shook his head and declared she knew she was answering him idly, “for you must believe there is something in early training,” he added,

“something in the ‘bending of the twig’—something in hearing when very young of that which makes men,

‘Ply their daily task with busier feet,
Because their hearts some holy strain repeat.’

At the same time, however,” finished Mr Aggland, “I incline greatly to the opinion that he who said ‘characters are nurtured best on life’s tempestuous sea,’ was right also; but this poor creature seems neither to have had one experience nor the other. You will be kind to her, Phemie. Remember, he may not live—think how soon she may be left a widow.”

Mrs Stondon did not require that last argument to induce her to return to her guest’s room and beg for admittance; but it drained the only drop of bitterness which was left in her away, and softened her heart completely.

“I am very sorry for having been cross,” she began, hesitatingly—“it was very wrong of me, and—”

Georgina never let her proceed further in her apology. She threw her arms round Phemie’s neck, and kissed her over and over again.

“It was my fault,” she said, “all my fault; but I have been so miserable, and so jealous of you; after what has passed, perhaps you will not believe me if I say I am grateful, but if he only recovers, and we come together once more, I will try to show you—I will try to do better than I have done. I wish I had never done you any harm, I do. I wish I could live my life over again and be honest and straightforward. If we could only see things at the beginning as we see them at the end—oh! if we only could!”

From that day the two women became friends. Resolutely Phemie set herself to do what she could for Georgina, and the poor wife, whose home had been always such an unhappy one, grew different in the atmosphere of love and thoughtfulness.

“It is like being in heaven,” she said one day to Mr Aggland. “I do not wonder at Basil hating me if this was the kind of life he had pictured to himself. What do they say about him now?”

she asked Phemie, who returned at the moment from speaking to the doctors.

“Only what you already know,” answered Mrs Stondon—“that he is dangerously ill;” and Phemie turned away, for the crisis was drawing near.

CHAPTER XLI.

CONCLUSION.

THERE is nothing colder than a night-vigil ; be the curtains drawn never so closely, the fire piled never so high, there still comes an hour at the turn of the night when the cold steals inside the draperies, and takes up its position on the hearth alongside the watcher, seeming to say, "I have as good a right to the heat as you," and it absorbs the heat accordingly.

What is that shiver which tells us, spite of fires and closed doors, that the turn of the night has come ; that chill which creeps through the body, even in the summer time, if we are keeping our solitary watch by the sick-bed, or travelling hour after hour through the darkness ?

Some people say that the hour before dawn is the coldest, and this is possible ; but it is not cold with the peculiar chilliness of which I am now speaking, and which produces precisely the same effect upon the nerves as the sudden withdrawal of pressure at the gas-works produces in a room.

In a moment the lights of the soul seem to burn dim, while that strange cold crosses the threshold and takes possession of the watcher's spirit.

None perhaps, save those who have habitually watched through the night, worked at a trade or profession, or sat in attendance on the sick, will understand exactly what I am trying to write about, and yet the effects of this atmospheric change must have been felt some time or other by all men and all women to whose

fate it has fallen ever to keep a solitary vigil, or to walk alone at night either through London or the country, or beside the desolate sea-shore.

It is at that hour they come fully to comprehend why intramural burials are so pernicious—it is then the sewers give forth their effluvia, and the scent of flowers grows heavy and oppressive—it is then we close the window to keep the smell of the *seringa* from entering our chamber, and cast away the lilies that seemed once so sweet—then we take desponding views of sickness and of the future, and shrink alike from the work of this world and the rest of the unseen!

Through the night Mr Aggland and Phemie and the nurse watched Basil Stondon, and when the hour to which I have referred came Phemie arose, and, wrapping her shawl more closely round her, moved to the side of the sleeper and took up her position there.

As she did so, the lights in her heart were burning dim. She feared the worst—she believed he would not recover, and that the end was very near. She had persuaded Georgina to lie down, promising to call her should there be any decided change for the worse. The nurse was dozing on a sofa behind the door; Mr Aggland, seated by the fire, was reading Jeremy Taylor's sermon concerning the "Foolish Exchange;" and there was a great stillness in the room as well as that peculiar cold, while Phemie softly drew a chair to the bedside in order to watch the sleeper more closely.

