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RACHEL'S SECRET.

VOL. III.



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*Hopkinson*

# RACHEL'S SECRET.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“THE MASTER OF MARTON.”

“Post tenebras lux.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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## CHAPTER I.

### WORK AND REST.

IT was getting dusk by the time Mrs. Doyle's meal was over. Rachel left her then, and went upstairs. All was quiet in the sick room. Her patient seemed to be asleep, the fire was burning with a steady glow, the crescent moon hung in the clear evening sky above the trees at the bottom of the garden. She took her knitting and sat down softly beside the window, where it was still light enough to see to work. The little rest and the peacefulness of the moment were pleasant to her. It had been a tiring day, filled up by a continual succession of those trifling matters, all needing to be attended to, yet seeming to leave nothing behind to atone for the time spent over them, which make up so large a portion of most women's lives.

She was feeling tired and worn, glad to sit down for awhile and think that there was nothing else just now to need her care. Everything was still about the house. The men had not yet come into their suppers, the children were playing in the loft over the barn; Martha and the girl were getting their tea in the kitchen. She was free to be quiet if she liked for half an hour; and none but those who have been "on the stretch," day after day, from morning to night, and sometimes from night to morning again, charged with the guidance of an unsettled household, while the spirits all the time are taxed to bear with the impatience or the lassitude of sickness, can know what a luxury such a blink of rest may be.

But Rachel had sat down hardly five minutes, when a low moan, proceeding from the sick man's bed, fell upon her ear. He had not been asleep then, or if he had, he had been waked by pain. She laid down her knitting and rose at once.

"What is it?" she asked, as she went towards her charge, and gently put aside the white dimity cur-



tain that had been drawn between him and the light.

“My arm,” he muttered feebly, and closed his eyes again as if unwilling to be disturbed.

Rachel stood for a moment looking at him. His face was drawn and haggard, his lips compressed, and as he lay he moved his head feebly upon the pillow with a slight incessant motion, as if thereby he would relieve the restlessness of pain. He was not suffering much, that she saw, but he was weak and languid and unable to endure the continued throbbing in the fevered arm. So nervelessly it lay outside the coverlet; that strong right arm that many a time had done such sturdy service to its owner, its sinews slackened, its power and cunning all lost out of it, just a bundle now of aching nerves.

Rachel was touched. There was something in the thought of this utter weakness and dependance on herself that drew forth her sympathies. She had borne patiently with the sullen moods and irritable humours by which she had been so often tried, but the sight of this silent uncomplaining

distress moved her to compassion. She sat down and began softly to chafe the aching arm. She had often soothed old David Gillespie thus, when nothing else could give him ease; there was a lulling power in the monotonous repeated movement that acted sometimes like a charm. But Dunstan seemed to take no notice of it, though he suffered her passively to continue. Yet by-and-by his head ceased its uneasy motion, and his countenance relaxed as if relief had come. Rachel went on untiringly; she had sat for hours sometimes beside her foster-father, chafing his rheumatic limbs, until the practice had become a habit. At last she paused for a moment, and turned to look down into his face.

His eyes were open now, and fastened on her with a wistful, earnest gaze.

“Go on,” he murmured, “you do me good.”

And then, as if he were speaking half to himself and half to her, he repeated the words—

“You do me good, you do me good.”

Rachel went on again. It was no weariness to her

to do it. So long as she could minister to the comfort of another, her own was what she seldom thought of.

“I wish that I had thought of it sooner,” was all she said. “It might often have made the pain easier to bear.”

“Perhaps it might,” he answered in that weak, broken tone which from a sick man seems like a call for pity and for patience. “Perhaps it might. I have had a great deal lately, more than I have had in my whole life before. It seems a strange thing to be ill in this way. I must be giving a great deal of trouble.”

“Not more than we are willing to take,” said Rachel, quietly; though she was half surprised to hear him speaking thus, for since she came into the house, it was seldom that he had opened his lips, except in the way of complaint or moan, or now and then to ask for something that he wanted. “Before long, if God will, I hope you will be well again; you are better now than you were a day or two ago.”

“Yes, I know I am,” he answered. “But I must have been lying here a long time. That pear-tree outside the window was green when first I came, and now every leaf is gone. This is November, is it not? But I don’t seem able to think at all, except thoughts that come to me of themselves. My head won’t bear it. I feel weaker than a child.”

It was a sorrowful confession. Rachel looked at him with pitying eyes,

“Don’t try to do so,” she said, “it will only distress you, and you have no need for thinking yet. You will get well all the sooner, if you only let yourself be quiet; that is all you want just now.”

“To be quiet,” he repeated; “yes, that is it—to be quiet; I have not been very quiet while I have been lying here; my thoughts would not let me. They came round me like dogs baying at my heels, and I could not drive them away; I tried, but I could not do it. I daresay I was dreaming, but I used to think sometimes they wanted to devour me. Mrs. Doyle could not keep them off, but I

have had them less since you have been here."

Rachel was uneasy. She fancied he was wandering, yet he spoke composedly and his eye was steady as he looked her in the face.

"Do not talk now," she said again, "you will tire yourself. You had better try to sleep."

"No," he answered, "I think not. It is doing me good to talk to you. It is like beginning to breathe again. I used to wish to do so sometimes before, but you would not let me."

"I not let you!" echoed Rachel.

"No. Your face was always silent to me, but just now it spoke. I knew you would listen to me and understand me. What was that you were saying awhile ago about 'as God wills'?"

"I said if He wills you will soon be well again."

"Ah! yes, I remember now. I shall get well again—and strong. That will seem strange, to be strong again. It will be like beginning another life, growing up out of childhood again. I do not know how it is, but there seems to be nothing be-

longing to me in all those years that lie behind me. It is as if they had been lived by some one else. Is there not something in the Bible about being born again? That must be what it means. You read your Bible—don't you? I saw you once in this room with a book that seemed to be like one."

"Yes," said Rachel, anxious now that he should cease this rambling talk.

She feared lest, weak as he was, the exertion should be more than he could bear. But he went on still, in the same half-absent undertone, as if thinking aloud rather than speaking to her.

"I thought so. I used to read it to my mother once myself, a long time ago when I was a child, but I have forgotten it all now except what they have in church. But my head feels dizzy. What was I saying about being a child? I think if my mother had been here I should have been well long ago. She used to look at me softly just as you did awhile ago. You are not doing it now; you are shutting

yourself up again. It is always the same. They just open their doors and let me see the fire within, and then close them on me. It is cold outside. I thought you were going to let me come in and warm myself."

He was wandering certainly. Rachel rose, and covered up the arm, which all the time she had continued chafing.

"You must not talk any more now," she said, "it will do you harm. By-and-by, when you have rested, you shall again."

He obeyed her regretfully, as a child might do who is accustomed to being quietly controlled. Something in the clearness of her voice seemed to call back his feebly straying faculties.

"You are not going away?" he said, when he had swallowed the cordial that she had brought him. "Sit by the window there, where I can see you. I daresay I could sleep if I knew that you were not far off."

Rachel did so. She was not wanted downstairs yet. Besides, just now she hardly dared to leave

him. She felt half fearful lest this vague unsettled talk, so different from his former taciturnity, might be in reality some new phase in his malady rather than a symptom of returning health.

But he looked collected enough when she smoothed down the pillow beneath his head, and put back the tossed hair that had fallen over his forehead. He turned a grateful glance upon her,

“You are good, Rachel,” he said, “you are very good. I have not deserved that anyone should be so kind to me.”

“Do not think of that,” said Rachel; “we should none of us get much, I am afraid, if no one gave us more than we deserved. But try to sleep; I am not going away yet.”

She went back to her seat by the window, wearied through, yet with a hidden feeling of content that made her satisfied to bear up against fatigue and toil. It was scarcely worth while, she thought, to disturb the quiet by lighting the little



lamp that stood ready upon the table. The fire-light was enough within the room. It was too dusk however to go on with her knitting, even near the window, though a tender radiance still lingered in the sky. She could only sit still and think. And as if of their own accord, her thoughts went back to that afternoon before she came to the farm, when sitting in the cottage by herself, she had felt so lonely, so useless, so almost wretched. Since then her days had been hardly spent. It had cost her something to sacrifice her own comfort, the quiet and seclusion which had become a habit, almost a necessity to her, and to devote herself entirely to this work of labouring for others. She had been ready sometimes, when, try as she would, things would jar or go across in the house, or in the sick-room her patient cares seemed to be received only with sullen indifference, to wish that she had never undertaken the task that was proving almost too heavy for her.

But this evening, as she folded her hands in her lap, and leaned back her head against the white

panelling of the little recessed window, she felt as if she had indeed not been spending her strength for naught. She had received that sweetest guerdon, the meed of loving thanks. It had been worth much painstaking and discouragement to see poor Mrs. Doyle's face when she repeated what the doctor had said about Mr. Dayne, and to think that her own poor service, perhaps, had helped him back to life. It nerved her to new effort. It made all that she had already done seem little in comparison with such reward. Her weariness, as she recalled it, was replaced by thankfulness. For there is a strange rest, a rest which is itself a joy, in thus laying aside the thought of self, and living a life which, since it may not sit down to be ministered unto, is content to rise, to gird itself and serve.

Rachel felt it. Her patient toil had not been thrown away. Even this morose and moody charge of hers had been moved to tardy gratitude. Her life was not quite worthless then, since her very presence could be itself a boon. And as she

stole softly out of the room—for by his measured breathing she knew that Dunstan was at last asleep—his last words followed her—

“You are good, Rachel. You are very good.”

## CHAPTER II.

## GETTING WELL.

HAVING once got the "turn," Dunstan proceeded to "mend" with such exemplary dispatch, that even Martha herself began to be mollified towards him, especially when, on the occasion of his coming downstairs for the first time, a week or so later, he put his gaunt head inside the kitchen as he went past the door, and seeing her by herself sanding her fresh scoured floor, slipped half a sovereign into her hand, wherewith to buy herself a winter bonnet when she went on Saturday to Bedesby market.

Martha would have resented the gratuity as an insult if it had been offered in the presence of another. As it was, she pocketed the affront, gave a sort of spasmodic grunt by way of recognition, and

inwardly repented of having brought in that morning for Dunstan's dinner one of the leanest chickens in the poultry yard, instead of the fine plump one which she was resolved the next time to select.

Dunstan went into his parlour, and sat down on the first chair that offered itself. He walked in not very steadily, for he was feeble yet, and the exertion of coming downstairs was about as much as he could bear. It was one of those soft sunny days which linger sometimes on the very skirts of autumn; a reminiscence of the glories of the fading year. The green panelled parlour, with its chintz curtains and leaping fire, and a bunch of chrysanthemums in the old-fashioned china vase on the table in the window, looked bright and pleasant, as he entered it for the first time since he had gone out of it on the morning of his accident, more than three weeks ago, now.

Yet it was a dull descending again to the level of every-day household life. For Dunstan missed something in the empty air. It was the sound of

Rachel's voice, the sight of her quiet face, and the grave smile of welcome that he had looked to meet. For while he had lain prisoned in his chamber, healing of his wound and gathering back something of the strength that the fever had robbed him of, he had grown more and more to lean in his weakness, body and soul upon her. Her frequent presence, her soothing cares, had exerted over him an influence to which he had yielded without resistance, almost without being conscious of it. Always patient, compassionate and serviceable, she had gradually become a need to him; the hours seemed long when she was away. He had learned to watch for her coming as for the light, to feel at rest when she was by, uneasy when she was absent. And since the commencement of his recovery, this habit of reposing on her gentle ministry had grown more constant than before. He seemed to feel through her alone his returning life. He had had no one else to speak to. Mrs. Doyle, wrapped up in a shawl, had looked in upon him once or twice, and Martha made an inroad now and then

with brush and duster into the room, but for everything else, Dunstan had been dependent on Rachel, and on her alone.

Not that, weak as he was, he cared much for anything in the way of society. It was just the sense of some comforting human presence that he wanted, and that Rachel could have supplied, though she had sat silently knitting, as she generally did, all the time that she was in the room. For it must be owned that she had a fine talent for silence. Her voice, when she did speak, was always sweet and low, but it was seldom she said anything more than was absolutely necessary. Still, she listened to him, and that was enough, when he was in the mood himself for talking, looking up, sometimes, with responsive eyes, or putting in a remark from time to time, that served to show that she was attending to what he said.

And, one way and another, she had become the depository of a good deal since that day, a week ago or more, when first the gates of speech had been unclosed, and feeble in body, and still un-

strung in mind, he had suffered his thoughts to flow out as of their own accord before her. Always grave and placid, he felt that instinctive confidence in her discretion which a fine and reticent nature will uncsciously inspire; and now that his cramped life began to stretch itself again, it was a relief, when the fancy took him, to wander out, with her to listen, upon any track into which his mood might lead him.

Everything came tumbling out before her, in indiscriminate confusion. Stories of the scrapes and follies of his boyish days, the history of his early struggles and vexations, and mingled with these, the gentler memories of his childhood, which seemed now, so frequently did he recur to them, to have a special charm for him. But to things that had taken place since his residence in Glinton Dunstan never made allusion. As often happens in such cases, the period immediately preceding his illness had for the time become a blank. Memory, in its recoil, leaped back to a more distant time, and overpassing events that had but recently occurred,



landed him in the midst of scenes that had long been half forgotten.

It was well for Dunstan that it was so. His mind was kept from harping on distressful themes, and worrying itself with vain regrets; though whether, by-and-by, when strength returned, these old associations would also recover their ascendancy, was a question which only time could answer. At all events, for the present, the thing with which he chiefly beguiled the tedium of convalescence was reviving these faded memories of the past, and indulging, when he could secure Rachel for an auditor, in these reminiscences of days gone by.

But to-day he watched and waited for her step in vain. The time seemed insufferably long. He took up a book and tried to read. It was the first time he had done so since his accident, but the print swam before his eyes, and his head began to ache with the attempt. He laid it down, and sauntered to the window. The flowers were all gone out of the garden, with the exception of a few sickly-looking asters and pale chrysanthemums.

The walks looked littered and untidy, even the sunlight seemed almost out of place shining on the bare brown borders and leafless trees that would so soon be fleeced in the winter snows—out of place as the sound of mirth and dancing might be in a house over which the great Shadow was already creeping.

He went to the fireside, and leaned back wearily in his chair. It felt duller downstairs than it had been in his chamber. There, when he was alone, he could wile away the hours half-dozing, half in a waking dream. But here, with everything belonging to working life about him, his books and papers, his meerschaum and riding-whip, all the appurtenances of business and of pleasure, it seemed incumbent on him to be doing something—enjoying himself, at any rate. And poor fellow, he had nothing to do, though if he had he was not able to do it. So much as he had reckoned on getting down for the first time into his parlour, and now he was caring nothing about it, less than nothing, for he almost wished himself back again in that

dim, quiet, white-curtained chamber, where he had not felt it wearisome to sit still and be idle.

He looked at his watch. It was nearly the hour when Rachel usually brought in his dinner. Would she never come? He would have rung the bell, only that he could think of nothing that he wanted, at least not without making an effort, and that he was not equal to.

There was a tap at last, and the door opened. It was only Mrs. Doyle, who had come to inquire after him with many motherly expressions of satisfaction at his re-appearance. But Dunstan did not respond very cordially. He was disappointed at not seeing Rachel; and Rachel, Mrs. Doyle told him, was not in the house.

“There’s one of our men’s wives,” she said, “as lives up the lane, has got a child badly burnt. Poor thing! she was in such a way as never was, for she’s no more notion than nothing what to do with it. So she sent up to us all of a fluster, and Rachel just put on her bonnet and went down. She said she’d be back right away; but I doubt

she's found it worse nor what she'd thought, makes her be gone so long."

And then Mrs. Doyle, perceiving that her lodger was not in a particularly pleasant mood, went out again, thinking perhaps that he would prefer his dinner to her society.

It was far on in the afternoon, and the round table was set in the great kitchen for tea before Rachel returned. The child had been seriously burnt, but she had dressed the burns and left it asleep at last.

"Poor little thing!" she said, when she had told all to Mrs. Doyle, "I could not come away till I saw that it was easier; and the mother seemed so afraid of being left with it, that I could not refuse to stay. But how is Mr. Dayne? I did not like leaving him so long, and his first coming down, too. But I knew you would attend to him; and what could I do when the poor little thing was suffering so?"

"He was asleep in his arm-chair when I went in just now to mend his fire," said Mrs. Doyle;

“and I was glad of it. It would put on the time a bit, for he has seemed sadly moped, shut up with hisself all day. I’d have offered to have set with him a bit, but I couldn’t just bring my tongue to it. You see, there’s no telling how he might take it, or else I pitied for him, I did.”

“It has been a dull day for him, I am afraid,” said Rachel. “He would perhaps have liked to have had the children. It’s a long time since he has seen them, and they might have amused him.”

“So he has. I sent in Geordie Kennedy to him to say ‘Good-bye,’ for he has gone home this afternoon. Abigail’s been up to say that they’re coming back this week, the Doctor and the Missis, and she’s took him with her. I thought they was going to stop away a bit longer. But, come, Rachel, get off your things, and have a cup of tea. You’re like to be wanting it, such a day as you’ve had.”

## CHAPTER III.

## A SURPRISE.

RACHEL laid aside her bonnet and cloak, and sat down to tea. When it was over, she took up her knitting—Rachel never suffered herself to sit with idle hands—and went into the parlour, stepping gently, lest if he were not yet awake, she should disturb the sleeper. He was dozing still, his head laid back against the cushion of the chair, and the firelight flickering over his face, and making shadows among his hair. She closed the door softly behind her, and came forward. For a moment she stood looking down upon him. His features wore a restless aspect which seemed to come out in his sleep more clearly than Rachel had ever noticed before. Lines of suffering too were traced sharply here

and there, and his forehead was contracted almost into a frown, as if unquiet thoughts were troubling him, even in his dreams.

A movement of pity stirred her heart; a thrill almost of tenderness, as she looked on the wasted countenance, and felt how needful she had been and still was to him.

“It has been a dreary day for him,” she said to herself; “I wish I could have been at home to have made it a little more cheerful.” And with a feeling almost of compunction, she turned away and sat down in the deep-recessed window, where, in the pale light, she was still able to see to work. But the twilight was deepening fast. She could not go on long, and clasping her hands upon her lap, as her custom was when nothing else pressed in upon her, she closed her eyes and folded her thoughts in quietness about her.

Once or twice she looked round towards the fireplace, at the still figure beside it. “He must be sleeping a long time,” she thought, for the moon, which when she first sat down was hanging

in the sky just over the trees at the bottom of the garden, had mounted higher and higher, till now it poured with a flood of wan radiance through the latticed casement.

But Dunstan had been awake sometime. He had opened his eyes in the midst of a troubled dream, and seeing Rachel there close at hand, had sat watching her, with the mists of sleep still hanging about his brain, not changing his position, just satisfied to know that she was near; though in the dusk he could not see her face, only the suave outlines of her figure, as she sat bending slightly forward, the moonbeams shimmering softly over her. At last he spoke. She started a little, and looked up,

“You have had a long rest,” she said.

“Yes,” he answered. “I have been watching you. You were thinking. I saw you smile once. What was it about? No, don't light the lamp. Just draw down the blind, and stir the fire to a blaze. It will be light enough to talk by. It has been terribly dull all day. I was in a regular fog



all the afternoon. I thought the time never would get over."

And Dunstan rose and shook himself and took a feeble turn or two up and down the room.

"It has tired you coming downstairs," said Rachel. "I am sorry I had to be away so long." And then she told him how it was.

"Oh, never mind," he said. "I daresay the child was worse off than I was, only I did not know before how much I wanted you. I could not have believed once that I should ever have been brought to such a pass as this."

And he glanced down at the wasted limbs, on which his clothes hung so loosely now, and on the wounded arm which he still carried helplessly in its sling.

"I feel more like a shadow than a man. It is rather humbling, is it not, to be brought down in this way?"

"But you are getting better every day. By-and-by, you will be as strong as ever you were."

Dunstan sighed and sat down again.

"I don't know," he said wearily. "I think I have lost something out of me that I shall never get back. It is something more than strength that has gone from me."

And as he leaned down his head upon his hand, Rachel noticed the heavy, spiritless look that drew itself over his countenance like a veil.

He lifted it again directly.

"It is no use making a fool of oneself," he said, "but I can't help it. I would not have cared this afternoon if that shot had killed me outright instead of only wounding me. It is hardly worth living for to be crawling on at such a pace as I am doing now. And yet I have a downright dread of being thrust out into the world to rough it there again."

"But you will lose that feeling as you get stronger," said Rachel soothingly. From the bottom of her heart she felt sorry to hear him speaking thus. "The wish to work will come back with the power for it."

Dunstan shook his head.

“And what if it does when there is nothing worth working for?” he said almost bitterly, and after a pause he added, “It’s just here. I had as keen a relish for life awhile ago as any man could have ; but it has got the flavour all washed out of it now! Or if it isn’t tasteless, it is bitter, and that is worse still. I wish I could pour the whole mess out, make a libation of it to the Gods, and have done with it.”

Rachel was silent. It was a strange mood he was in ; one that she scarcely knew how to deal with. She had never heard him talk in this half desperate way before. He had been vexing himself surely with something, as he had sat alone so long during the afternoon. She wished now that she had returned for a little while, just to have spoken to him and cheered him up, even if she had gone away again directly. How she longed to pour some healing balm into this sick spirit, as she had often lulled the pain of that aching arm. But Rachel was never fluent of speech. Living as she had done, so much within herself, her

thoughts were slow to form themselves in words. She understood well enough this shrinking recoil from facing the long weariness of life, but no words of comfort came. She only looked at him, with wistful, earnest eyes, soft with the tenderness that brimmed her heart; for a new bond of union seemed to have formed itself between them—a sort of spiritual kinship, that drew her for the moment very near to one who was suffering perhaps now, as she herself had suffered not so very long ago.

“I know what it all means,” she said gently, and there was a placid strength in her voice that unawares conveyed itself to Dunstan, as he sat with his head half hidden again upon his hands, rocking himself to and fro in the firelight with a sullen incessant motion that told of some angry pain within.

But Rachel had done unwittingly the wisest thing she could have done. For in times of sore inward need—and this spiritual suffering is a thing harder even to bear than that which afflicts the body

only—words of counsel, or even comfort, are not always the best kind of consolation. It is just sympathy that is needed, and that out of her abundance Rachel gave.

“She knew what it all meant.”

And Dunstan looked up and met the deep look of pity that dwelt upon him. He felt as a little child might do, who, groping out in the dark, meets the clasp of some soft kind hand, and knows that he is not alone. And that had been such a dreary solitude into which he had been thrust this afternoon. For seeing Geordie again, and hearing as he had done, of the return of the Kennedys, had brought back to him with cruel freshness the thought of Winny, and of the weary blank which as it seemed to him again, life must be, after all, without her. Feeble and oppressed, he could not rid himself of his reflections, but as he sat alone with nothing to divert his mind from the vexing theme, he had been brooding over it anew, waking up one after the other his grievances, until, fretted and tired out, he had fallen at last into a heavy

but unquiet sleep, in which the trouble of his waking hours had been repeated in his dreams.

“If only you had been here this afternoon,” he said; “but it does not signify; I have got through the worst of it.”

And for a moment an impulse came over him to tell her all his story. She looked so helpful and compassionate as she stood there, cherishing him with those quiet truthful eyes. It would ease him so to pour it all into her ear. But something held him back. There was a sacredness even now about those passages between himself and Winny, which, false as she had been to him, he did not dare to violate.

“I am sorry,” said Rachel, as she thought of the long dull day that he had spent. “I would have come home sooner if I had thought of this.”

“I know you would,” he answered quickly. “It was not your fault; you could not help it. But I wonder if you knew how much I wanted you.”

Dunstan was feeble, and every feeling had the mastery over him. Even in health he had never

been used to control himself, but had just flung himself without restraint into the mood of the passing moment. And now, with the sense of weariness and desolation still strong upon him from which Rachel's coming had relieved him, the longing for some still closer sympathy bore him onwards like a tide that he could not stem. He would fold her tenderness about him as he would wrap himself in a garment against the cold. The thought told itself aloud.

“You have been very good to me, Rachel,” he said. “I suppose there is no other woman in the world who would have done as much for me as you have. It is almost worth having been hurt to find that anyone could spend such care upon me; only it is a pity it should have been wasted on such a piece of useless lumber.”

Rachel looked pained.

“You should not talk so,” she said. “And yet I have felt just the same myself at times. No one need be a piece of useless lumber in this world where God has placed him, unless he

chooses himself to be so. We can make of ourselves almost what we will, whether for use or hurt; but there is nothing that need keep your life from being a great good, both to yourself and others."

Dunstan shook his head. He was not to be persuaded.

"I wish I could think so," he said; "but mine seems to me, unluckily, not to be a good at all—nothing but a huge, intolerable blunder. I have made a regular hash of it from beginning to end; and the worst of it is, I don't see any chance of its ever being better than it is, unless——"

He paused. Something seemed struggling within for utterance. Then he went on hurriedly,

"I did think awhile ago that things were going on a better track, but they are all off now. If it were not for you, I could just knock under at once. I could indeed. I never knew what it was to have a friend before I met with you; and how you bore with me I don't know, for I behaved more like a brute than a man when first you came, I



did, and I knew it too, but some evil thing had a grip of me, and I could not free myself until you did it for me. No, it was not the pain. I could have borne that a hundred times over, but if ever a man was possessed by something worse than himself, I was then. It was horrible sometimes. I lost faith in God and man, and in myself too, till I felt as if the whole world was rotten and decayed together. And then you came like my good angel, and gave me back to myself, and taught me that there was something left to trust in yet. You did not know what you were doing, but it was like life from the dead when first I felt your spirit touching mine. It was that first evening, you remember, when you bade me not talk any longer. You were frightened. I believe you thought my brain was fevered, but it was not so, only I kept mixing you up with the thought of my mother."

Rachel was gazing at him with astonished eyes. He was speaking eagerly. The tone of bitterness and languor had changed into one of almost passionate intensity. His face, as the firelight flashed

upon it, seemed kindled with excitement. She was dumb before him ; his despondency and self-upbraiding she had understood, but this passed her comprehension.

“Is this for me?” she thought, and as he paused there ran through her a tremor whether of joy or fear, she could not tell. It was not mere thanks for service that he was pouring forth, not gratitude that was leaping out thus before her, but something strange, bewildering, that made her wonder whether what she heard was a reality, or whether all was nothing but a dream.

There was something peculiar and illusive too even in the aspect of the room. The moonlight was streaming in through the latticed casement, making sharp shadows near the window and weaving a fine diaper pattern on the wall as it fell through the lozenged panes, while beside her the firelight flickered in the high old-fashioned grate, mingling strangely, as it flashed and faded through the room, with the ghostly radiance, and playing in strange freaks of gloom and glow up and down

the panels of the wainscot, and over the dark walnut furniture which from every knob and polished surface reflected a ruddy, uncertain gleam.

Dunstan noticed her silence, and felt its cause.

“You wonder to hear me say all this,” he said, “but it is because you do not know—you never can know, all that you have been to me. I tell you I lay dying by the wayside of life—dying body and soul both, and you came by with helpful hands and poured oil and wine into my wounds, and made me whole again. And do you think I owe you nothing for all this? I do, more than I can ever give, if I gave all I had. You can take it. It is not worth having, but it is yours. Only, Rachel, keep by me—do not leave me any more. If you stay with me I shall be strong—I know I shall; but if you forsake me now I shall sink back deeper than ever I was before.”

He was speaking quietly, and yet his words were wild. Rachel felt uneasy. His brain must be unsettled; the excitement of the day, fatigue and solitude had hurt him.

“I am not going to forsake you,” she said, as if she were soothing a frightened child; “I will stay with you till you are well, then you will need me no longer.”

“You don’t understand me,” he said sadly. “I mean that I shall want you always—to my life’s end. It is of no use talking of staying with me till I am well; that is not enough. If you were gone, I should be well no longer. You must promise never to leave me—never again.”

Rachel looked at him with distress and embarrassment upon her face. Whether he meant all that he was saying, or whether it was but rambling talk, still it was strange to hear him speaking thus to her. For hitherto, closely as they had been thrown together, he had never overstepped the bounds which her own sense of fitness and self-respect would have marked out between them. There was a gentle gravity about Rachel which fortified her against any approach to freedom. Those fine cares, veiled by an exquisite reserve, that she had bestowed upon him, had been re-

ceived as she had given them, quietly and readily, with no parade of gratitude. It was enough that her services were needful to him; it had never occurred to her that they could be viewed in any other light. But now his impetuosity disturbed her. She shrank within herself, like some sea-flower, whose floating petals have been too rudely touched.

“To stay by him always!” He could not know what he was saying.

“That cannot be,” she answered nervously, for she felt at the moment as if her self-possession were forsaking her. “This house is only my home so long as I am needed in it. Besides, you will have to leave it yourself some time. It would be impossible for me to stay always with you.”

“Unless you were my wife.”

Dunstan was not looking at her now. He was gazing absently into the fire. Rachel could see his face. It was quiet enough, except for the unsteady gleam of the dancing flames that played

fitfully upon it. And his voice was cool and collected. Apparently he was quite aware of the full import of what he had been saying,

“Unless you were my wife.”

## CHAPTER IV.

## WANTED, A FRIEND.

RACHEL understood him, but she would not hear. These were words to be forgotten, not remembered by either her or him.

“It is nearly six o’clock,” she said. “It is time you had your tea. I will go and make it ready.” And she moved towards the door.

To reach it she had to pass his chair. Dunstan put out his hand and stayed her.

“I have not vexed you, Rachel?” he said. “I did not mean to do so. But think of what I say. You do not know what good you have it in your power to do, or what harm either. You are the only friend I have. Do not take yourself away and leave me again, a beggar, as you found me.”

The full tide of eagerness had ebbed by now.

He spoke wearily, almost faintly; his head laid itself back feebly against the cushion of the chair, his whole frame seemed unstrung and spiritless. Rachel turned, and, as she did so, a great flood of pitifulness surged over her. A strange new thrill, too, of a tenderness beyond pity. His weakness appealed to her as his strength could never have done; the woman's heart within her trembled towards him, as might that of a mother towards her new-born babe. For was he not her own, given to her as from the grave itself; and now putting himself, if she would take the gift, wholly into her hands?

To cherish him, to comfort him, to be his stay and solace. Could she refuse it all? Did she not rather yearn at this moment to surround him with a whole panoply of anxious cares, to carry him as a burden on her heart though she herself should sink beneath the load?

But nothing of this showed itself in her face, only her voice was shaken a little out of its quietness, as she said in very soft, low accents,



“It is so strange to me. I cannot comprehend it yet. It is a thing that needs much thinking of. But I must go; you will be faint for want of food.”

Dunstan had her hand in his. He had taken it as she passed him. He carried it to his lips, and pressed them lightly on the slender palm. She drew it hastily away. He looked hurt.

“You do not trust me, Rachel,” he said, sadly.

The words touched her. They came out feebly, like the utterance of one too spent to defend himself against an implied reproach.

“It is not so,” she answered. “You do me wrong to think so,” and as she stood before him by the fire, her dark, soft-falling dress in shadow, and the warm light playing over her face and among the smooth bands of her dusky hair, there gathered into her countenance a look of almost pained intensity.

“I do trust you,” she said; “but you do not know what you are doing. Be my friend, if you will, but it is too much for you to give your love to one

like me. I should not dare to receive it. My life is so cold and sad; it could put no brightness into yours. You should choose some one fairer, and fresher, and happier than I, to be your wife. I will watch over you, care for you while you need it, help you if I can, but I could not let you sacrifice yourself to me."

She hesitated an instant.

"And then your friends," she added. It was a wide space that parted their relative positions, and even at this moment Rachel could not help being conscious of it.

"My friends!" he echoed, with a scornful emphasis and slight access of warmth. "My friends! I told you that I had none. I can please myself in what I do. There is no one who has any right to interfere with me. I am alone in the world, as you are yourself, Rachel."

Alone. Yes, she was alone. Rachel had felt that sorrowfully, and almost bitterly, many times since old Andrew Gillespie had died. And to be alone, truly alone, holds in it all 'of sadness that

man or woman in this world can know. Yet some vague presentiment or self-distrust seemed urging her still to put from her this proffered love, which, could she but accept it, might place her, desolate as she was, in the safe warm shelter of a husband's home. To put it from her, yet not as she had put away that which David Doyle had pressed so pitifully upon her. Then as she denied him, there had been only *his* pleading to resist. Now she was feeling as if her own heart were siding itself against her. It needed an effort to save herself from yielding, and she made it.

"We will not talk about it any longer now," she said. "Wait till you are stronger, and have had time to think about it. Things look so different often, when we have thought about them long."

And without giving him time to reply, she slipped out of the room, and Dunstan saw her no more that night.

He followed her to the door with his eyes;

then he leaned back exhausted in his chair. He was actually faint by this time, as Rachel had said, for want of nourishment ; for he had taken nothing since his early dinner, not even the customary cordial, which, with no one to remind him of it, had escaped his memory ; and Martha's dry chicken, not very daintily served up, for the meal lacked all those little delicate *et ceteras* which Rachel's finer hand would have supplied—had been hardly tempting enough to provoke an appetite.

He tried to recal what had just occurred, but his powers failed him. The sudden excitement following on the tedium and irritation of the day had brought its re-action with it. His faculties refused any longer to obey him. He only knew that he had done what till that afternoon had never occurred to him even in idea. Rachel had been a faithful and a helpful friend—he had asked her to be his wife. He felt the touch of her hand still upon his lips ; he heard some vague echo of her voice mingling with the soft whisper

of the dancing flames. "It needs much thinking of." No doubt it did; only just then he could not think. Everything seemed in a mist and whirl of confusion. He must give it up, and wait till he had eaten, and was refreshed. But it would all be right. It must be so. Everything was with which Rachel had to do. He wanted something to rest against, to trust in absolutely, to lean his whole soul down upon, and he could do it here. It was not love he cared for now, only truth and kindness, and Rachel was so true—so good. Somehow it would all be right.

The thought lulled him. His head leaned more heavily against the cushion. In five minutes' time he was in a restless doze again. He could not have lost his consciousness for more than a few moments, at the most, yet during that time his waking thoughts had disguised themselves in a dream that had seemed to last for hours. He had been chasing for a whole summer's morning some strange and brightly-plumaged bird that fluttered on continually before him till it had lured him

into a bleak and barren wilderness. There it took wing and left him, and as he sank to the ground, spent and footsore, a voice that sounded to him like Winny's, filled the air with peals of mocking laughter. He lay till night had fallen, then he heard a veiled step approaching, and felt soft garments floating near him. A hand was placed beneath his head, a cup of wine put to his lips. He heard Rachel saying: "I am not going to forsake you." And then the mocking laughter rang again around him and he awoke, and started up. Martha was just coming with lumbering step into the room, bringing the tray with his tea upon it.

She was in an affable mood this evening. Perhaps the gleam of Dunstan's half sovereign had left a trail of brightness behind it that had not faded quite away, for she seemed disposed to patronize him even to the extent of a little conversation—a very unusual thing with Mrs. Doyle's taciturn domestic.

She volunteered the information that Rachel

had gone again to the cottage down the lane. "It's wuss again, is the bairn," she said, "and t' mother sent on to say she durstn't be left with it. She's a poor stick, is Tim's wife. It was nobbut a bad find for him when he picked her up. I doubt if she could as much as boil a potaty for his dinner without spoiling of it. But however, it sarves him out for being taken in with her pretty face when everybody knew she hadn't a stocking to her foot but what had a hole in it, an' not a penny saved out of her wage neither. It passes me how men can make such softs o' themselves because one gell's a bit better looking nor another. As if the broth 'ud taste any better for her watching of it. An' a deal they care for it all after a bit. I lay Tim never takes a kiss of his wife now from year end to year end, for as much as he thought of one when he was a-courting of her. He'd better ha' got summut that would ha' lasted longer, and him a working man, an' seven on 'em now to feed. It's a fortune that's soon spent, is a pretty face."

One certainly that Martha would never have the chance of spending, a fact which made her, perhaps, less charitable than she might have been towards those who had; though, as she clattered down the things upon the table, she pursed up her lips with an air that seemed to imply a comfortable consciousness of possessing attractions superior far to the evanescent charms of a pair of rosy lips.

Dunstan was wide awake by the time that Martha had finished her harangue. The fragrance of the hot tea and buttered toast saluted his olfactory nerves with an appetising odour that seemed already to have brought refreshment with it. He got up and turned his chair towards the table.

“What were you saying about the child?” he asked.

“It’s wuss, sir,” responded Martha, smoothing down her ample blue-checked apron. “It must have got itself burned dreadful. They seem to say it won’t come round, an’ a good thing an’ all if it didn’t. I never takes on, myself, when I hears tell o’ bairns being took. There’s allays plenty on ’em



left, an there's no telling what it saves 'em from. I'm sure, what one thing an' what another, the most o' folks seem to have more trouble than owt else in this world. It's just toiling an' mōiling from morning to night to get their bit an' their sup, an' a deal on 'em not that. An' it's a even chance if them childer o' Tim's wife's turns out bad or good, so as she brings 'em up. They're as well, mebby, to be safe afore they have t' chance o' getting wrong. They won't come to a deal o' harm, I reckon, as long as they're lying in the church-yard, though that's not to say one's to dig 'em a grave afore they're ready for it."

And Martha, having made herself agreeable thus far, threw a fresh shovel-full of coals upon the fire and retired to 'the kitchen, clapping the door after her with a din that made Dunstan's nerves quiver as if he had heard the report of a cannon-shot at his elbow.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE OLD BROOM-MAKER.

“**H**E seems to bid pretty fair to mend straight away now, does yon Mr. Dayne,” said Gideon that same evening to his wife, as he sat smoking his pipe after tea in the chimney-corner.

Now that the days were getting short, this was Gideon’s chief social opportunity. At other hours of the day conversation was apt to be carried on under difficulties, for he was seldom in the house except at meals, and being a hearty man, and always in a hurry to be out again and seeing after his men, he was generally “over-throng with his victuals,” as Mrs. Doyle expressed it, to allow of much interruption in the way of domestic intercourse.