Eighteen years, or thereabouts, have elapsed since first in the church at Tordale, when the summer sun was shining on the earth, you, reader, were introduced to Phemie Keller. Should you care in that which is the darkest and coldest hour of all the night to gaze upon her again?

Those authors who, commencing with heroines of eighteen, take leave of them when they quit the church-door at twenty, have a great advantage over the other members of their craft who are compelled to talk of women when they have passed the Rubicon of female attractiveness.

Youth is so pretty, so fresh, so engaging, so full of poetry and romance and gaiety! And once youth is gone, when there are lines on the brow, and memories in the heart, and graves in the past, how shall the interest of the story be kept up—the reader led on to follow the path of maid, or wife, or widow into middle age?

Still, as lives are lived after twenty, so the tale of those lives must be told; and, although eighteen years have gone, Phemie's beauty has not quite departed with them—it is not a thing of the past to this present day.

She wears her widow's cap, and the glory of auburn hair still remains thick and glossy, sunshiny and wonderful, as of old. It may not be the young hair that first attracted Captain Stondon, but it is a woman's hair for all that—soft, luxuriant, beautiful as ever.

What more, you ask, what more? Oh! friends, we cannot both eat our cake and have it. We may not go through the years, and enjoy them, we may not live through the years, and learn experience out of them, and remain just as we were at the beginning.

How would you wish it to be? We came upon her first a girl—a farmer's adopted daughter—dressed in a large-patterned, faded gown—in a coarse straw bonnet—unacquainted with the usages of society—a child of the hills, who had her dreams of fortune, and admiration, and love, nevertheless, just like your daughters, sir, and yours, and yours.

Once again you look upon her, but draw back, declaring this cannot be Phemie Keller! And yet the change which seems so wonderful to you has come gradually upon her, and it is the past which seems to her incredible, rather than the present.

A self-possessed and still beautiful woman—a saint rather than a Hebe—with lilies abiding in her pure face rather than roses—with features regular and perfect as of old.

Should you not like that face to be near you when you lie dying? I should. It gives the idea of all passion, all envy, all jealousy, all uncharitableness, having been taken out of it by the grace of God.

She still wears black. Till she is laid in her coffin, I do not think Phemie will ever cease to do so; but black, as Duncan Agglard somewhat cynically remarked, is becoming to her, and few people would wish to see Mrs Stondon differently attired.

As for the rest, she has, as she had ever, lovely hands, and a stately figure, and a gracious presence; somewhat thin she may be, somewhat too slight for her height; but yet her admirers dispute this fact, and declare Mrs Stondon to be perfection.

This shall be as you please, reader; for those who love Phemie best affirm it is not for her outward beauty they delight in this woman, whose story is almost told; but rather because there is that in her which they can trust and honour, which they have searched for elsewhere in vain.

She has come forth from the fire purified, and the face which looks on Basil Stondon is the face of one who, having passed through deep waters, has found rest for her soul at last.

Yet her thoughts were not happy as she sate by the bed gazing on the sleeper.

She sate thinking about him, and about men like him. She marvelled how the world would go on if all in it were as weak, as helpless, as vacillating as he. She wondered, if he recovered, how it would be with him and Georgina. And she could not help going on to speculate what her lot might have proved had it been cast with such a husband, instead of with the true, good man who had stood between her and the world—who had loved her better than himself—who had remembered her in the hour of his bitterest agony,—and who had left her with his wealth no restriction save to make herself happy if she could.

People think about strange things when they watch by sick-beds. It is not always the malady which absorbs them—not always the end they sit considering; rather, oftentimes, they speculate about the patient, wondering concerning him and life, and his allotted part in the great drama—how far his existence has been useful—how far, according to their light, the world would have been better or worse had such an one never existed.

Very vaguely Phemie recalled the years of Basil's life since he

and she met, and marvelled whether his future, if he were spared, would be as purposeless as his past had been.