Mrs. Doyle sat in the rocking-chair beside the

table with a basket of worsted stockings upon it that she was mending. It was not much in the way of household matters that she was able to undertake as yet, but this and such little light work, she was quite competent to perform again.

She snipped off an end of worsted, and looked up.

“Ay, he’s coming on wonderful, considering,” she replied. “It’s just a week yesterday since he took the turn. But it’s a bad bout he’s had, poor young man! I’m sure, afore I was took myself, I was almost fit to misdoubt, one time, whether he’d frame to pull through at all or not. Nor I don’t believe he would, if it hadn’t been for Rachel. No wonder he takes to her as he does. If she’d been his own sister he couldn’t seem to think more of her, an’ speaks to her allays as if she was any lady. But well he may, for it’s beyond anything the way she did for him when he was at the worst. An’ for me an’ all; I should have worretted myself to death when I was bedfast and couldn’t see to nothing, if she hadn’t come just when she did. David used to say she was over-good for this

world, an' I think sometimes myself, she is. There doesn't seem to be a speck upon her to make her belong to it, like."

And Mrs. Doyle put her hand into the stocking she was darning, and examined it minutely from toe to heel. The result was satisfactory; she rolled it up, and took another.

"Ay, she's made out o' finer clay nor what the most o' folks is," said Gideon; "there's no denying that, though how she comes by it is more than I can tell. It hasn't been her bringing up, that's sure. He was a bit of a scholar, was David Gillespie, an' having been in the Service made him hold himself up as you may say. But Rachel's got a sort o' quality air about her. It's neither here nor there, an' she's not to call pretty neither, just she has it in her. It's mebbly with her being up at t' Hall so much when she was little, playing along with Miss Winny. Or else she has it by blood. It's my belief old David knew more nor ever he chose to tell. They're close, is Scotch folks—they're close."

Mrs. Doyle made no reply to this remark. Rachel's virtues just then were more upon her mind than her origin, whatever that might be.

"An' then t' way she has with her tongue," continued Gideon. "You'd think any day to hear her, it was quality talking. That was a'most the only thing ever I had again' her an' David. It wouldn't ha' been in natur for her to ha' been seeing after t' men an' calling to t' ducks an' geese as if she'd been a lady born. Why, they wouldn't ha' known what she was a-saying of."

And Gideon paused, and puffed out a huge cloud of wreathing smoke, apparently puzzled by the contemplation of such an anomalous state of things.

"An' the way she put up with Mr. Dayne was a pattern," said Mrs. Doyle, returning to her original theme, "an' him as contrairy when first she come as ever he knew how to be. I'm sure if it hadn't been for the thought of David he'd have put me past my patience times an' times again, he was that touchy."

“An’ it takes summut to do that,” said Gideon, as he looked at the mild face before him, somewhat paled and thinned to be sure, but sweet and comely still. “But he was allays easy up, was Mr. Dayne. He was like that brown mare, Bess. Give her her head, an’ there wasn’t a better beast this side o’ Bedesby; but go again her in owt, an’ she’d pretty soon let you know where you was. I’ve wondered oftens whether there was aught up with him an’ Miss Winifred. He used to be a deal there while just a bit afore they went away, an’ he took on then, I recklect, an’s been in the stunts ever since.”

Gideon was a shrewd man, and prided himself on being able to see as far into a millstone as most of his neighbours.

“I don’t know for that,” returned his wife. “There’s a deal of folks says it’s Mr. Cyril that’ll get her, but there’s no telling; things falls out so different oftens from what you might ha’ counted on.”

“Ay, they do that,” said Gideon with a sober

shake of his head, "particklar where there's a woman in the way. They allays goes by contrairies, does t' women. You never can tell where you have 'em."

Mrs. Doyle never argued with her husband when he got on this point. Like most men whose disposition leads them to be subjugated by the softer sex more easily than most, he was fond of making the balance even, as he thought, by having an occasional fling against them. But the good woman knew full well that there was not a better husband in Glinton, nor one that thought more of his wife and how to please her, than did her Gideon. She darned on in silence, while the farmer puffed away slowly at his pipe.

"Did she say when she'd be coming back?" he inquired at last.

"What, Rachel?" said Mrs. Doyle. "No, but she won't be here yet a bit, I reckon. It would take her good part of an hour to get the child fettled up for the night, an' she's sure to see all straight afore she leaves. I don't know what Tim's wife

would ha' done, poor woman, if it hadn't been for her. She could no more have brought herself to have dressed that little thing's burns, I do believe, than she could have flayed it alive. But, however, I can't blame her; I know by myself what it 'ud be. I'm sure, when I was doing Mr. Dayne's arm sometimes, you might have knocked me over with a feather, it made me feel that bad to see him wince and shrink at every touch."

"I think I'll just step down myself to Tim's," said Gideon, "an' come along home with her. It's lonesome in that lane after dark, an' Rachel's not like common folk that reckons nothing o' being out by theirselves at night."

"I wouldn't be long afore you're off then," said his wife. "You might be missing of her."

"No fears o' that in Thixby lane," said Gideon, "without it was her sperrit that was coming. I'll just smoke out this pipe, an' then I'll be going."

He puffed away silently a moment or two longer. The pine log crackled in the chimney; Cadge, the old watch dog, lay at his feet, basking with half-



shut eyes in the warmth. Suddenly he pricked his ears and looked towards the door.

“What is it, Cadge?” said Gideon; “what is it, old boy?”

For answer there came a low knock at the door which opened out of the kitchen into the yard. Mrs. Doyle rose with her stocking on her arm,

“What! it’s you, Sandy,” she exclaimed, as she opened the door and drew back a step. “Why, who’d have thought of seeing you here this time o’ night? Come your ways in.”

“Nay, I maunt come in,” said Sandy in his thin quavering treble, “but I war coming by, an’ I thowt I’d just ax how t’ gentleman war as got hisself hurt.”

“Oh! he’s very near well again,” shouted Gideon from the chimney corner; “but step in, Sandy, don’t you stand out there.”

“But I’ve got Jess,” answered Sandy from without. “Her an’ me’s been taking a load o’ brooms to Bedesby made me be out so late. I mun be getting of her home an’ seeing after a bite o’

summut for her. It's been a goodish trail she's had, there and back."

"If that's all, we're not pinched for a mouthful o' hay at this place, I reckon," cried Gideon, in his hearty good-natured accents. "Here Mike! Mike!" and he went to the door and called to one of the farm lads out of the yard, "fetch a wisp of hay for this here beast, an' look sharp about it. Oh! stop," he added reflectively, "we may as well do it handsome while we are about it. Give her a feed o' corn, an' let her enjoy herself for once. It's what she doesn't get every day, I reckon. Now, Sandy, come in an' sit you down a bit; we haven't seen you of a long spell. You're like to have a drop o' summut to warm you."

Thus enjoined, Sandy stepped in, pulling off the loose sack that he wore round his shoulders by way of overcoat. A small, shrunken old man he was, with shoulders bowed by sixty years of honest toil; his big brown coat hanging down half way below his knees, and blue ribbed worsted stockings meeting a pair of patched corduroy smalls.

He sat down by the fire, and began warming his shrivelled fingers at the blaze, while Mrs. Doyle, on hospitable thoughts intent, made preparations for mixing him a comfortable glass of toddy.

“Sup it up Sandy, sup it up,” said Gideon, when the old man had got it stirred up, and set beside him. “It’ll warm ye up a bit. You’re looking rayther nipped about the chaps. Yes, he’s had a longish bout, has Mr. Dayne, but we’re going to have him well enow. I say, Missis, tell him Sandy’s here. He’ll mebbly like to see him.”

Sandy put down his glass with a look of alarm,

“Nay now, wait while I’m gone,” he begged, “wait while I’m gone;” and he shifted uneasily upon his seat; “it wouldn’t be manners in me to be axing of him to his face how he war. He’d mebbly take it ill.”

“Hould your whist, Sandy,” said Gideon. “He’s like the rest on us, I reckon; he’ll be none the worse pleased for knowing as folks has a thought

on him. Where's t' good of a man being badly if he's never to be axed after by no one?"

Sandy shuffled about still somewhat apprehensively but made no further remonstrance. Mrs. Doyle went out to give her lodger information of their guest, and Gideon got up and reached down his hat.

"An' now I mun be off," he said, "I've to t' far end o' Thixby lane to go. You'll stop a bit, Sandy, an' keep t' Missis company while I get back. I shan't be long, an' I'll give a look at Jess as I go down t' yard, an' see as Mike's giving of her her corn."

"Tell him to come in here, Mrs. Doyle," said Dunstan, when he had heard who was in the house. "Or no, I will come out myself and see him in the kitchen. I think I have not been fairly inside it since I went into it that morning with my arm full of shot."

And Dunstan stretched himself, and followed Mrs. Doyle out of the room. It had been a long day with him again. He had seen little of Rachel

—and that little had not been altogether satisfactory. Something in her staid and guarded manner had forbidden him to return to the one subject that now was uppermost in his mind. Yet the more he thought upon the step which he had so hastily taken, the more he satisfied himself that it had been the one right thing for him to do. Like a house with its windows labelled, “Apartments to be let,” Winny’s defection had left our hero’s heart empty, swept and garnished, ready for the reception of some fresh occupant should any such appear. And in Rachel he had found something to fill the void; comfort, tenderness, gentle service, a prop for his weakness, a supply for his wasted spirit. And as she had stood without, with patient hands ministering to him in this sore and sudden need, what better could he do than open wide the door to admit her, if she would but enter, which was just what Dunstan was waiting now to learn.

But when a man has been turning over a subject from night to morning and from morning to night again, with no intermission beyond a few

hours' dreaming sleep, it is a relief sometimes to drop it for a moment.

Dunstan felt a touch of the old life warming in his veins as he faced again the glow of that huge open fireplace with its blazing logs, and saw the bright tins upon the buff-washed walls, and the pewter mugs and platters in the great delf-rack, all winking back to the flames just as they had done on that first night of his arrival at the farm; and everything, from the big chintz-covered couch down to Susy's little three-legged stool that stood in the corner by her father's chair, wearing just the same familiar, home-like aspect,

"Noo, sir," said Gideon, facing about, for he had got his hat on now, and was just setting off, "I'm glad to see you better, sir. It looks summut like, having you in here again."

And he put out his broad palm and gave Dunstan's hand a hearty grip.

"Here's Sandy Kaye, sir, comed in to ax after you."

Sandy was on his legs making his "obedience"

to the gentleman, and feeling somewhat awed at his own presumption ; but as the farmer had assured him, Dunstan seemed rather pleased than otherwise to be an object of attention ; for he sat down on the settle and began to talk to them all in a way that made Mrs. Doyle's face fairly shine again with pleasure.

“He's really comed round wonderful,” she said to herself, “an' as free as ever he was, though he was a bit twisty while he was badly, an' makes hisself at home so there in the settle, an' seems in such good sperrits, too.”

Her heart quite warmed within her towards her lodger, the more so as she noted his thin bleached hands and wasted face, and the way in which his clothes seemed now to hang about his once well-filled frame. For there is nothing opens a woman's heart to perceive the good properties of anybody so much as seeing them in need of a little commiseration.

Gideon had gone now, just putting his head inside the door again to assure Sandy that Jess was

all right, and that he might make himself easy to sit a bit.

“An’ sup your toddy, Sandy,” urged Mrs. Doyle, “you needn’t have no fears of it. It isn’t strong to speak of.”

Sandy took a careful sip, and by degrees, under the united influences of the genial beverage and Mrs. Doyle’s attentions and the gentleman’s affability, began to feel himself at ease, and trotted off quite briskly into conversation. For though Sandy was abstemious in the matter of whiskey toddy, he was fond of a “crack” now and then when he could get it, the more perhaps, because in his cottage on the moor, the old broom-maker’s social opportunities were somewhat of the scantiest.

Dunstan too was enjoying the change from his parlour to that bright, hospitable kitchen. It made him feel as if the hush of a sickness was dropping off. He was in the mood to be pleased; Rachel would soon be coming in, and if he stayed he was pretty sure to see her again that evening. Altogether he was disposed to encourage the old man. And in-



deed it was worth something to see how Sandy chirped up as he sat with his red pocket-handkerchief spread over his knee, rubbing his hand up and down his ribbed stockings, and his withered wrinkled face spread over with a smile of full contentedness.

Sandy was by no means a contemptible companion when he was once wound up and fairly set a-going. There was originality and homely humour about him, though how he came by it some might wonder, seeing that for the last five and fifty years, as he was fond of telling, he had never slept a night out of the old stone cottage in which he was born; so that the horizon of his life had been none of the widest.

“Fifty-five years, Sandy,” echoed Dunstan. “That’s a long time, Sandy; there are not many men can say as much.”

Sandy perked up at the compliment implied,

“Ay, sir, it’s a long time to look forrard to, but it’s none so much to look back on. When I got wed and sattled down wi’ my wife in t’ place that had been my father’s afore me, I should ha’

wearied at the thought o' stopping there mekking brooms to t' end of my days ; but noo that it lies aback o' me, it seems nobbut a step or two that I've gone."

"But it is dull work, Sandy, isn't it, making brooms year after year, from Monday morning to Saturday night?"

"Nay, sir, I can't say as it is. You see I brings my mind to it, an' that makes it easy ; and then there's Sundays comes an' makes a change, an' I'se allays lighting on summut in t' Bible as gives me a lift."

And Sandy hitched his chair a little forward, and looked up as if he had something coming that he would like to say.

"Now, there was t' other Sunday I come over here to t' church, and there was t' parson a-preaching away, an' all t' folks set looking at him an' taking of it in, forbye two or three on 'em that I see'd asleep. An' says he, we mun all receive o' the deeds done in the body. It's all wrote down, says he, what we've been agate on down

here. An' thinks I, it'll cut nobbut a 'poorish figure, I doubt, when t' angel sets down in t' book above that Sandy Kaye had made so many brooms that week, an' done nowt else."

Dunstan smiled, and Sandy went on.

"Well, an' then, when I gets home an' sits me down to read, there was that piece about yon time when there wanted a bit o' bad flooring mending in t' Lord's house, an' it said as 'the men did the work faithful.' An' thinks I, if the Lord thought it worth while having that set down, so as wherever t' Bible goes folks may hear tell on it, as like as not He'll have t' angel put down in his book as Sandy Kaye made so many brooms a week, an' made 'em well, too. I wouldn't like it to be owt but that, you know, sir. Here's t' Missis'ull tell you it's allays a karacter for a broom to say as Sandy Kaye made it."

"It is that, Sandy," said Mrs. Doyle. "There's a deal o' folks hereabouts would miss your brooms if you was gone."

"I doubt they would," said Sandy, shaking his

head with a mingled expression of satisfaction and perplexity. "It's a thing as allays troubles me when I studies it over, where them as I've served with brooms so long 'ull look to get others as good. It's t' only thing as saddles me to stop on a bit longer, or else oftens when I lies waking o' nights, an' thinking o' Esther and t' bairns that's all been took afore me, I could almost be fit to ax the Lord to let me fall asleep and wake up wi' them."

"Ay, it's like to be lonesome for you, Sandy, now Esther's gone," said Mrs. Doyle, with a touch of compassion in her voice. "I don't wonder you miss her, so many years as you've been together."

"Five-and-forty year," said the old man absently; an' ten years come Christmas it 'ull be sin' I brought her to Glington Churchyard. But them that has naught but death between 'em isn't so very far apart. It's nobbut waiting a bit, an' I shall go to her, though she'll never come back to me. She's been looking out for me, I know, sin' ever she went. It wouldn't be like her to be enjoying

herself up there, an' never giving a thought to me. An' the Lord lets me see her now an' again, though it isn't with waking eyes; he thinks, mebbly, I should forget the looks of her if I didn't. Last time was a bit afore Easter; an' says she, 'I'm beginning to think long o' you, Sandy,' says she. 'You're past seventy, by a good bit, I thought you would ha' been here afore now.' Says she, 'The Lord's keepiug you a long time at them there brooms.' 'Niver heed, honey,' says I, 'it'll be all right. He'll make it up to us when the time comes.' An' He will, too, I know; I've no fears on Him."

Dunstan looked into the old man's face more curiously than he had done before. There was a simple pathos in his words that had gone home to him, and touched him more nearly than he cared to show. And there was nothing strange in this, for we shall often find a depth and strength of nature among the humble poor that in uncouth phrase lets us see further into the living heart of things than the polished utterance of the finished scholar.

To be sure, Sandy's acquaintance with literature was but small. He never read save in the thumbed, leather-backed bible that for the last half century or more had been his daily study. But the man who is familiar with these grand old Hebrew books will not be destitute of cultivation. He will know pretty nearly all that man knows about man. He will have read some of the finest poetry in existence. He will have found fit language in which to express all that is deepest, all that is highest in himself; and he will have come near to the great heart of things, and seen, if but dimly shadowed forth, that mystery of existence which for a man to look into, is to feel the awfulness and the beauty of the lowliest, as well as of the loftiest life.

And Sandy had so imbibed the spirit of what he read, that it oozed out unconsciously in everything he said and did, tinging even his ordinary speech with a quaint flavour of what in any one else would have savoured of Puritanic cant, but which in him was the genuine outcome of a soul

whose range of utterance would else have been too limited to give form to the thoughts that stirred within his breast.

Dunstan felt something of this, though he made no response. What Sandy had said about his wife had sent his thoughts wandering after Winifred. And near to him as she once had been, he was feeling now as if her betrayal of his trust had set a gulf between them which no loving memories might ever bridge.

For Dunstan's love for Winifred, sincere and passionate though it had been, and keenly as he had suffered from his loss, was yet not of that noblest and enduring kind which once given, can never be withdrawn, which no coldness can chill, no treachery destroy, giving still of its unfailing store, though nothing be received again. For a moment he felt a catching sense of the difference between it and that of the old broom-maker for his wife, a love which for ten long years had still burnt on, unextinguished by even the cold blast of Death. And then again Rachel came between him and

his thoughts, and for awhile he saw only her quiet, faithful face.

All this time a little stream of talk was trickling on between Mrs. Doyle and Sandy.

“We’ve winter coming on fast, Sandy,” she was saying, when Dunstan roused himself up again at last to listen. “It’ll be hard times, I doubt, with a many, an’ the war making things so dear.”

“I doubt it will,” said Sandy. “They’ve riz t’ price o’ flour again, an’ they say it’ll be up as much more next week.”

“An’ meat’s dear, too, an’ potaties,” added Mrs. Doyle.

“They are that,” echoed Sandy, with a sigh; “though it doesn’t much matter to me, the price o’ meat, for it’s a thing I never gets. You see, I can’t do as much now as I used. My hands gets stiff, an’ my eyes is dim, an’ where I’d three brooms to sell once, I haven’t over one now. An’ there’s a deal o’ folks beats me down with the price. There’s a man lives a piece further on the moor, sells ’em cheaper than what I can. An’ so could I



sell 'em for less, if I was to put as little work an' as little stuff in 'em as what he does. But I couldn't a-bear to turn a poor broom out o' my hands, it 'ud go again' me, it would, to say naught o' cheating folks with it."