There lay a great sorrow at her heart—a sorrow too deep for tears—as she looked on the face of the man she had loved so long and so intensely. Sleep always is a wonderful state to contemplate—except in the case of a child. The man's troubles are forgotten—his schemes laid aside—his thoughts are far away from the concerns of his every-day life;—and his body shares in the great change likewise—the keen eyes are closed—the windows of the brain are closely shaded—the lips open to utter no biting sarcasm—no ready excuse—no words of censure—no sentence of explanation;—the features remain quiet—the over-wrought nerves are still.

Never a movement is there, either in the restless fingers or in the hands, that are so seldom unemployed. Almost feigning death, the sleeper remains so quiet that the watcher longs to wake him—to bring him back from himself and rest, to his fellows and the rush and bustle and hurry of life.

Time after time Phemie rose and bent over the sick man, to assure herself he was still breathing. Softly as the summer wind touches the leaves, she laid her fingers on his wrist, to feel if the pulse were still beating; till, at length satisfied there was no cause for immediate apprehension, she leaned back in her chair and waited—waited, for whatever might be the result.

He had aged more than she. There were deeper lines on his face than on hers—thin and white were his cheeks—worn and wasted his body—his hair was all tangled—his beard and moustache untrimmed. Basil, the young strong man, was gone, and there lay there in his stead another Basil to him who had walked with her among the heather and across the fells.

The night wore on, and through the closed blinds dawn peeped with grey eyes into the sick-chamber; then, in due time, the sun began to rise, and Phemie turned wearily to greet his beams.

How would it be in that room when the sun set? Would she then have looked her last on Basil Stondon living. Should she thenceforth have to think of him as dead?

She crossed the room and, putting the curtains aside, looked out. It was a lovely morning in the early spring, and the birds were singing their fiercest—piping fit to burst their little throats for joy that it was daylight once again. All the east towards which she gazed was glorious with colour, and the distant sea lay like a lake reflecting back the sky.

Sadly, and with a gesture of utter weariness, Mrs Stondon dropped the curtains and returned to her post. Her eyes were dazzled with the bright sunlight, and for the moment she could not see that Basil was awake and looking at her.

“Phemie,” he said; and then she knew he was saved. And while the sun rose higher and higher in the heavens—while the songs of the birds grew louder and more frantic—while the sea rolled gently in upon the shore—while every tree, and leaf, and shrub, and flower looked bright and glad in the light of morning—a great cry of exceeding joy ascended to the Throne of God; for the man was left to make a better thing of his life—to be a spendthrift of his time and a waster of his happiness, a faithless steward and a thankless unprofitable servant, never more.

She did not let him see his wife for a time. The illness had been too sharp to allow of sudden surprises—of much conversation during convalescence; but, as the days passed by, Phemie talked to him about his wife—about their unhappy disagreements—and openly and without reserve, as though she had been speaking of some other person, about herself.

Not without tears did she speak of that past Eden in which they had eaten of the fruit which brings forth death. Not unmoved did she talk of her own shortcomings—of her own repentance. From the old text she preached the sermon of their lives, but as no good sermon ends without holding out some hope for him who turns from the evil of his ways, and seeks even at the eleventh hour to cleave to the right—so Phemie, having faith that every word she spoke was true, assured Basil it was certain he might yet know happiness, and come in time to think of the

story I have told but as a trouble that had been borne—as sorrow which had been endured.

She made him comprehend, after much difficulty, how faulty he had been in his conduct towards his wife. Never did she weary of repeating to him her belief that it was in his own power to make or to mar the peace of every future hour.

“You have never understood each other—you have never tried to comprehend her—you have never allowed her to understand you; but now, as you must travel through your lives together, do try to travel peaceably.”

“And your future, Phemie,” he asked—“what of that?”

“It shall be happy, too,” she answered. “We do not look for a land without shadows when the noontime is over; but the land on which the evening light is shining may be very beautiful for all that.”

And she laid her hand in his which he stretched out towards her; and the man and the woman who had loved one another so much when their high noon of life threw no shadow, looked steadfastly at one another, and discoursed silently, he to her, she to him.

In that hour, heart told to heart all it had suffered—all it felt strong enough to do. Without a word being spoken, each knew what was passing through the other's mind; and as their fingers locked together and then were withdrawn, Phemie comprehended that Basil had sworn to God he would strive in the future to make atonement for the past.

As he might have gripped a man's hand in order to confirm a promise, to render verbal assurance unnecessary, Basil grasped with thin fingers the soft, small white hand, which she put in his.

And thus they buried the old love for ever; and so Basil returned from the darkness of the valley of death—death physical and mental—to take his place in the world, and to fulfil the duties which his wealth and his station entailed upon him.

As for Phemie, what more is there to tell, save that she is now a happy, and a contented, and a useful woman; still beautiful, and still a widow.

Suitors come to her, suitors such as she dreamed of when she built castles in the air among the Cumberland hills, but Phemie's answer to one and all is—No.

If she could live her life over again with her present experience ; if she could retrace the old road with a knowledge of its snares and its pitfalls ; she would choose a second time as she chose the first, and take for her husband the man to whom she would strive to be a faithful and loving wife—the man who in the first chapter of this story, after toiling under the noontide heat, came suddenly within view of Tordale church, and who beside Strammer Tarn, amid the purple heather, within sound of the plashing waterfall, where ivy and lichens covered the face of the rocks, and ferns and foxglove grew between the stones, and the stream laved the mosses and the tender blades of grass, wooed and won, young, vain, fanciful, blue-eyed, auburn-haired Phemie Keller.

THE END.

New Handsome Library Edition

of Popular Novels by Authors of the Day. *In cloth, gilt top, 2s. 6d. each.*

BY MRS. RIDDELL.

Austin Friars.
 Too Much Alone.
 The Rich Husband.
 Maxwell Drewitt.
 Far above Rubies.
 A Life's Assize.
 The World in the Church.
 Home, Sweet Home.
 Phemie Keller.
 Race for Wealth.
 The Earl's Promise.
 Mortomley's Estate.
 Frank Sinclair's Wife.
 The Ruling Passion.
 My First and My Last Love.
 City and Suburb.
 Above Suspicion.
 Joy after Sorrow.

BY FLORENCE MARRYAT.

Gerald Estcourt.
 Love's Conflict.
 Too Good for Him.
 Woman against Woman.
 For Ever and Ever.
 Nelly Brooke.
 Veronique.
 Her Lord and Master.
 The Prey of the Gods.

*BY FLORENCE MARRYAT—
 continued.*

The Girls of Feversham.
 Mad Dumaresq.
 No Intentions.
 Petronel.

BY JOSEPH HATTON.

Clytie.
 The Tallants of Barton.
 In the Lap of Fortune.
 Valley of Poppies.
 Not in Society.
 Christopher Kenrick.
 Cruel London.
 The Queen of Bohemia.
 Bitter Sweet.

BY J. SHERIDAN LEFANU.

Checkmate.
 All in the Dark.
 Guy Deverell.
 The Rose and the Key.
 Tenants of Mallory.
 Willing to Die.
 Wylder's Hand.

BY F. W. ROBINSON.

Christie's Faith.
 Carry's Confession.
 Under the Spell.
 House of Elmore.

LIBRARY EDITION of POPULAR NOVELS—*continued.*

BY F. W. ROBINSON—
continued.

Milly's Hero.
Mr. Stewart's Intentions.
No Man's Friend.
Wild Flowers.
Poor Humanity.
Owen, a Waif.
Woodleigh.
A Woman's Ransom.
Mattie, a Stray.
Slaves of the Ring.
One and Twenty.

BY G. A. SALA.

Quite Alone.

BY SIDNEY S. HARRIS.

The Sutherlands.
Rutledge.
Christine.

BY ANNIE THOMAS.

On Guard.
Walter Goring.

SECOND EDITION.