Dunstan caught up the old man's words,

"But it comes hard on you, Sandy," he said, "to see people taking the bread out of your mouth in this way, doesn't it?"

"Ay, he'll have a deal to answer, will yon man," said Mrs. Doyle, warmly. "It's only, as you may say, like selling a lie instead of telling one, isn't it, Sandy?"

"Well, mebbly it is," said Sandy; "but however, I've naught to do with that. I haven't a-many more brooms to make now, an' I'd like to keep on making of 'em well while I've done, whether other folks does or not. When it comes to t' last, the Lord won't say to me, 'Hoo comes it there's so much cockles in your neighbour's field, Sandy?' It'll be, 'Hoo much wheat have you growed in your own?' An' if I've got a sheaf to

bring him, if it's nobbut a little 'un, he'll say, 'Come along, Sandy, that's better than nowt. You'd nobbut a little patch to grow it on, an' you wasn't expected to bring in a cartload. Sit you down here, while I see what this here man's gotten to bring.'"

"Well, I suppose that is about the right way of looking at it," said Dunstan. And his conscience pricked him, as he thought how much more ready he had been all through life to look at the faults of others than to amend his own. For the young man's heart had been softened lately by trouble and pain and sickness, the pride and self-confidence had been weeded out, and the soil made ready for gentler influences to root themselves. And he thought now within himself that it should be a different life from this time forth that he would lead—one more lowly and more loving towards men, more true to himself and more reverent towards God.

At last Sandy got up to go. He was anxious about Jess, who stood outside in the cart, thinking,

possibly, of the thistles on the common, and the turf-built hut that served her for a stable.

Rachel and Gideon came in just as Sandy was going out. Gideon had met with Rachel half-way down the lane. They both looked grave. The child was dead.

But Dunstan saw nothing more that night of Rachel. She took a candle and went away upstairs, where she stayed all the rest of the evening. But she told no one why she went. It was to pray for the mother whom she had left weeping beside the little corpse.

## CHAPTER VI.

## TO BE OR NOT TO BE.

A FORTNIGHT slipped quietly away. Each day Dunstan gathered back his strength. He had even been out once or twice when it was fine, creeping in the sunshine up and down the garden-walk, rather feebly at first, and glad, sometimes, for very weakness, to lean on Rachel's shoulder for support as she walked slowly by his side. A support which Rachel never shrank from giving, for day by day a strange sweetness infused itself into each service that she rendered to him. Not the former springless, patient charity, that strove to fill a vacant life by acts of self-denying helpfulness, but a nameless feeling of content, that wound itself now through all her being, making her sometimes half regret that there should be no

longer room for sacrifice in anything that he had to ask for at her hands.

But Dunstan had never yet been able to break through the fence of mild reserve with which she had engirt herself. Though outwardly there was no change to be seen upon her. She never seemed to avoid him, though he saw less of her than formerly; and when with him she was just the same as she had always been, only that sometimes as she moved about the room, or sat in silence at her work, her down-dropped lids or rising colour would make him fancy that she felt his eyes upon her.

Mrs. Doyle, too, was recovering fast—so fast, indeed, that she soon outstripped Dunstan in the race for health. For by the time that he was able to take his little garden strolls without the aid of Rachel's shoulder, she was going quite briskly about the house, looking after her dairy matters, bottling her gooseberry wine, laying in her winter stores, and even buckling-to once more to the great culinary fight on baking mornings.

The secret of this speedy convalescence lay, perhaps, in a letter that had come from David, giving her the account of his voyage and the arrival of the troops at their destination, and begging her to make herself quite easy about him, for everything was so much better than he had expected. The men had to live hard, and work hard too, he said, now that they had got on shore, but that was what he had reckoned on; and in a month or two he hoped they would have beaten the Russians, and be ready to return, covered with glory, to their native land. He sent his love to Rachel and bid his mother tell her that he had not forgotten her, and never should; and then followed messages and inquiries, and kisses for Susy, and a good deal more which made Mrs. Doyle feel that to get such a letter as that from her son had been almost worth the pain of parting with him for awhile.

“You see,” said Gideon, remarking one day to Dunstan on this speedy improvement in his wife, “you see, it was all along of her sperrits that she

got laid up. They go a deal by their sperrits, does women, an' she'd took on so about David while she was fretting after him day an' night. As soon as ever I set eyes on this letter, I telled in a minute it 'ud do her a sight more good than all the stuff the doctor could give her. An' you see how she's picked up ever since, an' looks as spry now very near as ever she did, nobbut she holds her hold while t' next letter comes."

But Rachel somewhat damped this general rejoicing. She must go home now in a day or two, at farthest, she said. In vain Mrs. Doyle tried to persuade her to remain at least another week. Her words were only thrown away.

"I can't be easy," she said, "to let you go so soon. So as you've been slaving after us all the time you've been here, an' now when things has come round a bit, an' you could do as you liked, an' be comfortable, to go an' leave us. I'd never no thoughts of your going before Christmas, an' I'd laid out to have things pleasant, so as it should be a bit of a change for you. I'm sure, if ever

anybody was, we're beholden, all of us, to you. An' there isn't a thing you could mention but what it would be a pleasure to do it for you, if you could make it agreeable to yourself to stay."

But Rachel was not to be moved. She had reasons of her own for leaving thus abruptly, though perhaps she had hardly owned them, even to herself.

"I would stay, Mrs. Doyle, I would indeed, if I saw my way clear to do so. But now that you are well again, and Mr. Dayne too, almost, I feel that I ought to be at home."

"Mr. Dayne!" said Mrs. Doyle, "why, that's just the very thing makes me want you to stay a bit longer with us, if it was only another week. You see you're better company for him than the likes of us, that can talk of nothing to him but what belongs to the farm. I'm sure he'd miss you as much as any of us now that he's coming round, an' wants some one to 'liven him up a bit. I allays says it's heavier a deal on men than what it is on women when they get laid by. They can't



take up a bit of sewing or a stocking or that, an' put the time on. They've just got to sit an' twirl their thumbs, an' it isn't a deal of pleasure there is to be got out of that."

But Mrs. Doyle little knew what lay behind the arras. The thought of Mr. Dayne was the very thing that had decided Rachel to leave the farm and return to her own solitary fireside. For she felt that while she remained where she was, she was getting entangled every day further and further in the meshes which his presence wound about her. And hers was not a nature that could be possessed by any strong emotion without becoming speedily aware of it. There was too much self-questioning in her, and too much steadiness of purpose, for that to be the case; and she knew now by the thoughts ever trembling towards him, by the sweet trouble that had begun to ripple the quiet current of her life, by the oppression that weighed upon her when he seemed dull or pained, or silent to her, by the thrill that quickened every pulse when, glancing up from her work or the book that she

was reading to him, she met his eye resting on her face; by all these things she knew, that if she would return to that old quietness from which his sudden passionate appeal had roused her, she must stay no longer where she was.

Dunstan was taken by surprise when he heard that she was leaving. It was not till the morning of her departure that she told him when she brought in some papers that had just been sent him from the office; for though Dunstan had not been there yet himself, he was beginning now to look a little into matters, and make himself acquainted with what had been going on during his absence.

He looked blankly at her.

“You are coming back again,” he said, “you are not really leaving us?”

“I shall come sometimes to see you all,” she answered, “but not to stay.”

“To see us,” said Dunstan reproachfully, “when we want you always! This is not keeping your promise, Rachel. You said you were going to stay.”

“Only as long as I was needed,” answered Rachel quietly; “I think now it is my duty to go back home.”

“Your duty!” echoed Dunstan, but she had slipped away. He could only turn, with thoughts all tossed and restless, to his papers, wondering what had happened to hurry her thus away, and resolved at all events to wring from her, if possible before she left, the promise that he had fallen short of when he had opened out upon her a fortnight since with such an artillery of entreaty.

Dunstan had felt rather foolish once or twice about that affair. A good deal of what he said had slipped his memory, as things often do that are spoken when men are fevered by excitement, and too weak physically to put the curb upon themselves. But enough remained to make him conscious that he had been rather extravagant, to say the least, in the mode of his proposals.

He was cooler now that he had had time, as Rachel had said, to think about it, yet he saw no reason to withdraw his offer. It was her comforting

presence that he needed still, her tender helpful womanhood, to be a shelter for him when weary and oppressed with cares. She might be beneath him in position; but he was his own master, and could choose his wife from where he pleased. She might even bear a doubtful name—his own would serve them both. Besides, he had set his mind on having her, and he could not brook being thwarted.

“Rachel,” he said, when an hour or two later he found her in the garden, covering up Mrs. Doyle’s fuschias against the winter, “Rachel, if you would go with me, I think I could walk this morning as far as the river side.”

She looked up and hesitated.

“Are you sure it would not be too far?” she asked.

“Not if I had you with me. I feel quite strong again to-day, and I want to see how the world looks outside these garden gates. Go with me, Rachel. It will be a long time, perhaps, before I shall ask you anything again.”

Rachel looked at him, and yielded to the persuasion in his eyes.

“It is the last time,” she thought—“afterwards I shall be safe at home.”

They went out together, not through the village, but down the lane and by a path that led across some fields to the plantation by the river. It was a sunny, gentle day, one of those which do come sometimes even in the dull November time, as if the departing autumn in some regretful impulse had turned to press one last warm kiss on the cold front of winter. A mellow haze rested on the meadows, and hid the outlines of the distant hills. The air was still, so still, that they could saunter on as slowly as they pleased beneath the leafless trees in the Thixby lane. And from the hedgerows dangled long branches of briony and bramble, with here and there a moist red leaf glowing like a flower among the brown twigs and the filmy threads of gossamer that were still spangled with the dew-drops which the thin sunlight had not yet drunk up.

They went along very silently. It was seldom at any time that Rachel was the first to speak, and Dunstan, with that settled purpose in his mind, did not care to preface what he had to say by any casual remarks. They had crossed the meadows and gone down the steep path that brought them into the plantation, before he broke the silence; and then, as his custom was, he plunged headlong into the subject that he had in hand.

“Rachel,” he began abruptly, “have you thought about what I said to you?”

He did not explain himself further. There was no need to do so. Rachel knew intuitively what he meant. She drew a quick breath, and went on a pace or two before she answered him.

“I have,” she said; and there was nothing but quietness in her voice as she spoke the words. She too had resolved already within herself what it was that she must say.

But as Dunstan went on a second time to plead his cause, repeating in sobered language all that he had said so vehemently before, telling her how,

now that he was entering afresh on life, he longed to make a more complete and fairer thing of it than he had ever done before; and how, with her beside him, he trusted that the rough places in his character would be smoothed away, and all be ranged in harmony and order—as she heard all this, Rachel's heart began once more to strive against her. A strange conflict was going on within her; for in truth, it was love that bade her yield, and love that bade her still hold out.

She went on beside him, her eyes cast down to the ground, where dropping through the lacing boughs, the sunlight lay sprinkled over the carpet of fallen leaves on which they trod, and smiling on the little tufts of moss and primula that still peeped out with living face from beneath their sombre shroud. She listened as if torn out of herself and hearing all as in a dream. And still between the pauses of his voice she heard the hoarse call of the rooks from the elm trees away up the Rookland slopes, and the ocean-like lament of the wind sounding dimly through the fir trees, and the ceaseless

plaint of the river, as swollen by the autumn rains it swept on complainingly between its banks, and fretted round the lichened boulders that stayed its course.

Could this be real that he was telling her, or did he but delude himself and her in fancying that she could give such value to his life? She who saw so little in herself that was fair or worthy to be loved. For even as he spoke, his words seemed to open a rift before her, through which, with self-distrustful eyes, she saw into her very soul. And of all that he was asking from her what was there that she could give him? Nothing, unless it were her love. And with a shiver both of joy and pain, Rachel felt that spite of herself, already he had that.

Yet feebly she assayed again to turn him from his will. She dare not, no, she dare not, with her own hands unlock this door, which should open for her into such a new, beautiful, bewildering life.

They had reached the little foot-bridge now that crossed the stream and led up the bank and over



the stile into the Bedesby road. They rested here ; it was the limit of their walk. Dunstan leaned his arms upon the railing and stood resting thus, looking down into the waters as they crooned along bearing with them the dead autumn leaves, olive and brown and faded gold, that had fluttered from the overhanging trees and were floating downward with the current. Just so, as he stood with Rachel by his side, waiting for her to speak, his thoughts dropped idly into the past, and drifted backward to the memory of Winny, as she had stood that summer evening beneath the limes, her bright face upraised, and her sunny hair falling backward on her shoulders. For an instant that fresh young face seemed to smile up at him from amid the dark transparent waters. Then, with an impatient gesture, as though he would bid the mocking vision from him, he turned aside and looked into Rachel's eyes with a long questioning gaze, that seemed whether she would or no, to draw an answer from her.

It came at last, slowly, brokenly ; forcing its

way through the crust of troubled thoughts that were working within,

“I dare not,” she said. “It would be so terrible to me to know that I had given my love to one not worthy of it; and I could not cause you to suffer thus yourself. And there is so little in me for you to care for. You would find it out in time. You would weary of me, and then I should be only a fetter round you.”

Dunstan was baffled. It would have been easier to give her faith in him than in herself; and yet the very earnestness of her refusal conveyed a sort of tacit pledge that by-and-by he should succeed.

“You will know me better some time, Rachel,” he said, “and yourself too.”

And then for awhile longer they stood side by side, neither of them speaking, only with absent eyes watching the stream gliding on beneath them, and the dead leaves drifting down it, and the wan sunlight flickering in and out among the reeds and sedges by its brink.

“Let us go,” said Dunstan at last. And they turned away and retraced the path by which they had come. It was a more silent walk than the other one had been. Once or twice as they went along, they touched as with an effort on things that neither of them were caring anything about; but Dunstan spoke no more of the one thing that was present in his thoughts until the buff-washed timbered front of the farm-house looked out again upon them through the trees at the end of the lane. And then, as he held open the garden gate and stood by to let her pass, he said,

“You will think of this again, Rachel.”

He was wearied, and the words dropped heavily from his lips. They sounded reproachfully in Rachel’s ears, for he was in truth grieved that whether she distrusted herself or not, she had not faith enough in him to believe that his one wish now was to take her just as she was, and keep her always by his side.

Her heart smote her. What if she were really doing wrong in thus withstanding him?

“I will,” she said, “I will. If I only knew what I ought to do.”

But her words faltered on her tongue, Her secret was her own no longer. It was telling itself in the trembling lip and anxious eye. She turned away hastily, for she felt that to stay would be to yield, and hurried up the walk and into the house, there to shut herself in her room, and, falling on her knees, humbly and pitifully to plead for some light to fall upon her path. That if it might be so, leave might be given her to put these bound hands in his, that so through life till death she might walk with him, always near to give him the comfort of her love, to strengthen him in weakness, to be with him in hardship and in toil—And in joy?

But Rachel's thoughts never lifted themselves to that. Enough for her if she might bow beneath his burdens.

## CHAPTER VII.

## THE EMERALD RING.

AND then downstairs, where already the sunlight was coming in long slant lines into Mrs. Doyle's kitchen, shining redly on the opposite wall, and making the painted face of the big clock glow as if it had been on fire. There was a warm fragrant smell here as if baking were going on. Martha was taking a tinful of hot tea-cakes out of the oven, and on the dresser stood the best japanned tea-tray, with the china tea-things that were only used on special occasions, and the crystal sugar basin that had been a wedding gift when Mrs. Doyle was married, and one of the fine damask table-cloths folded up beside them.

There was a fire in the best parlour too, indicating that Mrs. Doyle was going to have com-

pany, and just as Rachel came into the kitchen, she appeared in the full glory of her best black silk and Sunday cap, bearing with her two great dishes of tarts and cheesecakes from the dairy.

For this being Rachel's last day at the farm, it had behoved Mrs. Doyle to signalise the event in the orthodox north-country fashion, by this little extra effort in the culinary line. At half-past four the company began to arrive. Mrs. Toft, who it will be remembered, had entertained Geordie Kennedy with such disastrous consequences on the occasion of his going into knickerbockers; and Miss Bligh, a brisk comely old lady, who lived on a little farm of her own, and managed it as well as any farmer in the district; and Mrs. Dale, the curate's wife, who formed a sort of link between the commonalty and the quality of Glington, a gentle pretty little woman, dressed in deep mourning for an only child who had died six months ago, just as they had come into the parish.

Then Gideon came in, fresh shaved, and in his Sunday best; and Susy, very shiny about the face,

and looking shy and conscious in her new merino frock. And Rachel had to sit down among them all, and take her place at the tea-table, and talk as well as she might, though all the time there was set about her that circle of secret solitary consciousness into which none of them might enter. Not even sweet little Mrs. Dale, who feeling drawn to Rachel by something in her face, had fallen aside with her after tea into a quiet corner, and by-and-by was telling her all the story of her baby's life and death, and how sad and desolate she had been with none but strangers near, when first it was taken from her.

Yet somehow the hours wore themselves away. Mrs. Doyle's company rustled upstairs, put on their bonnets, and went away. Gideon went out to put the horse into the gig, for he was to drive Rachel home; and then the farewells had to be taken.

That was all that remained to be done. Rachel had made every other preparation beforehand. There was nothing now but to go away, back to

that solitary cottage which it seemed almost a mockery to call a home.

Mrs. Doyle could not help expressing her regret. It was not too late, even then, she urged, for Rachel to change her mind. Gideon would willingly go down by himself and tell the servant that she must not expect her mistress back at present. But Rachel only shook her head and unclasped Susy's arms, which the child has fastened tightly round her neck. At last all was ready, the gig stood at the door; Gideon was there tying the lash on his whip. The parting moment had come.

"You'll look in and say good-bye to Mr. Dayne," said Mrs. Doyle, as she came down stairs with Rachel's shawl upon her arm. "He's like to have a word with you afore you go."

"Yes, I must do that," she said, and she crossed the passage, and tapped lightly at his door. A great quietness had come over her. She felt not even a flutter at her heart as she opened it and went in. Dunstan was sitting before the fire, leaning back in his chair, with his hands clasped



behind his head. He had heard the sounds about the house, and looked round when she entered, knowing beforehand who it was.

“I was waiting for you,” he said. “Then you are really going, Rachel?”

“Yes,” she said, “I am ready now.”

“And you have nothing to say to me?” he asked.

“Only to say Good-bye. Mr. Doyle is going with me. I must not keep him waiting,” and she put out her hand to bid him farewell. But he did not take it,

“Wait one moment,” he said; and drawing from his pocket a bunch of keys, he selected one of the smallest, and went to a desk that stood upon a side-table. He unlocked it, and took out a ring, set with a single emerald of great size and brilliancy that flashed and sparkled in the lamplight as he brought it towards her.

“This was my mother’s ring,” he said; “I remember her wearing it when I was a child. My father gave it to her before she was his wife.”

And as he spoke, he took Rachel's hand in his, and slipped the ring upon her finger.