The Aldine Reciter. Modern Poetry for the Platform, the Home, and the School. With Hints on Public Speaking, Elocution, Action, Articulation, Pitch, Modulation, etc., etc. By ALFRED H. MILES. Crown 4to, 676 pp., cloth bevelled boards, gilt extra, 5s.

The Dramatic Companion Volume to the "Aldine Reciter."

The Aldine Dialogues. Edited by ALFRED H. MILES. Crown 4to, 332 pp., cloth gilt, bevelled boards, 3s. 6d.

The "Aldine Dialogues" is the dramatic companion volume to the "Aldine Reciter." It contains selections from the modern dramatists, carefully prepared for home and school use, with full directions for amateur rendering; also arrangements of the principal plays of Shakespeare, bringing them within the possibilities of drawing-room performance. A third section is devoted to charades, set pieces, proverbs for acting, suggestions for "living pictures," tableaux, and other entertainments, adapted for school festivals and family gatherings.

[Ready.]

THE PLATFORM RECITER SERIES.

EDITED BY ALFRED H. MILES.

Crown 8vo, cloth, 1s.

This Series is issued to provide a library of high-class prose and poetical pieces for recitation from copyright sources, printed in large clear type, well leaded for "platform" use.

1. The Browning Reciter. By ROBERT BROWNING, ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING, ADELAIDE PROCTER, W. S. GILBERT, &c., &c., besides a number of prose and poetic selections from the repertoires of Mr. Samuel Brandram, Mr. Clifford Harrison, and other high-class elocutionists, including "My First and Last Appearance," "The Eye-witness on the Ice," "The Hat," "The Ostler's Story," "The Bishop and the Caterpillar," and a number of other pieces, which are much sought after by elocutionists. 256 pp. crown 8vo, cloth, 1s.

2. The Overton Reciter. Character Sketches for Recitation. By ROBERT OVERTON, author of "A Round Dozen," "Queer Fish," &c. Crown 8vo, cloth, 1s. The second of this series contains a number of sketches of life and character by ROBERT OVERTON. These include some of the most successful pieces of the modern platform, "Our Pardner," "The Three Parsons," "Me and Bill," "Love and Buttons," "One More," "Killing no Murder," &c., &c., &c.

Fifty-Two Stories for Boys. By R. M. BALLANTYNE, W. H. G. KINGSTON, ASCOTT HCPE, GEORGE MANVILLE FENN, CAPTAIN MAYNE REID, GORDON STABLES, ROBERT OVERTON, CAPTAIN GROVES, THOMAS ARCHER, &c. With full-page illustrations, 456 pages, large crown 8vo, bevelled cloth, gilt extra, and gilt edges, 5s.

UNIFORM WITH THE ABOVE.

Fifty-Two Stories for Girls. By ROSA MULHOLLAND, GEORGE MANVILLE FENN, ALICE COCKRAN, SARAH DOUDNEY, &c. With full-page illustrations, 456 pages, large crown 8vo, bevelled cloth, gilt extra and gilt edges, 5s.

BY W. H. DAVENPORT ADAMS.

The Maid of Orleans, and the

Great War of the English in France. By W. H. DAVENPORT ADAMS, Author "Scenes from the Drama of European History," "Anecdotal Memoirs of English Princes," Memorable Battles in English History," &c. Large crown 8vo, handsomely bound in cloth, gilt extra, with nine illustrations, 3s. 6d.

CONTENTS.

Early Influences.—Birth, Breeding, and Youthful Years of Jeanne d'Arc.—Development.—The Heavenly Voices.—Joan Receives a Mission.—A Crisis.—Historical Sketch of the Wars of the English in France.—A Recognition.—Joan at Chinon.—The Siege of Orleans.—Coronation of Charles VII. at Rhiems.—At Compiègne.—The Agony.—Joan's Imprisonment and Trial.—The Public Abjuration at Rouen.—The Martyr's Crown.—Death of the Duke of Bedford.—Decline of the English Power in France.—The Witnesses of the Last Scene.—Justice to the Dead.

This book was written some years since, but is now published for the first time.

The Brig and the Lugger. By

Colonel HUGH WALMSLEY, Author of "Branksome Dene," &c., &c. Crown 8vo, in handsome cloth binding, gilt extra, with Illustrations, 2s. 6d.

Old Lamps and New: An After-

Dinner Chat. By JOSEPH HATTON, Author of "Toole's Reminiscences," "Clytie," "Cruel London," "Valley of Poppies," &c., &c. In One Vol. crown 8vo, 6s., in handsome cloth binding, gilt extra. With Portrait of the Author.

SECOND EDITION OF 20,000.

The Thousand Best Poems in the

World. First Series, containing 500 Poems. Selected and arranged by E. W. COLE. Paper, 1s. 6d.; cloth, 2s. 6d.; and various leather bindings.

PRELIMINARY ANNOUNCEMENT OF

The Poets and the Poetry of the Century.

EDITED BY ALFRED H. MILES.

In Eight Vols., 356 pp. each, fcap. 8vo, cloth bevelled, gilt top.

Limited Edition on Hand-made Paper, in handsome cloth case,
£2 12s. 6d. The Volumes sold separately at 6s. per Vol.

Fine Paper Edition, in cloth case, £1 15s. Or in separate
Volumes, 4s. per Vol.

Now that the century is drawing to a close, it is natural that some attempt should be made to estimate the measure of development attained in the various departments of human activity. Literature, science, and art have all moved forward with extraordinary strides; and it may be expected that in these, as in other spheres of work, the next few years will be largely occupied in taking stock and reporting progress.

The "POETS AND THE POETRY OF THE CENTURY" is an attempt to do this in so far as poetry is concerned. Every poet who may be said to belong to the century is represented by a sufficient selection from his writings to show him in his variety, both in matter and form, the distinguishing feature of the work being that the selections are, as far as possible, complete poems, and are given in sufficient number to really represent the best and most characteristic work of the poet. The selections thus made have, in the case of living poets, been submitted to the respective authors for consideration and comment; thus the Editor has had the advantage of consulting the writers themselves, as well as that of conference with a number of the best critics, so that the final result has been bettered by the judgment of many.

A work produced under such conditions should be of universal acceptance; a necessity to every public and private library.

Especially suitable for School Libraries.

The Aldine Speaker of Poetic and Dramatic Literature. Crown 4to, 1,040 pp., cloth gilt, bevelled boards, 7s. 6d.

This volume comprises the "Aldine Reciter" and the "Aldine Dialogues" bound in one volume, and forms a complete library of poetic and dramatic literature. Especially suitable for school libraries.

BY JOHN COLEMAN.

The White Ladye of Rosemount:

A Story of the Modern Stage. By JOHN COLEMAN, Author of "Curly," "Players and Playwrights," &c., &c. Crown 8vo, in handsome cloth binding, gilt extra, 3s. 6d.

In attractive coloured cover, crown 8vo, 218 pp., 1s.

Wild Will Enderby. By the Hon. VINCENT PYKE. A thrilling story of the New Zealand Gold Fields.

In those halcyon days when I revelled in tightly-strapped trousers, a frequent addendum to the title of a novel or story was the legend—"Founded on Fact." This was supposed to furnish a potent claim on the reader's consideration, and it was usually the most imaginative part of the work.

I was reminded of this the other day, when Professor Murphy Maguire, having read the proofs of this book (with a due regard to the semicolons and careful consideration of commas, as being the most important part of punctuation), laid down the last sheet, and first clearing his glasses—spectacular and otherwise—said in a befittingly solemn tone, as one who understood the gravity of the issue impending—"Is it *all* true now?"

Well, I accepted the implied doubt as a compliment. If my rendering of life on the New Zealand Gold Fields, in the early sixties, was so faithful as to cause the learned Professor to hesitate whether to regard the story of "Wild Will Enderby" as fact or fiction, I must certainly have achieved a success. And I answered him in words which I will now submit to the reader.