It was a finely-moulded hand. Not a small one—Rachel's had been no idle life—but exquisite in form and texture, with the slender fingers and oval nails that hint at gentle blood, or at what is still more precious, that gentle nature which this implies, though it does not always give. A white fair hand that sorted well with the gleaming gem on which she was gazing as if spell-bound, making no effort to remove it, though she knew full well all the significance of the action. Something almost of a flush mounted to her quiet brow, as passively she suffered him in what he did. The decision to which she could not come herself, he had arrived at for her.

For a moment Dunstan watched her inquiringly, as she stood with down-dropped eyes before him.

“It may stay?” he asked. And whether she intended or not to say it, she answered,

“Yes.”

Then she went out; and Dunstan, when all was

still again, sat down once more before the fire, put his head in his hands, and thought it all over. The thing was settled now, and it was a relief to have it so. The world, no doubt, would say that he had acted foolishly. Let it. This was a matter in which the world had nothing to do with him, or he with it. He was sick of its din and worry. He wanted a home, and some woman to make one for him—a quiet nook for rest and shelter; and in choosing Rachel, he had secured these. He had done right; he had done quite right. And then a thought glanced arrow-like across his mind, and he wondered what Winifred would say if she knew that evening's work. Would it sting her to know that he had cast her out of his heart as she had carelessly dismissed him from her own? And her bright face rose before him with the mocking smile upon it that was his last remembrance of her. It had been a summer's sport for her, just that and nothing more. Pleasant for them both while it had lasted, but a sharp reality for him when he had been undeceived at last.

Even now he could not keep his thoughts from plunging for a moment helplessly about this vexing theme. Then they fell back, and Rachel's eyes were resting on his face—those quiet faithful eyes, so full of helpfulness and truth. Yes, he had done right; he had done quite right!

## CHAPTER VIII.

## GOSSIP.

**B**Y Christmas-time, Dunstan had taken his place again in the office, and had got once more fairly into harness. He had been absent a long time, nearly two months altogether. It seemed to him like as many years. And if time is to be reckoned, not by the slow march of days, but by the progress of the soul, then perhaps Dunstan was right in feeling that it was a wide space indeed that parted him from that stormy period that had gone before his illness.

For as every one might see, Dunstan Dayne was a different man now from what he had been. People remarked the change, and said how much he had been sobered down.

“And carries himself so differently too. He

used to have quite a distinguished air," said Mrs. McWerther to her friend Miss Barbe, when she chanced to meet that lady one day in the little milliner's shop at Glington. "And hardly seems to know people if he meets them. I am sure the other day I saw him pass Mrs. Kennedy in the street, and he scarcely noticed her. I am certain he did not bow; and so friendly as they were before. But he always was very variable; I have observed that frequently myself. One day he would seem quite pleased to meet you, and the next you might suppose that it was taking quite a liberty to stop and speak to him."

"And so indifferent about making himself agreeable too," chimed in Miss Barbe. "I am sure, when I heard that he was getting so nicely well by Christmas, I felt that it was quite providential. Just in time, you know, for him to have been an acquisition, now that people are beginning to have their friends. But to my own knowledge, he has had three invitations this week, and refused them all. Really so poor as Glington is in gentlemen, he

ought to consider that there is a responsibility resting upon him.”

“So he ought,” said Mrs. McWerther.

“And as to making business an excuse,” continued Miss Barbe, “I don’t believe a word of it. I have heard twice of his being seen half way down the Rooklands lane. Now if he can find time for a walk in the middle of the day, it is quite evident to my mind that he might discharge his duties towards society.”

Mrs. McWerther gave a series of significant little nods, and glanced aside at the milliner’s young woman, who was standing at the other end of the room.

“Miss Barbe,” she said, and she lowered her voice, and laid her gloved forefinger confidentially on that lady’s muff, “Miss Barbe, I am sorry to hear you say so. If that is the case, you may rely upon it there is something in that direction.”

“But Mrs. McWerther, you forget. The Gilmours have been away the last three months or more; and besides, I don’t believe there ever was any

truth in that report—or if there was, she threw him over for young Kennedy; and if I am not mistaken, that is at the bottom of his coolness there.”

Mrs. McWerther replied by another series of nods, more significant than before.

“Very possibly. But I was not referring to Miss Gilmour, but to that young person who lives at the cottage by the pool. The one that old Gillespie brought up and left his property to. She was at the farm, you know, nursing him.”

Miss Barbe started back at Mrs. McWerther's speech, as if that lady had thrown a glass of water in her face.

“Impossible!” she exclaimed. “What, that Miss Dallas as they call her? He never surely can be thinking of marrying her?”

“I cannot answer for that, Miss Barbe,” and Mrs. McWerther made a little deprecatory movement with her hand. “I hope if he is thinking of anything, it *is* of marrying her.”

Miss Barbe pursed up her lips, but looked interested, nevertheless.



“There is certainly something prepossessing in her appearance,” Mrs. McWerther went on; “and her manners, too, are quite superior—remarkably so, in fact. No one would suppose, unless they were acquainted with the particulars, that she was not altogether the thing. I am not surprised, I must confess, at his being struck with her, especially under the circumstances. They do say, you know, that she almost saved his life when he was ill, though, I daresay, old Dr. Potts exaggerates a little. And there is no telling what a designing young woman might effect with such opportunities. I knew a case myself, precisely similar, though mind I don’t for one moment hint that there is anything of the kind here.”

“I should hope not, indeed,” said Miss Barbe.

“Indeed, he might not have been going to the cottage at all; merely, as you say, walking out for his health. No doubt he will have to be careful of himself for some time to come. Attacks like these are usually very reducing, and affect the spirits a good deal. Perhaps that may account

for his being so altered, so quiet, so very quiet."

And then the conversation drifted off to the stylish shape of one of Miss Turner's new bonnets, Miss Barbe mentally resolving to adopt the same, if possible, for an old Dunstable of her own, which she was having cleaned and made up again for everyday wear.

Certainly, as Mrs. McWerther had observed, it was easy to see that a great change had passed over Mr. Dayne, though it was a change that penetrated much deeper than those outward signs which were all that she was able to detect. For through those long hours of weariness and pain, through days of lassitude and dulness when thought and feeling had seemed alike asleep; and later still, when Rachel's influence had begun to distill upon him, his character had been knitting itself somewhat more firmly together. There was more purpose in it now, less of headstrong, impatient haste. Those old ambitious dreams were over now—they had passed away with some other things, whose time to die had come. And he was not so quick either to

take offence, though Miss Barbe was quite right in her complaint of his being so indifferent to making himself agreeable.

For Dunstan could hardly avoid going to an extreme in something, and he went to it now in eschewing society altogether. A bad thing, no doubt, not only for the people in Glinton, who were beginning to have their friends, and would have been so thankful for his assistance in balancing the heaps of tarlatane and muslin that filled their drawing-rooms, but for himself as well. For though seasons of solitude are as needful for spiritual growth as sleep is to the body and hours of darkness are to plants, yet that will be in the end but a pale and stunted life that refuses to take its fair amount of social pabulum.

But Dunstan did not take that view of things. The Glinton people seemed to him to have become all at once unaccountably dull and stupid. They bored him, especially the ladies. He could think of nothing to say when he was with them. It annoyed him to be condoled with on his altered

looks, and to have Mrs. McWerther, and the rector's wife, and Miss Barbe, and all the rest of them, crossing the street to shake hands with him, and inquire about his health, and say how delighted they would be to see him now that he was able to get out again.

He wanted nothing just now but to be let alone, and to have leave given him to take his own course, without having his affairs gossiped over at every tea-drinking and supper-party in the place.

For, if truth were told, at the bottom of Dunstan's avoidance of society was the dread lest this intimacy between himself and Rachel should get dragged out of its hiding-place, and made a subject of discussion. Somehow, though he kept repeating to himself that he had a right to do as he pleased in such a matter, he could not help wishing that it should be kept a secret from the little world of Glington. For it was such a detestable place for talking. He should never hear the end of it if it were once to get abroad.

But Dunstan might take what precautions he

would, the thing was soon buzzed up and down the village. As indeed with so many maiden and other ladies, whose sole occupation was either to hear or to tell of some new thing, it would have been surprising if it had long escaped detection.

Mrs. McWerther having once got upon the scent, never rested until she had ferretted out, if not the truth, at least a pretty strong suspicion of it. Still, no one could positively say how matters stood. All that was known was that Mr. Dayne went from time to time to the cottage by the pool; though whether or no with any ultimate intentions, could not be satisfactorily ascertained.

For however ineligible Rachel Dallas might be to be admitted within the pale of Glinton society, there was a certain grave dignity about her that fortified her against the most remote attempt to intrude upon her personal affairs; Dunstan kept his own counsel, and Mrs. Doyle, who perhaps guessed the whole truth, was discreet enough to be silent upon a secret that had not been intrusted to her keeping.

Of course the thing came at last to Mrs. Kennedy's ears. She had not called on Dunstan since their return, nor he on them. The Doctor had been too busy in making up arrears of literary work to have a thought for anything beyond his study walls; and Mrs. Kennedy reflected that as there was no advantage in keeping up the intimacy, it might be as well, unless Mr. Dayne chose to make the first advance himself towards renewing the intercourse which their absence had suspended, just quietly to drop the acquaintance—so far at least as visiting was concerned. She had sent once or twice to the farm, just after their return, to inquire about him; and what more could she do, especially as he seemed disposed himself to keep aloof from them? They certainly had shown him a considerable amount of attention when first he came to the place, and if he were not prepared to appreciate it, of course they could not be expected to force themselves upon him.

Of course not. So Mrs. Kennedy confined herself to giving him, when they chanced to meet,

one of those frank, bright smiles, which she distributed indiscriminately among her friends; and the Doctor, if he came across him as they were leaving church, would shake hands in his old friendly fashion; but, like many literary men, Doctor Kennedy was somewhat unobservant in small social matters, and never noticed that Dunstan had become now quite a stranger at the Lodge.

When Mrs. Kennedy heard the whisper of Dunstan's repeated visits at the cottage, she raised her eyebrows in incredulous amaze, though she was too well bred, and too much a woman of the world, to make any comments thereupon which might come round to ears for which they were not intended.

"The thing is preposterous," she said, as she chatted the matter over with the Doctor when he emerged at dinner time from the seclusion of his study, bringing thence, however, a tatterdemalion pamphlet with which to occupy the intervals between the courses, and a couple of pieces of paper

on which to jot down his notes. "The thing is preposterous. The idea of young Dayne marrying Rachel Dallas! But there are really no limits to the inventions of these Ginton people. Their gossip is interminable."

"I don't see that it would be so very preposterous," returned the Doctor, who was rather given to take the opposite side of any argument whatsoever. "Rachel Dallas has more really fine points about her than any girl I know; only you women never can see any beauty that there is in another. Why, her figure is fit for a sculptor's model, and her nature too is cast in a mould as fine."

"Why, surely you would not call Rachel pretty?" exclaimed Mrs. Kennedy.

"Not pretty, to be sure; but there is a sort of fascination in her face, deeper than mere prettiness, for those who can appreciate it. If ever a soul in prison looked out of any woman's eyes there is one looks out from hers. Their expression is absolutely irresistible sometimes; only I should hardly have thought Dunstan Dayne had been



the man to have been taken by that sort of thing."

"Nor I," returned his wife. "And then her position!"

"Ah! well, that does not surprise me. Dunstan is just one of those high-flown, Quixotic young fellows, who are pretty sure to look either a good deal above them or as much beneath them for a wife. There is a spice of romance in his composition, though he has managed that railway business so well. However, poor fellow! if he be in love, it does not seem to suit him, or else it is that illness that has made such work with him. I never saw anyone so changed. I should hardly have known him for the same. By-the-bye, why don't you ask him up here some day? He has not been once since we got back, has he?"

"Geordie," said his mamma, "I cannot let you have any more. Two slices of amber pudding is as much as is good for a little boy. If you are hungry still you can have some oat cake and cheese directly. And, papa, did you remember to order me those jars of preserved peaches from Mason's

when you were in Bedesby the other day? I thought not. Then, my dear, you will have to go without for some time to come. It is a pity, when you are so fond of them that you should have forgotten all about it. Besides, I particularly wished to have them. Miss Lancaster will be here, you know, next week."

## CHAPTER IX.

## MISS LANCASTER.

MISS LANCASTER! Who was Miss Lancaster? All Glinton—all the feminine half of it at least—was asking the question, when, the second Sunday after this little reminder of Mrs. Kennedy's to her forgetful spouse, Miss Lancaster herself appeared *in propria personâ* in the Doctor's pew at church. And by her side was Mr. Cyril Kennedy, who walked in with her and walked out with her, and found the places in her psalm-book, and by divers unmistakeable indications convinced the good people of Glinton there must be certainly, as they said, "something between them," to account for their simultaneous appearance, and these indefinite but manifest attentions.

And Mr. Dayne's affair was flung aside like a

bone that was no longer worth the picking, when this savoury bit of gossip presented itself for their delectation.

“You may depend upon it,” said Mrs. McWerther, who was making a round of morning calls the next day for the express purpose of giving her opinions an airing, “you may depend upon it she has a fortune. Mr. Cyril is not the young man to marry a plain-looking girl unless he had good reasons for doing so. And she certainly is plain, remarkably so, in fact, though being dressed so sumptuously helps to carry it off to a considerable extent. And she can't be young either. Six or seven and twenty, I should say, at the very least, though plain-looking people often do look so much older than they really are !”

This was a point, however, on which Miss Barbe did not attempt to offer an opinion ; the subject of age being one on which she was judiciously reserved.

“But that she has money,” proceeded Mrs. McWerther, “I feel quite convinced. Everything

about her seems to indicate it. Indeed, I made a point of going out of church immediately behind her to satisfy myself about those fur trimmings on her cloak. It was real miniver, Miss Barbe, not imitation. That cloak could not have cost less than five and twenty guineas. Just consider! Five and twenty guineas for a cloak, and everything else to correspond. And her handkerchief—I particularly noticed her handkerchief. Such exquisite cambric I never saw; and you know, Miss Barbe, one may judge more accurately by those little things than by dress itself. Depend upon it she has something handsome. And then she has just that easy air which any plain young person would have who knew that she had a fortune to fall back upon.”

And Mrs. McWerther said “good morning” to Miss Barbe, and bustled off to enlighten another of her friends.

Glinton, as represented on the present occasion by Mrs. McWerther, was quite correct in its conjectures, and it had the satisfaction too, before long, of

knowing that such was the case. For Mrs. Kennedy herself acknowledged to one or two of her intimate friends, who, in the strictest confidence of course, confided the fact to others with whom they were equally intimate themselves, that Cyril was actually engaged to the young lady in question, whose acquaintance they had made during their stay abroad. Also it came out that she was the heiress and only child of a wealthy banker, a circumstance which quite coincided with the astute observations of Mrs. McWerther.

The March winds blew the rumour to the Brook Farm; and Mrs. Doyle, when she heard it from Martha, who had heard it from Job Dolson's house-keeper, who had heard it direct from Abigail herself, laid out—good woman—in her own mind to tell it as a piece of tasty news to her lodger when he came in from the works, for she had fancied that he had been rather “low sperrited” that morning, perhaps on account of a big letter with print outside which he had received. And Mrs. Doyle had a wholesome horror of big letters with print

outside. It had been one of that description which had brought the intelligence of their stacks having been uninsured at the time they were burnt.

Mrs. Doyle was not far wrong in her conjectures as to the cause of Dunstan's "low sperrits" on this particular morning. The big letter in question conveyed the information that an appointment which he had just succeeded in obtaining must be revoked, as the whole scheme had been quashed in consequence of some extensive failures among its principal promoters. It was a heavy blow. Dunstan felt as if he could hardly rise up after it. For he had built so much on this appointment, and calculating on it, he had meant to settle down and bring Rachel to a home of his own, as soon as he had got himself fairly established.

Now all that must be given up. He was afloat again, nothing certain before him, not even the prospect of it. He was a waif and stray once more in the world, as poorly off as when he was in London, except for the sum that he had laid by

during the year. He had got a name, to be sure, which he had not then, and which by-and-bye, no doubt, would ensure him renewed success; but Dunstan was given, as we know, to take what Sydney Smith has called "short views" in life. A course which however that wise and witty divine might recommend it, is not in every case the best to be pursued.

And so Dunstan, looking but a little way ahead, saw himself, his present occupation gone, nothing else to turn to, drifting on perhaps to beggary. A dark picture, doubtless; but then he had not struggled out yet from the effects of that shattering sickness, and perhaps the grey March skies and a long series of sharp east winds that had shrivelled up the very life within him, might have had something to do with these gloomy fancies. For when a man's soul looks out through windows all begrimed and dimmed, he is apt to see even the sunniest landscape at a disadvantage; how much more the sombre prospect that lay now before poor Dunstan's eyes?



When things went wrong with him, or what came to the same thing, when he got wrong with himself, Dunstan generally went down to the cottage and had it all out with Rachel, who would listen to him patiently, as a mother to a sick complaining child, and then soothe and heal him by her wise and tender sympathy. A sweet office for Rachel, for day by day, as she moved about her narrow household ways or sat beside her solitary hearth, this love of hers was deepening and strengthening within her; and the rather as it had come, not into a life already peopled with forms of warm human love, with ties of kindred or of friendship, but into one empty and desolate, where now it sat enthroned, a power that held every thought in sway.

It is often thus with these quiet and seemingly passionless natures. A great emotion, when once it has obtained possession, will sweep onward like an Alpine streamlet swollen by the melting snows, in a tide that bears down all before it. And yet it was a strange bond that united these two—one indeed that seemed to consist almost in a reversal of

those mutual relations that usually subsist between man and woman. For on Rachel's side it partook rather of the yearning, passionate devotion of a mother for her child, than of that clinging dependence which would have made her feel out for some one stronger than herself on whom to lean. And as for Dunstan, in the recoil of his whole nature which the sting of Winny's falseness had produced, he had flung himself, spent and panting, on Rachel's faithfulness, caring for nothing but to feel her spirit sheltering his own ; as a hunted stag might rush into the covert of a wood, with no thought of the pleasantness of its shade, only fleeing as for life into some place of rest and safety.

So as he left the works, Dunstan went down to the cottage to carry his ill-news to Rachel, and pour out to her all his heaviness and disappointment. He took the road by the river and through the plantation instead of going by the high road. He generally did so now. It was more retired, and Dunstan's dislike of his movements being observed had grown into an almost morbid dread.

He knew well enough that people had gossiped about himself and Winifred, and if he could help it, he was determined that the same should not be repeated now.

It was a grey windy day, with now and then a stray gleam of sunshine breaking through the clouds; cold enough to make him thrust his hands deep into his pockets and hurry on before the searching breeze that whistled shrilly round him even when he had got into the shelter of the wood. The last year's leaves lay still piled about the roots of the trees beside the path. Here and there a pinched-looking primrose that had awoke before its time from its winter sleep, peeped out from beneath its ragged mantle, or a starved snow-drop, half-hidden in the grass, shivered upon its stalk. But not a bud had begun to swell upon the gaunt bare boughs that stretched themselves a dark network across the cloudy sky. All was wintry, still, and desolate. No hint in these leafless solitudes of those imprisoned forces that were waiting only for the soft breath of spring to leap

forth, as at the touch of an enchanter's rod, to their joyful work.

It sorted with Dunstan's gloomy mood. There was a dreary, dissatisfied feeling in the hungry air that chimed in with the errand on which he was bound. He set his face against the wind that blew straight up the long brown vista before him, and pressed forward, impatient to reach the cottage and unburden himself of the load that was too heavy to be borne alone.

Rachel was standing in the garden with her cloak and bonnet on, bending over a little tuft of blue hepaticas that were just beginning to put forth their tender blossoms in a sheltered nook by one of the huge chestnut trees that stood before the cottage. She too had been out alone, but her fine health had made that an enjoyment to her which had served only to chill the blood in Dunstan's veins. And she had not had the grip of disappointment either, fastening on her heart, to drag back her thoughts from all the sweet visions that had been thronging in upon her.

For her life lay before her now, like the brown fields that she had passed as she crossed the uplands behind the plantation just greened over now by tiny blades springing timidly among the clods, but by-and-by, as the year crept on, to wave golden for the harvest. And it seemed to her, as she thought of her present deep content and on all the rich promise of the future, that the long empty years that stretched behind her, were as nothing when set against this new strange joy of loving and of being loved.

But when she looked up at the sound of steps upon the road, and saw Dunstan standing at the gate, his clouded face cast a shadow on her own.

She did not exclaim, however, or bear down upon him with a rush of inquiries or condolence, only waited quietly till he came up, and then turned and went with him into the house, and took him into the little wainscotted parlour with its high-backed chairs and old-fashioned furniture that had stood, every piece of it, in just the same places for the last quarter of a century or more.

There was an air of dim seclusion always in this parlour. Even the grey light that came in through the latticed windows was sobered down by the shadow of the chestnut trees that grew before the house, and the small bit of clear fire that was in the grate burnt now steadily and silently, as if it would not disturb, by so much as an unseemly flash or flicker, the general air of stillness and repose.

They did not sit down, but stood together in the little deep window against which every now and then the wind was beating down the chestnut boughs; and there Dunstan told her all his tale. Rachel heard him silently, as was her wont, until he had poured out his disappointment and vexation, and then gently she laid upon his fretted spirit the balm of her quiet words. She did not say much. Rachel seldom did, but Dunstan felt her influence distil like dew upon him. There was healing in the very tones of her voice, in the gaze of those dark grey eyes that seemed almost to touch him, so earnestly they dwelt upon him.

And yet the news had fallen heavily on her as well. It had torn asunder the filmy web of dreams that she had been weaving only an hour ago, as she walked along the hill-side, thinking of the quiet home that was to be; for though Rachel had her own fireside to come back to, yet that is hardly home to man or woman either, where there is but one to sit beside the lonely hearth. And Rachel, self-centred though she might seem to be in passionless control, yet felt as deep a thrill of joy in the thought of gathering round herself all that makes life most sweet and precious, as if she had been one of those fragile natures that can no more stand unsupported and alone than the slender wild convolvulus with nothing to twine itself around.

“We must have patience,” she said, as Dunstan murmured at this sudden reversal of all their plans. “We must have patience; it is only waiting a little longer. And after all, what does it signify, so long as we have one another left?”

Fortune cannot take everything away. It leaves us what is best."

It was not often that Rachel said so much as this. She was undemonstrative in speech as well as act; too much so at times for Dunstan, who took that for apathy which was but the stillness of a nature too deep for him to fathom. But just now her heart was drawing very near to his, and to comfort him in his trouble, if she could, she would bring out before him even this hidden treasure of her love.

"It leaves us what is best," said Dunstan, repeating her words. "It has left me you, Rachel!"

And as he spoke he drew her a little nearer to himself, and closing his eyes he leaned down his face wearily upon her head. He could do it easily—he was so much taller than she—and as he rested thus upon her, he seemed to himself to be leaning down also his whole weight of care upon that sad, strong soul.

Rachel did not move. That burden to her was more sacred than any joy could be. Nay, to bear



it was itself a joy ; to receive his suffering upon herself, to give him her comfort in return, was happiness enough for her. For if ever Rachel had doubted before that such poor love as hers could be indeed a boon to him, the doubt had vanished now. It was one of those blessed moments that do at times fall into life, when the shadowy screen that hides all human spirits the one from the other, seems to have grown for awhile transparent. He trusted her—she knew it—as he could trust no other human being in the world. He sought from her what there was no one else to give him. And the deep content that with this assurance settled down upon her, no adversity or outward change could ruffle or disturb.

For a long time she stood thus silently beside him, so near that she could feel his warm breath upon her forehead, even the pulsing of his heart beating time with hers. The last sunbeams crept beneath the chestnut boughs and fell upon their faces, wandering over the folds of Rachel's black dress, and glittering feebly on the small gold chain at-

tached to her watch which was the only ornament she ever wore, except indeed the ring that Dunstan had given her, and this was sparkling now upon her finger, for as her hand rested on the window-ledge the gleam of it had caught her eye, and in an absent mood she was playing it hither and thither, letting it catch and reflect the glancing light.

Suddenly a quick shiver ran through her frame. She started aside, and withdrew herself as by an involuntary movement from Dunstan's enfolding arm. He raised his head, and looked at her, surprised.

"It is nothing," she said, replying to his inquiring eyes; "unless, as the children say, some one was passing over my grave. I could not help it."

And she smiled, but unquietly, as if she had hardly yet recovered from the momentary shudder.

Dunstan smiled too,

"Very possibly," he said. "I hear the clock at Rooklands striking five; the boys will just be coming out of school and running home through

the churchyard. But I must go, Rachel; it is later than I thought."

It was more than half an hour though before he said "good-bye" to her at the garden-gate, and then he took her hands in his and looked down long and earnestly into those clear, unwavering eyes.

"You are a great comfort to me, Rachel," he said. "I don't know what I should do without you. It is worth anything having you to trust in!"

Rachel stood and watched him down the grassy path that led across into the plantation. The wind was bleak and blew sharply over her uncovered head. Rachel did not feel it; those last words were still sounding in her ears. She waited till she had seen him turn round to wave his hand to her at the plantation gate; then she went back into the little dim parlour and sat down upon the window-seat by which they had stood together.

But the sun had long faded off the chestnut boughs and sunk behind the bank of grey cloud that skirted the horizon; twilight had fallen out

of doors, and darkness gathered in the room where the fire had died down to little more than a hollow cave of smouldering ashes, before she roused herself at last, and rose to draw down the blind and light the little Argand lamp that stood upon the table.

“He trusts me so,” she murmured to herself. “He trusts me so.” And a second time that sharp, unaccountable shiver ran through her frame.

What could it mean? And again the superstitious saying crossed her mind, by which she had tried to pass it off with Dunstan. It was a foolish fancy. She stirred the fire together, took out her sewing from the basket on the table, and sat down resolutely to her work.

Dunstan had a pleasanter walk home than he had had to the cottage. He had lost, for one thing, the dull, disheartened feeling that he had carried thither; and for another, the wind blew now at his back instead of full into his face—no small matter, so keen and biting as it was. It

seemed quite possible to him now that something else might be turning up before long, as good as what he had lost. And besides all this, there was the thought of Rachel fresh upon him, and of that long look that he had got right down through her eyes into the depths of that faithful soul. There was nothing to hide there, nothing that she might not care for him to see. "There was one woman, at any rate, in the world," said Dunstan to himself, "one woman who was true to the core, and true to him."

It was nearly six when he reached the farm. Bessie was bringing in the cans from the milking to the dairy; Mrs. Doyle stood just within the kitchen-door, mixing a mash for the calves. She looked up as he swung the gate upon the hinge. It was easy to see that he was in a better mood now than when he had gone away, if only by the way in which he stopped Bessie as she crossed the yard, and bade her bring him a glass-full of the warm milk fresh out of her can.

Dunstan generally patronized Bessie's can in

preference to Martha's. Perhaps because her cows gave the richest milk, or it might be that her rosy face and ready smile imparted a flavour to the beverage which the harsher visage of the elder damsel failed to give.

“I don't think I ever drank such milk in my life as this of yours, Mrs. Doyle,” he said, as he went into the kitchen, and set down the empty glass upon the dresser. “It seems even sweeter than what I used to get when I was a boy.”

“You've had a walk, sir. Mebby that's given you a relish,” said Mrs. Doyle; “but as like as not, Bessie's mixed in a drop o' cream afore she brought it to you. It improves it wonderful, does a drop o' cream.”

“I daresay,” said Dunstan. And he looked so pleasant, that Mrs. Doyle, who was always open to a little friendly chat, was emboldened to bring out her bit of gossip.

“And what do you think of the news, Mr. Dayne?” she inquired, as she stirred another handful of meal into the mash.

“News!—what news?” said Dunstan, with a sudden fear lest it should be something relating to himself.

“What, haven’t you heard, sir? Why, it’s all over the village—about Mr. Cyril Kennedy! He’s going to be married.”

“Cyril Kennedy!” exclaimed Dunstan, with a sudden sinking at his heart. If he had fancied that Cyril Kennedy’s affairs were nothing now to him, he found that he had been mistaken.

“Yes, sir,” said Mrs. Doyle, not ill-pleased to see that her news was really news. “If you mind, there was a young lady at church with them a bit back when he was over here—rather stout, she was, and sandy hair, and dressed most beautiful.”

Dunstan did not remember, He had not been to church the morning that the young lady in question had made her appearance. He had walked over instead to the new Catholic church that Lord Downes had just built at Skilsby, a couple of miles away.

“I don’t remember,” he said.

“Well, sir, it’s her,” said Mrs. Doyle. “Miss Lancaster, her name is. They say she rolls in money; an’ if she isn’t to call good-looking, which to be sure is what she can’t pretend to, she has an uncommon pleasant smile, so mebbly he’s a right to be satisfied—a man can’t have everything. Or else she isn’t to mention with Miss Winifred; an’ folks did say he was after her, an’ a likely thing too, without it be that she’s given him the slip. They’ve allays been particklar friendly, has the Kennedies and the Rooklands folks. Indeed, there was nobody but them ever used to go to Rooklands at all, not while you came. He’s a queer man, is Mr. Gilmour, an’ has been ever since his wife died.”

“It can’t be true,” said Dunstan, looking not at Mrs. Doyle, but through the kitchen window and out into the yard where Mike was driving the cows before him back into the pasture. “It can’t be true,” he repeated. Yet he said it with the stifled hope of hearing that it was. There was no sinking at his heart now. Instead, a whirl of



strange conflicting feelings, that gave him at the same moment a sharp sense of joy to think that Cyril Kennedy had not won the prize which he had lost; and yet a hidden pang that Winifred should be free, but not for him.

“There’s a deal of tales going, to be sure, sir,” said Mrs. Doyle, “but however, I know this to be true for a fact. For it was Job Dolson’s house-keeper that told it to our Martha, and she had it from Mrs. Kennedy’s maid, so it hasn’t come far, and Abigail said it was no secret or she shouldn’t have said nothing about it. For you see, sir, she’s like one of the family, is Abigail, being with them so long and nursed all the children, except Mr. Cyril himself.”

Mrs. Doyle had finished mixing the mash now. She gave it a final stir and then took up the bucket, not without regret, for she would have liked a little longer chat, and went out to give the calves their supper before she brought in tea for Mr. Dayne.

Dunstan walked into his parlour, got out his

papers, and sat down at once. He had three good hours' work before him this evening, for he had wasted great part of the morning in fruitless regrets about this piece of ill-fortune that had befallen him. Now he must make up for lost time by working over-hours. But his thoughts refused to obey him. They plunged and reared like a restive horse. Now it was the loss of his appointment that distracted his attention, now the remembrance of the hour that he had spent at the cottage. And then the thought of Winny floated round him like a rosy mist, through which again Rachel's clear eyes, so full of purity and truth, looked steadfastly upon him.

It was no better after tea. He grew impatient with himself. At last he wheeled his chair round to the fire, planted his elbows upon his knees, thrust his hands into his hair, and set himself resolutely to think the whole thing over and fix every matter in its proper place. Six months ago, Dunstan could not have gone through such a feat of mental discipline. He had himself somewhat

better in hand now. For half an hour he sat staring into the fire with knitted brows and lips folded tight together. Then he roused up, shook back his shoulders and drew his papers towards him again. He had mastered himself, for the present at least. He must put up with his loss, it was no use worrying any longer over that. He had thrust back the thought of Winny among the wrecks and rubbish of worn-out follies. And for a sure possession there was Rachel's steadfast love, a very rock of faithfulness, on which he might build up what hopes he pleased with no fears of their coming down with a crash about his ears. Another day or two, and if Rachel did not call at the farm in the meantime, he would go down again to see her at the cottage and strengthen himself afresh.

## CHAPTER X.

## ECHOES.

WHICH he did. At least he went down to the cottage, though he did not succeed in seeing Rachel. She was ill in bed, Elspie told him ; that is, she wasn't so very bad, only a sort of headache, she thought, but she hadna got up yet. Should she tak her ony message ?

No, Dunstan said, only that he had been, and that Mrs. Doyle would be glad if she would come down on Sunday and have tea at the farm.

It was lucky that he had chanced to hear Mrs. Doyle say as much that morning just when he was coming out. It had given him an excuse for offering to leave word for her if she liked, as he would be passing that morning near the cottage. But it was something so unusual for Rachel to be

ill. It made him feel uneasy as he walked back through the plantation. If he could only have seen her he would not have minded so much, but now he could not well make an excuse to go again himself before next week at least. But this was Thursday; she would be better by Sunday. If it were only a headache it could not last long, but he would see her then, and they would talk over everything again, and have a quiet time together.

But the quiet time did not come. Mrs. Doyle went down herself the next day and brought back word that Rachel was no better, indeed rather worse. The day after it was the same, and the next too. She was sickening for illness. By Sunday the malady had declared itself. It was fever with which she had been seized, and Dunstan remembered, with a sudden pang of self-reproach, that only an hour or two before he had seen her last, he had been in the cottage of one of the labourers on the line, where, unknown at the time to him, a child lay ill of the same disease. It was his doing then; he must have brought away the

infection with him, and in some subtle way communicated it to her as they stood together that evening a week ago.

There was no seeing her now, no sending even a message, beyond one of mere inquiry. Mrs. Doyle would have stayed at the cottage altogether for awhile, to help Elspie to nurse her, though she could not have gone backwards and forwards from the fevered house to her own. But this Rachel would by no means suffer. As soon as she knew the nature of her complaint, she expressly forbade Elspie to admit anyone into the house. She could not bear the thought that any one else should run any risk on her account. Besides, it could do no good, as she said; Elspie was a careful nurse, and enough for all her need.

As indeed she was. Taciturn and stubborn, like many of her race, she proved herself none the less equal to the occasion. Her mistress was cared for, if not tenderly yet efficiently. The doctor's orders were scrupulously carried out. Above all, the cottage was guarded like a fortress, and no one

suffered to cross the threshold, except the girl from the mill, who had had the fever herself and who came from time to time to go their errands.

Dunstan went past sometimes. Not that he had any need to call to make inquiries; for Mrs. Doyle sent almost every day to hear how Rachel was going on, generally accompanying her message by a present of a few fresh-laid eggs, a plump chicken, a little cream, or some such farm-house delicacy. But there was a sort of dreary satisfaction to him in just looking up at the window, with its white blind always drawn closely down, and the casement, on sunny days, set a little open. To be sure he could only cast a glance towards it as he walked slowly past; still it felt like doing something, though Rachel might never know of the thoughts that he was sending towards her, as she lay within that darkened chamber.

For more than a month Rachel kept her room. It was a serious case, the doctor said, though happily she had an excellent constitution to help her through. The weeks slipped on, and April showers

began to make soft the earth, and April sunshine to warm the air. The sharp easterly winds had snarled themselves away. It became pleasant to saunter out of doors. Spring seemed to have come, as often happens after a tardy season, with a sudden burst upon the earth. The hedges were covered with myriads of tiny pink buds, the sycamores and chestnuts began to unfold their crumpled leaves, the woods were carpeted with primroses and pale anemones, and in every sheltered glade hyacinths hung out their fragrant bells, and blue violets peeped shyly out, half-hidden in their own green leaves.

And spring in the country is such a delicious time. Dunstan could not help feeling something of the blytheness in the air when he went down in the morning to his office, and pitying people who lived cooped up in towns, and only knew that it was April by being reminded that it was time to pay their rent.

Poor Rachel too! He thought of her, shut out from it all, so as she would have revelled in it;



hardly seeing so much as a streak of all this glorious sunshine that was making the earth so glad. Just enduring life instead of enjoying it. And he knew by himself what weary work it was lying day by day on a sick bed, each morning longing for the night to come, and at night wishing only that it were morning again.

He had missed her sadly when first she had been ill. It would have been worth anything sometimes, to have had just one hour of her quiet, comforting companionship. He had been so used for a long time now to lean upon her, to look to her for solace when anything oppressed him, that he felt at a loss without her ready sympathy. But this was wearing away now; he was learning, as it were, to go alone, like a child from whom some guiding hand has been withdrawn. And each day, as the buds burst out more greenly on the trees and hedges, it seemed easier to do so.

But indeed it is hardly possible for anyone who has to be much out of doors, as Dunstan was just now, to maintain a very persistent sense of his own

little private griefs and worries, with Nature so cheerily at work around him. Whether he will or no, something wins him at times, to be glad, even in spite of himself; he cannot help the life within him leaping up to meet the rushing life without. And Dunstan felt the thrill. He began to be more like his former self, to walk with a freer tread, and to carry his head erect and carelessly as he used to do before his sickness had struck him down.

“I knew he'd get a turn along with the year,” said Mrs. Doyle to herself one morning, as she watched him down the yard and out into the lane, with Cadge frisking clumsily about him, and Susy, who was setting off to school, screaming with delight at the antics which he was provoking the dog to play.

“Them east winds was pinching him up; and no wonder, for they were sharp enough while they were on to cut a body in two. It's a mercy they didn't hold out while the lambing got agate. We should have had a pretty handful if they had.”

And Mrs. Doyle took another egg out of the basket which stood beside her on the dresser, and broke it into a huge round dish filled with square lumps of fat bacon, and destined to contain an egg and bacon pie on which the farming men were to dull the edges of their appetites that day at dinner.

Dunstan went lightly down the lane. He was alone now. Susy had gone on the other way to school, and old Cadge had parted from him at the gate, going back, like a prudent dog as he was, to the kitchen door. The sunlight was streaming down merrily upon him through the half-clothed trees; the blackbirds were piping in the hedges, and somewhere out of sight a lark was pouring down a flood of melody as it fluttered upward, singing as it rose. If he had had a cane in his hand, he would have swung it, but Dunstan never carried a cane. He hated, as he said, to be bothered with a thing that was of no earthly use except to get lost by being left about. So being destitute of that vehicle for his emotions, he began to whistle a stave of an old tune that had been

ringing in his ears ever since he awoke. How it came there he could not tell, but it was a tune to which Winny used to sing a favourite ballad of hers,

“There was a Friar of orders Grey.”