The pictures of life and society in those early days are true; the scenic descriptions are true. Some of the incidents narrated are true. For instance, the episode described in the Third Chapter of the Third Book occurred to a personal friend, who related it to me in his own graphic manner. And George Washington Pratt, for whom I confess a wholesome partiality, as the elder-begotten conception of my brain, is drawn upon lines furnished in my all too-brief intercourse with George Hartley, the discoverer of the Molyneau river-workings—one of the most manly men it was ever my fortune to meet with—a typical American, and a right honest fellow. And so I make my bow. Ring up the curtain.

VINCENT PYKE.

DUNEDIN, *May 1st*, 1889.

SECOND EDITION.

In Australian Wilds, and other

Colonial Tales. By L. J. FARJEON, C. HADDON CHAMBERS, EDWARD JENKINS, Madame COUVREUR, &c. Edited by PHILIP MENNELL. Crown 8vo, in handsomely printed coloured wrapper, 4s.

The Aldine Reciters.

EDITED BY ALFRED H. MILES.

Crown 4to, 128 pp., clear type, well printed, good paper. Each book complete in itself.

Price Sixpence paper; One Shilling cloth.

The American Reciter is a complete text-book of American Poetry, and includes the finest selection ever produced at the price.

The Scotch Reciter is devoted to the Poets of "Bonnie Scotland," from Sir Walter Scott to Robert Buchanan.

The English Reciter comprises selections from the English Poets, from William Wordsworth to John Clare.

The Victoria Reciter is a compendium of the Poetry of the Victorian period, from Mrs. Hemans to Mrs. Browning.

The 1888 Reciter provides selections from living authors as well as numerous anonymous pieces.

The Shakespere Reciter contains arrangements of all the most popular of Shakespeare's Plays, with full directions for private performance.

The Aldine Reciter comprises the first five of the above books, with Treatise on Elocution, 676 pp., bound in cloth board, bevelled, price 5s.

The Aldine Dialogues, Part II., Crown 4to, 112 pp.

The A 1 Reciters.

64 pp., large folio. Each book complete in itself.

Price Sixpence.

The A 1 Reciter, Part I., contains Poetical Selections from George R. Sims, W. M. Thackeray, W. A. Eaton, Tom Hood, Lord Macaulay, the Ingoldsby Legends, &c., &c., &c.

The A 1 Reciter, Part II., contains Poetical Selections from Robert Browning, Robert Buchanan, Matthew Arnold, Clement Scott, W. S. Gilbert, J. G. Saxe, &c., &c., &c.

The A 1 Reciter, Part III., contains Poetical Selections from Bret Harte, Will Carleton, Elizabeth B. Browning, Mrs. Craik, J. G. Whittier, &c., &c., &c.

The A 1 Reciter, Part IV., 128 large pages of Poetry and Prose by leading English and American authors.

The A 1 Elocutionist contains Poetical Selections from George Macdonald, Adelaide Proctor, Lord Lytton, W. H. Longfellow, Mrs. Hemans, Lord Byron, &c., &c., &c.

The A 1 Reader, Part I., contains Prose Selections from Charles Dickens, Artemus Ward, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Arthur Sketchley, Samuel Lover, &c., &c., &c.

The A 1 Reader, Part II., contains Prose Selections from Mark Twain, Sam Slick, De Witt Talmage, Max Adeler, Alfred H. Miles, &c., &c., &c.

The A 1 Book of Dialogues contains Proverbs for Acting Charades, Set Pieces, &c., &c., &c. Paper covers, 6d.; cloth, 1s.

The A 1 Book of 550 Songs (Words only) contains the words of the best and most popular Songs, old and new. Price 6d.

The Library of Elocution comprises the first six of the above books bound together. 392 pp., large folio, red cloth, gilt. Price 5s.

RETURN TO → CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT
202 Main Library

LOAN PERIOD 1	2	3
HOME USE		
4	5	6

ALL BOOKS MAY BE RECALLED AFTER 7 DAYS

Renewals and Recharges may be made 4 days prior to the due date.

Books may be Renewed by calling 642-3405.

DUE AS STAMPED BELOW

APR 29 1991

AUTO DISC APR 22 1991

U.C. BERKELEY LIBRARIES



C008349313