Winny was not by any means a finished musician. She nearly always used to manage to get wrong some way or other if she had a pianoforte accompaniment to assist her voice. It put her out so, she said. But how sweetly she used to trill out those songs of hers as they all sat together on the bank beside the river; Lewis and he lolling beneath some drooping ash or willow with their fishing-rods in their hands, his own often idle enough, and she not far away; Dunstan had the picture of her this moment in his mind, sitting on the turf, with her light muslin dress tumbled round her like a rosy cloud, her little brown hat lying on the grass beside her, and the slant evening sunbeams rippling through the soft tresses of her falling hair.

That little figure was often flitting in and out

of his mind just now, to be turned out vigorously whenever by chance he found it there. Still it would keep coming. He could no more help it than he could help the fragrance of the wild hyacinths and violets from floating round him as he passed the banks on which they grew.

For somehow these bright spring days with all their budding freshness and wealth of sunshine, seemed to be filled with faint echoes from days gone by, dim jangling chimes which yet he could not still.

“She jilted me,” he said half aloud to himself. And he set his face resolutely, and went on more quickly down the lane.

Jilted him! It was an ugly word. Very ugly to a spirit like that of Dunstan Dayne. But he forced it out. It was best to say it plainly. He could fight down his weakness more easily when he humbled himself thus to do it. He threw his head back; he was getting the victory over his temptation, for a temptation it was, there was no denying that. Then he took out his pocket-

book and began to consider about some matters that he meant to attend to at the office that day. He would have to contrive his time carefully for he wanted to ride over to the clay pits, some miles away along the Rooklands road, where the men were banking. And there were other things on hand as well. Dunstan did not care how many; now that he was feeling once more the life growing strong within him, he rather liked to think each morning that a good day's work lay before him to be cleared away before evening came.

And he was working too with fresh zest now, for a day or two ago, by a piece of unforeseen good fortune, he had assured himself of an appointment even better than the one which he had lost. That would be indeed a piece of joyful news to take to Rachel when he saw her again, which he hoped to do now before many days were over. Mrs. Doyle had been once or twice to the cottage, for there was no fear now, the doctor said; and if the weather kept so warm, her husband meant to take the gig and bring her down to the

farm some day that week ; the bit of change would do her good, and she could go back before sundown. Poor Rachel! she needed something to make up for the long tedious time that she had had while she was keeping quarantine so rigorously.

Dunstan had a busy day of it, as he had expected. It was not until far on in the afternoon that he was able to pack up his things and set off for the Clay pits. It was a real luxury, after being shut up in the office so long, to mount his horse and ride away. And it gives a man such a sense of double life to get on horseback ; it is not his own proper force alone that he feels, but something also of the vitality passes into him, that nerves the thews and sinews of the creature that he strides. There is a sort of kingliness about it ; and he sits his saddle like a throne, and feels the dull dead earth at least one remove further from him than it was before.

Dunstan enjoyed it. He rode at a leisurely pace down the village. He preferred not to raise the dust by galloping down the street and

bringing out a host of little boys to stare after him; and he could take his time if he pleased, for he had cleared away his work behind him and left nothing to do when he returned. At last he got into the road leading past the Lodge—a shady quiet road, bordered with elms and sycamores that were just beginning to put on the faintest possible tinge of green. Mounted on his horse, Dunstan could see the ivy-covered front of the house above its belt of laurels, and the beds bright with spring flowers, that studded the closely-shaven lawn. Then came the paddock where Geordie's pony was kept—a shaggy little Shetland, whose beauty, if it had any, seemed to consist in a remarkably unkempt mane and tail.

Dunstan had got past the paddock, and was touching his horse into a trot, when he was stayed by a voice calling loudly behind him—

“Mr. Dayne!—Mr. Dayne! I say, Mr. Dayne!”

He looked back, and there was Geordie tearing wildly across the field, and making signs to him to stop.



Dunstan pulled up and waited for the boy to come up; but Geordie only shouted, "I'll be back directly," and shot off towards the house, whence, a moment after, he returned with something in his hand.

"Oh, Mr. Dayne, this is yours!" he cried, as all panting and out of breath he reached the stile. "I'm very sorry, but I forgot all about it, and Abigail found it this morning, and I was going to bring it to you to Mrs. Doyle's, only I saw you riding by."

Dunstan reached down from his saddle, and took what Geordie was holding up to him. It was Winny's note, all stained and crumpled, but with his name still plain outside! He started as the dainty handwriting caught his eye,

"What is this? Where did you get it?" he asked so sharply that Geordie could hardly stammer out for fright—

"It's Miss Gilmour's letter. She gave it me to bring to you the day before she went away. And—and—it got lost in my knickerbockers, and Abi-

gail only found it this morning, when she was pulling them to pieces.

And having delivered himself thus far, Geordie took to his heels and rushed back as fast as his legs would carry him, glad to put an end as speedily as possible to the uncomfortable colloquy.

Yes, there it was. Dunstan had read it from beginning to end at least half a dozen times, and certainly he was not dreaming. The little gentle, half-humble note in Winny's own delicate handwriting, the fairy-like strokes, the lines not very straight across the page. He knew it well. He had one or two such before which he had treasured sacredly until his illness; then they had been burnt. He wanted nothing after that to remind him of her.

But this? He felt as if he could not comprehend it yet. He could see it, feel it—the sheet of stained, crumpled paper that had never seen the light till now, since the day that she had written those words so long ago upon it. But it was all

strange to him; his thoughts would not gather themselves together to take in the meaning. He folded it up again, put it in his breast-coat pocket, spurred his horse into a gallop, and never drew rein until he reached the place where the men were working.

He gave his orders there and looked after what was being done as if he had met with nothing to disturb him. In truth he hardly realized anything as yet, beyond a vague feeling of remorse at having judged her so unjustly. But as he rode slowly home the thing began to shape itself before him. It was not Winny who had been false to him; it was he who had been untrue to her!

He took out the note, and read it again and again. He saw it all now. Winny! poor little Winny! She had really loved him, then. It was very sweet to him, even now, to know it; and yet the sweetness was itself a sting. For what mattered it to either of them now whether she had loved him once or no? She had overlived it, doubtless, long ago. She must have done

so, or she could never have been enjoying herself so much as Mrs. Kennedy had said, just after they had left. He had not been enjoying himself. He had been doing something quite other than enjoying himself.

And yet it was cruel to have treated her as he had done, to have visited on her so severely what perhaps had been hardly meant for an offence. Ah, well! he had punished himself for it by killing out her love for him, as he had well deserved to do. The little, happy, guileless thing who used to look up into his face with such frank, confiding eyes, and smile such sweet welcome always when she saw him.

Ah! he was not master of himself now. He was not tearing himself free from the thralldom of these sweet enslaving thoughts. For one wild delirious hour he would give himself up to them—afterwards he would be strong. And hardly knowing what he did, as he reached the Rooklands lane, he turned his horse into the path that led through the plantation to the Hall.

He must see it once again, ramble round the deserted garden and recal the memory of his dream. Just the memory of it, nothing more. Dunstan felt quite sure he could go so far, and then stop there if he pleased. And yet it was a foolish thing, and he knew it too. For was he not bound to another by ties that he could not in honour break, that he did not even wish to break? Yes, that was where his safety lay; and he hustled out of sight the phantom thought that had flitted ghost-like through some dim region of his brain. The Future belonged to Rachel, and to Rachel only. But the Past—he must give himself for one moment to the Past!

He tied his horse to the plantation gate, just as he used to do long ago—the habit came to him as if it had been a thing of yesterday—and went across the shrubbery to the house. It seemed like treading on enchanted ground. Those grass-grown, weedy walks, those over-grown laurels and unpruned roses trailing their long bare branches on the ground; he remembered them all; only

that when he had walked here last, he had been walking not alone. And in a moment all the fragrance and glory of that blossoming love bloomed out afresh, and a vision of Winny in her sweet girlish loveliness arose before him—this time not to be turned away. He was strong enough; he need not do that now. Like Ulysses, bound to the mast, he might float eagerly by and listen for a moment to the soft enchanting song.

There were steps behind him. Dunstan turned. It was old Michael shuffling along and dragging his rake behind him. What Michael did when he was at work, it would be hard to tell, for his labours never seemed to leave any perceptible results; though indeed it would have been difficult for one pair of hands to make much impression on such a wilderness as was the Rooklands garden. He pulled up his rake when he saw Dunstan, and touched the brim of his brown wide-awake. The old man was always solemn in his demeanour, but it struck Dunstan that there was something to-day almost lugubrious in his salute.

He stopped and spoke to him,

“You don’t look very hearty, Michael,” he said.

“Hearty!—no, sir,” said Michael, and the old servitor shook his grey locks; “nor isn’t like to. It’s comed heavy on us all, being so sudden. But mebbly you haven’t heard about it, sir, or else they say allays ill-news travels fast. We nobbut got word this morning.”

“Word of what?” cried Dunstan. “Miss Winny is not ill?”

“No, sir, not as I knows on,” said Michael, in a long drawn treble. “It’s t’ young Master, sir, that’s took.” And the old man rubbed his coat cuff across his eyes. “We’d never no thoughts on it while this morning, an’ there was a letter comed to Hannah as they was a-bringing of him home to bury.”

“Dead!” exclaimed Dunstan, surprised and shocked at the ghastly tidings that had thus broken in upon his elysian dream. “Dead!—Mr. Lewis dead!”

“Ay! sir,” returned the old man, shaking his head again, as he leaned upon his rake. “It’s owre true. But I allays misdoubted, when they took him away, that it was to no good. He’d a been safer a deal at home, an’ I said as much to Hannah. There’s never a Gilmour dies here at the Hall, nor hasn’t been sin’ ever the White Woman began to walk, an’ that’s over two hundred years ago. I’ve been here myself, man an’ boy, well on to seventy year, an’ I never knowed one of that name come to his end within these walls. But, however, it’s all owre now, an’ what’s to come to t’ Master I don’t know. It’ll be the death of him an’ all, I doubt.”

“And when will they bring him home?” asked Dunstan, too much awed to think for the moment of anything but the “body,” that must wait so long before it could be laid at last to rest in that vault in the village church beneath the Rooklands pew.

“I can’t say, sir, exact, but it’ll be some time next week, I expect. Doctor Kennedy’s got word. He’s been here this morning, an’ t’ Missis an’ all.



There 'll be a vast to do afore they come. I've started fettling up a bit myself. But it 'll make no odds what's done. They 'll never see aught on it, I'll warrant. It 'll be a dree coming home for 'em ; the Master an' Miss Winny an' all."

Dunstan moved away, chilled to the core. There seemed something ominous in coming here for the first time to dream as by stealth of his buried love, and finding himself confronted thus suddenly by the pale Shadow of Death. He mounted his horse and rode back through the plantation and out upon the road, a strange confusion in his breast. Now it was Winny that he thought of, pale and drooping in her mourning robes ; and then Rachel, still and self-contained, looking at him through those deep, unchanging eyes, the same in all things as she had been that night when he had parted from her at the garden gate. And he ! could he too look thus honestly into hers ?

Dunstan found himself wishing that the first interview were well over, and things going on again quietly in the old track. Only an uneasy ques-

tioning obtruded itself here. How would it be when Winny had returned? Could he bear now that she should know it all? And once he had almost triumphed to think that one day she should! And then again there drifted before him, as he rode on through the falling twilight, the thought of the "body" that must already have commenced its dolorous voyage, and even now, while he was riding there, would be on its way home to its grave, with the waves plashing round the vessel's side as it heaved along, bearing with it two where three had gone out, and instead of the third that awful freight, which, how precious soever it might be, the mourners were bringing with them only that they might bury it out of their sight. And with that there came breasting up against him another thought, whelming in its cold flood all else beside, how much of his life now lay dead—dead, yet with no quiet grave of forgetfulness in which to bury it! Ah! if he could forget!

And yet would he if he could?

## CHAPTER XI.

## ASHES TO ASHES.

IT was nearly three weeks after this before the vault beneath the Rooklands pew was opened, and the son of Catherine Gilmour, wife of Lawrence Gilmour of Rooklands, laid within it, there to moulder amid his ancestral dust. There had been contrary winds which had delayed the ship, so that the daisied sod and the blossoming thorn-trees in Glinton churchyard, were robed as whitely by the time the sable procession passed through its gates, as when, twenty years ago, the falling snow had flecked the pall that covered the young mother's bier.

“A small funeral—a very small funeral; quite mean, in fact,” remarked Mrs. McWerther, who, with the two Miss Barbés, had secured one of the

front windows of a house overlooking the churchyard, whence to witness all that there was to be seen.

There was no getting into the church itself. Job Dolson had received strict orders to admit no one on any pretext whatever, until after the conclusion of the ceremony. A great disappointment to Miss Barbe, who had quite set her mind on being present during the service.

“For it must be so impressive, so very impressive,” as she said, “to see the coffin actually let down into the vault beneath the pew. Something quite out of the ordinary way, not at all like a funeral out of doors, which was a thing that one might see at any time.”

And then, too, the body having been brought from such a distance to be buried, gave a peculiar interest to the event. Miss Barbe understood they had been travelling with it all night, and then there were the seven miles from Bedesby, though probably they would come more quickly on the road than down the village. But certainly she must

confess she felt not a little disappointed at seeing only a hearse and two coaches after all.

And truly, if grief be measured by the outward signs of woe, the young heir of Rooklands had not been greatly mourned for. As Mrs. McWerther observed, with some asperity—

“If Mr. Gilmour had not friends of his own to assist him in following the corpse, he ought to have considered it his duty to have had at least an empty coach or two, to make the procession a decent length.”

And she and the Miss Barbés stretched their necks out of the window as far as was consistent with polite curiosity, for the hearse had stopped now at the churchyard gate, and the coffin was being taken out.

Very heavy it seemed to be, but of course, as Miss Barbe remarked, that must be the case, for there could not be fewer than three of them altogether—the inner one, and then another of lead, besides the outer one of all, which, it must be owned, was handsome enough to be quite consistent with pro-

priety. The three ladies could see it quite plainly, so beautifully decorated, and such massive handles, and the shield, too, upon the top, though it was a pity they were too far off to read the inscription.

Then the great velvet pall was drawn over it, and a little gust of wind scattered down some of the white hawthorn from the tree that grew beside the gate, and the May sunshine fell as pleasantly over all as if it had been shimmering on the orange blossom of a bride. Next came Mr. Gilmour and Dr. Kennedy—they got out of the first carriage, and after them the three old servants from the Hall.

Those were all. Mrs. McWerther could not refrain from expressing a pretty strong sense of disapprobation at the scanty train, emerging speedily into a criticism equally severe on the demeanour of the master of Rooklands himself.

It was a positive shame, she said, to see him walking so stiff and upright, and he following his only son to the grave. And not so much either as

a white handkerchief in his hand, which would at least have been suggestive of tears, even if he had been too proud to shed them, as she supposed he was. Or else he hadn't any to shed, which was quite as likely, for she had always said she believed Mr. Gilmour had no more feeling in him than that stone statue on the top of one of the Gilmour tombs in the chancel of the church. Now the servants did seem to be affected with feelings suitable to the occasion; they were wiping their eyes all the way up the walk, but then that only made their master's conduct appear in a more unbecoming light. He ought to feel it incumbent upon him, Mrs. McWerther considered, to display a little emotion on such an occasion, if only to satisfy the feelings of the spectators, who naturally expected that on such an occasion the party principally concerned should look, at any rate, subdued, if not positively overcome by his emotions.

But Mr. Gilmour did not seem disposed to satisfy the feelings of the spectators in the way that Mrs. McWerther had desired. That ashen-

grey face looked, as she had said, almost as impassive as the stony visage of his ancestor upon the chancel monument, except that there was a slight twitching of the tight-closed lips which his charitable censor was too distant to perceive. Job Dolson, however, who stood within the church-porch in readiness to close the doors as soon as the last of the little procession had filed in, saw with those twinkling eyes of his more than Mrs. McWerther through her gold-rimmed spectacles, as she looked down upon the sight from that first-floor window.

“It’s comed heavy on him, I lay,” he muttered to himself; “it’s comed heavy on him, has t’ young Master’s death. Such a gruesome face as that of his I never see’d afore, for as much as he tries to carry it off the way he does. He looks more like one dead man following another to his grave, than like owt else; there’ll be another job for me afore long, or I’m wrong. Folks that corks up their feelings like that stands a chance oftens o’ brusting out with a shiver. I shouldn’t wonder



now at his dropping sudden any day. As most like he will, if he stops here. It's a uncomfortable place is Rooklands, for a Gilmour to die at. They're pretty sure to come to their end promiscus, without they go away for 't, as Mr. Lewis did."

And Job fastened the church door, and went up the aisle towards the vault, for being both clerk and sexton, his presence was required in an official capacity. And Mrs. McWerther, seeing that all was over for the present, drew in her head from the open window, and addressed herself to half an hour's chat with the Miss Barbes by way of passing away the time until the procession should re-appear; for as she was there, she said she might as well stay until the end, so as to judge for herself whether the ceremony inside the church would have the desired effect of inducing Mr. Gilmour to indulge the spectators by a little seemly manifestation of emotion on his return.

Brightly the May sunshine streamed through the painted windows in the chancel, light-

ing up with a quiet glory the still features of the saint in the arch above the south doorway which Mrs. Doyle fancied looked so much like Rachel Dallas ; and very softly the purple splendour fell upon that stone effigy of the Laurence Gilmour of Rooklands, whose evil deeds, as the village stories went, had brought upon his house the White Lady's curse. And with a ruby glow it burned upon the marble tablet over the Rooklands pew, whereon was traced the name of Catherine Gilmour, wife of the man who stood beneath it, his feet beside the open vault, and the crimson light hiding now the ashen paleness of his face.

For sternly though he might hold himself, the man's misery was in truth becoming greater than he could bear. The tears which since his son's death he had never shed, had been falling all the time with a slow drip of agony into his heart. For grief that can weep and bewail itself is not quite unendurable ; it is that dry-eyed wretchedness which suffers and which makes no sign that drains

the very life of the soul out of those on whom it fastens.

“Earth to earth! ashes to ashes! dust to dust!” And as the churchyard mould fell with a dull drop upon the coffin lid, the sound forced from the father’s lips the only moan that had issued from them since the hour when first he had seen before him the dead face of his son. The flood-gates of passionate despair were broken down. With an exceeding great and bitter cry, he fell beside the open vault—“Oh! Lewis, my son! my son! Would God I had died with thee!”

It was Job Dolson who raised him from the ground, while Dr. Kennedy, who was standing by, stooped down and unloosed his neckcloth.

“Take him out!—give him air!” cried one and another.

“It’s a fit. He’s a-twitching of his face like anything,” said the sexton. “I see’d as soon as ever I set eyes on him, that there’d be summut up afore long. His lips was a tweaking then for all he had

'em so close nipped up. I've see'd folk like that afore. It's their feelings that does it, when they've been keeping of 'em over close."

And putting their strength together, they conveyed their burden with some little difficulty to the door, where they laid him down on some cushions in the porch. The Doctor knelt beside the prostrate form, supporting the proud grey head, proud no longer now, for the features still twitched convulsively, and the deepset eyes looked out from under the level brows with a blank unmeaning stare.

Job Dolson peered curiously at him,

"Just as I was a-saying to myself," he muttered to the Doctor under his breath—"just as I was a-saying to myself. He'll be took suddent, I says, some o' these days; an' so he has. I shouldn't wonder now if he was to be gone afore ever we get him home. He has the blood of the Gilmours in him."

And Job looked into the Doctor's face with a glance that seemed as if it would express some-

thing which he was chary of putting into words. A glance, however, that was lost upon the Doctor who was anxiously looking out for the village Esculapius, to know whether it would be better to convey the sick man home at once, or take him to some house close at hand and send a messenger to break the tidings to his daughter. For Winifred had arrived with her father, though Dr. Kennedy had not yet seen her, and was even then at Rooklands awaiting his coming home.

And behind them in the empty church, the clergyman, standing beside the forsaken grave, lingered for a moment to read out the last solemn words of triumphant hope over the unconscious dust. There was none to say Amen when he gave thanks, that out of the miseries of this sinful world one had been delivered. Though Lewis Gilmour would not rest the less quietly for that, nor would the sharp cry that had been wrung by anguish from the living father's lips, pierce to the discomfiture of his girded peace.

Truly there are times when, moved by strange

pity, a man may say with one who had looked more deeply into the things of life and death than any of us may ever do, "Wherefore I praise the dead who are already dead, more than the living who are yet alive."

## CHAPTER XII.

## RACHEL'S VIOLETS.

IT was nearly two months now since Dunstan had gone to see Rachel that wild March evening, carrying with him the ill news contained in the big letter with the print outside. Then, as he stood beside her in the window, leaning with his burden upon her for support, the afternoon sun had been looking in through the leafless chestnut boughs, brightening a little that dim parlour as the day wore to its close. But now each shining bud had burst its sheath, and the broad palm-like fronds had spread themselves out into a thick leafy screen that would make perpetual twilight there even in the garish summer days. There would be no more sunbeams now wandering any more past the white

curtains and over the old-fashioned furniture, and tracing patterns of fanciful device upon that thread-bare carpet from which twenty years of wear had faded out all colour and pattern of its own. None at least until the sun sank very low, so low that its setting rays looked in redly from beneath the outstretched branches; and then at evening time for a little while there would fall a rosy tinge upon the wall, just hinting and no more of the glow and glory of the day that had so nearly passed away.

Just now however it was not thus looking in, only streaming outside merrily enough over the pear and cherry trees. But within, the shadowy room looked only the more shadowy contrasted with this affluence of light without; just as it had done six months ago or more, when Rachel had sat there that clear October afternoon, gazing out into the garden where the autumn wind was chasing the leaves upon the walks, but seeing nothing for the troubled thoughts that came between.

There was a high wind again now, only instead



of yellowing leaves it was bringing down showers of blossom from the trees, drifting one now and then quite through the open casement upon Rachel's black dress as she sat beside the window, her hands folded on the work that lay upon her lap, and in her eyes the same unheeding look that saw no more of the spring light and the falling flowers than they had seen then of the autumnal sunshine and the dropping leaves.

Rachel was well again now, quite well. The fever, sharp while it had lasted, had passed away and left her much as it had found her. Paler she could hardly be, for there was never much bloom on Rachel's cheeks to be blanched out by illness, though it might be that the outlines of her face were a little more sharply chiselled than they had been before, and there was just a touch of languor in the listless bend of the white long fingers upon which the emerald ring shone still ; not sparkling now, for no glancing rays were falling on it that might bring out its lustre, but gleaming with a dark clear light like that of the sea, when looking over a

ship side the eye sinks into a fathomless abyss of waters.

And there was a soft dream-light in those dark, once anxious eyes, and a smile of something more than still content playing at intervals about the folded lips, like moonbeams shimmering on the surface of some gently rippled lake. Surely a smile like that must have been the outcome of some very sweet unspoken thoughts! And in truth it was, for as she sat there, Rachel's thoughts had been floating back to the time when first she had seen Dunstan Dayne at the Brook Farm nearly a year ago, when he was to her just Mrs. Doyle's lodger—nothing more. And then she had recalled the weeks that she had spent at the farm while he was ill, and the tender compassion that his helplessness had stirred within her, while yet it had been service only that she had rendered him. And then came the joy of seeing him pass slowly out of the Shadow of Death as he grasped the hand that reached down to help him up the steep side of the valley. And after that, the great yearning pity

for the sick soul that had looked to her for healing, a pity deepening into love as she saw him needing what there was none but her to give, and felt that here at last she had found a channel in which her whole nature might have leave to flow.

And again that quiet smile shone through her face as she thought of the time, not very far distant now, when she might stand always by his side, needing no longer to keep back anything of that great love which was his alone; but with faithful heart and willing hand serving him truly all the days of her life, and finding therein happiness enough to fill her cup unto the brim.

Serving him truly! For this devotion of Rachel's was very perfect and entire; there was a crystalline purity, a rare unselfishness about her love, as indeed there was about her whole nature of which this was but the blossom and the crown, which in all things saw its object only, not itself. Saw, not blindly; for that there were scars and blemishes in Dunstan's character, Rachel knew full well; scars not all received in honourable battle;

blemishes, some of which might never be removed. Yet with them all she loved him none the less; perhaps he was even the dearer to her for them. For did not his very failings give her a yet tenderer hold upon him; making her feeble aid only the more needful, because his own steps not seldom faltered in the way?

Just then a gust of wind passed by, and swayed down the spreading chestnut boughs until one of the outmost sprays just touched the lattice with the end of a long green leaf. Rachel roused herself a little and glanced up. It was like a hand beckoning to her from without, as if the old tree would bid her look out and admire its snowy blossoms and green depths of foliage.

But her thoughts went on in the same track still. This blossoming life did but seem to her to repeat the bloom and fragrance of her own, a while ago so cold and colourless, now touched into a beauty so strange and rare. And she leaned down her head into her hand, and again the dreamlight overflowed her eyes as she thought that even this

fair robe of Nature's weaving was not fairer than that in which her own dull life now had clothed itself afresh.

Rachel might dream on ; the waking had not come yet. She did not know that through these bright weeks while the woods and fields had been putting on their beautiful array, and all nature decking herself anew in such gay garniture of leaf and flower, something had been fading slowly from her life whose warmth and sweetness had made to her one long summer of those winter months that now had melted into spring.

For Dunstan had kept his promise with himself — kept it to the utmost. He had not suffered her to guess that what awhile ago had been so precious, had lost its value now. He had seen her only once since her illness, and that had been the day when Gideon had brought her over to the farm ; and then by tender speech and act he had sought to hide that inward defection which he was struggling honestly to subdue. When he touched those quiet lips, as she put her hand again in his, it was with

no Judas kiss, for had he not vowed within himself never to betray that faithful love which in his bitterness and desolation he had once so wildly craved?

It had been a terrible blunder, and Dunstan saw it now, to have mistaken that passing weakness for a lifelong need; yet cost him what it would, he was determined to redeem his promise. Rachel should never know how fierce a fight was waging now between his honour and his inclination; not even that any struggle was going on at all. And after all, he reflected, his was a common lot. Others besides himself had gone through life, content to know that they were loved, without so greatly loving in return; and seeing that by his own deed he had made it his, he would accept it, and with it such scant share of happiness as it might contain.

So Dunstan had resolved. Whether he was right in keeping up the semblance of a love that he had never truly known; whether indeed it was possible to be true to another, while at the same time he was false to himself, others may

determine. There was a chivalry in his nature which made him choose the hardest course ; perhaps too, if it must be owned, a certain grim satisfaction in thus doing battle with himself, and forcing himself to gain the victory simply because he had determined not to lose it.

If Rachel could have known, as she sat this afternoon looking out into the future, what a gruesome form it was around which she was weaving that fairy web of hopes, she would have shuddered back, affrighted at the sight ! If only she had known ! But nothing betrayed it to her. So true herself, how could she dream of anything but truth in him ?

Again that tapping of the leaf against the lattice. The wind was careering in quite frolicsome fashion round the garden, bringing down a perfect snowstorm of tiny florets that whitened all the grass beneath the trees and littered even the carpet at her feet. She picked up one that had floated down upon her lap, looking half regretfully, as if it had been a living being, on its crisp white



petals. The poor little flower! Why could it not have staid laughing in the sunshine on the bough? And a shade of sadness crept over her face to think that even that small life was wasted; and that the little bud which had slept all the winter in its sheath, waiting so patiently for the spring, should have bloomed at last only to meet with this untimely end.

But her musings were broken in upon by a veritable tapping, not of the chestnut bough against the window, but a light firm rap at the parlour door.

The little blossom fell from her hand,

“Come in,” she said, and as she looked up, her heart gave a beat that answered to the summons.

That was not Elspie's matter-of-fact thump. The door opened, and Dunstan Dayne stood on the threshold of the room, not as when he stood there that wild March afternoon, bringing with him the ill news contained in the big letter with the print outside, heavy with disappointment, and chilled



through by that vexing wind that seemed to have withered up what little life was in him, but lusty now and upright, with the glow of health upon his face. He had lost something though of that frank, easy bearing and pleasant glance that had made him so many friends when first he had come to Ginton. Nor was there just that spring and elasticity about him that there used to be, nor those free curves about the mouth, which was set now into resolute lines, that to a keener observer, might have suggested a corresponding tightening of the once lax fibres of the soul.

And in his whole aspect there was the collectedness of a man who sees before him in the future some purpose which he is resolved to overtake, such a purpose as Dunstan had set before him, and which was henceforth to make Rachel's happiness, as he had thought awhile ago her loving, life-long tendance would have made his own. But this outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual change was not altogether perceptible to Rachel, who had known so little of Dunstan before the

illness which, as Mrs. McWerther had remarked, had sobered him down into quite another man. Only her rejoicing eyes told him how glad she was to see in him no vestige left of that lassitude and feebleness that had lingered so long about him.

Dunstan drew himself up in the doorway, looking down upon her with a smile—not the old flashing smile that used to light up his face like sunshine let into a curtained room, but a slow, steady smile that spent itself before it reached his eyes. For they were his lips only that smiled, and not his thoughts.

“You did not expect me, Rachel, did you, to bear down in this way upon you? But the porch door was open, so I walked in; I wanted to see how you were, not just to hear that you were well, and I knew that if I waited for Elspie to come, she would have sent me away as she did before.”

“I think not, this time,” said Rachel; “I am not afraid now of anyone coming into the house,

though indeed we have not many visitors to refuse. Elspie has even fewer acquaintances than I have."

"She is a worthy creature," said Dunstan, "but she kept the house like a dragon while you were ill. I never dared to come nearer to her than the outside of the porch. I wonder now what she would have said if she had known that I meant some day to carry off this golden apple that she guards so jealously."

Rachel was not well read in classical literature, but she comprehended something of his meaning, and a light flush rose to her brow,

"I am glad I had not gone out," she said; "I was just thinking of going to Rooklands to see if they had heard anything more from poor Mr. Gilmour."

"They are coming home to-morrow," said Dunstan; "I saw Dr. Kennedy this morning. He is making the arrangements for the funeral, and he told me it was to be at noon. They will travel all night, and bring the body direct from Bedesby

to the church, so as not to go with it to the house at all."

Rachel looked grave,

"Poor Mr. Gilmour!" she sighed: "it will be a terrible journey for him. I know, although people thought him so harsh and cold, that he loved that boy as his own life. When I was a girl and used to be so much at the Hall, I have seen his face sometimes grow as soft as a woman's when he has been watching him as he lay asleep on the sofa in the library, for he was always a puny, ailing child. He never made much of Miss Winifred; I used to be almost sorry for her. Many a time I have seen her lip quiver when she put up her little face to kiss him, and he just turned aside; you might have thought she hardly belonged to him, he noticed her so little. And she was such a bright, affectionate little thing; whatever her father gave to Lewis, made her just as happy as if it had been all her own."

Dunstan listened, but made no remark. He was looking out with absent eyes through the open

lattice into the garden where the fallen blossoms were drifting before the wind.

“Poor Miss Winny!” continued Rachel. “It will be very sad too, for her, coming back to the empty house. It is a pity Mrs. Kennedy is away just now; she has no one else that she could look to now that her trouble is fresh upon her; unless it draws her father out to her a little. When death comes into a family, it often brings those that are left, nearer to one another than they ever were before.”

“How the wind is bringing down the blossom from these trees of yours,” said Dunstan, breaking abruptly the thread of her discourse. And if Rachel could have caught a glimpse of his face just then, she would have seen upon it that girded look which it had only recently begun to wear. “There will not be much fruit this year, the blossoms cannot have had time to set.”

“I am afraid not,” she said. “It seems a pity, does it not, such rich promise as there was only yesterday? That great tree at the corner of the

garden was a perfect pyramid of bloom, and now it is nearly stripped."

Dunstan turned round to her; his voice had dropped into a lower tone.

"Well, it does not signify, I suppose, very much to us. We shall neither of us be here, I suppose, to gather the fruit, if there is any to be ripened. But, Rachel, what delicious perfume is it that the room is filled with? It is like the very breath of spring."

"Violets," said Rachel. "There they are, close beside you on that little table in the window! But surely you did not need telling what scent it was?"

"I thought I smelt violets; but you forget that I have never been in the country in violet-time since I was a boy. They must have been just over when I came here last year. But what a bed of them you have got here. There has been a whole bank rifled, surely, to make this purple pile. You are extravagant in your pleasures, Rachel."

"I am afraid I am," she said, half smiling. "Extravagant in time, at least, for they took me

half the morning to gather and arrange. But it seems such a pity to keep the spring all shut out of doors. I like, if I can, to bring a little of it into the house."

Dunstan was looking down approvingly.

"I should have known that you had something of the artist soul in you, Rachel, by these flowers alone. They seem as if they were springing out of this green moss of their own accord. It is perfect. But what are these white ones? I don't remember having seen any about here."

"That is because they need looking for. There are plenty of them in the wood. But these are a peculiar kind; if you notice, they are nearly twice the size of the others, and even sweeter, if possible. There is only one place that I know of where they grow. But I gathered them for poor Miss Winny's sake as much as for their own. She used to be so fond of these white violets, and there is quite a bed of them in a little nook where we used often to go together to seek them. And this moss, too, came from the same place. It

grows finer there, I think, than anywhere else."

"And where is that?" asked Dunstan. But the words came out as if he were hardly thinking of what he said, and as he spoke, his fingers played idly with the soft green sprays amidst which the violets were nestling.

"It is a long way from here, down by the river-side," said Rachel. "I am not sure that I can explain it to you exactly. You go along the bank and past that little waterfall, nearly as far as the gate which opens into the path leading to the village. If you remember, there is a willow-tree fallen across the stream. Well, they grow in a sort of cove that there is just against the roots. You know that tree?"

"Yes, yes! I know it well enough," said Dunstan, but without looking at Rachel. He was plucking out one or two of the white violets from among the rest.

Rachel said no more just then; perhaps because she felt the slightest possible touch of impatience in Dunstan's tones. She began, instead,



to pick out the rest of the white violets, weaving them into a dainty little bouquet with some slender sprays of moss.

“Take it, if you like them,” she said, when it was finished. And she held out her little offering with a smile.

But Dunstan put aside her hand, violets and all, “Nonsense,” he said, “keep them for yourself.”

And as he threw down those which he had been holding still, his lips set themselves again into that even line which seemed as it were to lock his whole countenance together.

Rachel withdrew her hand. The smile faded from her face. This time she had seen that bound look upon his face. It struck her with a sudden strangeness; but it was the tone in which he spoke that made her for an instant close up before him like flowers before a storm. His irritable moods during that tedious sickness had never troubled her. She had heard the hasty, fretful words patiently, even pitifully, as she would have heard a moan of pain; but this she could not

understand. Dunstan was not always affable even now to others, but to her he had never spoken otherwise than with courtesy, nay, gentleness. She said nothing in return, only her fingers trembled a little as she unloosed the flowers, and hardly knowing what she did, began to replace them absently among the rest.

But Dunstan stayed her hand. As it moved over the fragrant heap, the gleaming emerald had caught his eye and recalled his truant thoughts.

“Gather me some of the purple ones,” he said, “I had rather have them. And choose those that have the deepest colour, Rachel.”

She did as he bade her. His voice had melted all at once into its softest tones; yet still the jar remained of that careless gesture and those almost surly words. They disturbed her, like a stone dropped suddenly into still waters, breaking up the fair reflections on its surface. She could not quite compose herself, even when Dunstan went on to talk again easily and pleasantly as if he saw and would remove the impression he had made.

“I would rather you had taken the white ones,” she said when she had done; “I could have given you all I had then; besides, I fancy they are sweeter than these.”

“Not to me,” said Dunstan, and he took one little bunch from her hands and fastened it carefully in his coat. “It will look bravely there, Rachel, won’t it? Now you see, if I walk home thoughtfully, with downcast eyes, I shall be reminded at every step of you; or if I forget myself and look up, still there will be the perfume, like your unseen presence, floating round me.”

The light broke over Rachel’s face again,

“You need not forget yourself surely to look up. But still the white ones would have done as well.”

“Don’t you understand?” said Dunstan, and he took both her hands in his and drew her towards him. “Look in my face, and I will tell you why I like these best. It is because they have just the same deep steadfast tint that your eyes have when they search mine, as they are doing now. I see

something there that will never change nor fail, that will always be true to me as long as I am true to it."

Rachel smiled, a quiet, contented smile.

"Always," she murmured. "Not '*as long.*'"

"Always, then," said Dunstain, "*always.* Now are you satisfied, Rachel?"

The smile deepened in her eyes,

"I am content," she answered, "if you are." And the outcome of a life seemed to be in the words, so filled with lingering earnestness were the tones in which she spoke them.

But there was no answering light in Dunstan's face, as he held her hands in a still tightening grasp. A shadow rather seemed to be stealing over it, veiling the beam of tenderness that for a moment had given warmth and brightness to his glance, and dulling again the glow on hers.

"I am so," he replied. But he was looking now, not at her, rather as if away to some infinite distance beyond. "Yes, if to be loved can make a man's happiness, then I am sure of mine."

But his voice sounded hollow. There seemed the echo of a sigh in what he said that fell as heavily on Rachel's ears as those sharper accents had fallen awhile ago. Again her eyes sought his. Not gladly now, but with an anxious questioning look, as if she would read the very secrets of his thoughts.

Dunstan seemed almost disconcerted by her fixed regard.

"Tell me what it is you find," he said. And the corners of his mouth just curved a little. "I see it in your face, Rachel. You do not trust me yet as I trust you."

She drew in her gaze.

"No, no! it is not that," she said, speaking hurriedly, as if she would put away in nervous haste the bare suggestion that such could be the case.

"But you were studying me," urged Dunstan. "Confess it, Rachel. Tell me now, what you thought you saw? Anything you would not wish to learn?"

It was dangerous ground on which he trod, and

Dunstan felt it too. But he had a feverish desire to know that so far at least he had worn the mask successfully, and hidden the sad reality from those truth-seeking eyes.

Rachel smiled faintly,

“I learned nothing at all. Your face puzzles me. It seems like one of those monkish parchments that you once told me of, which have been written on again and again. What was it you called them?”

“Palimpsests.”

“Yes, that is the word; and sometimes the old characters appear again among the fresher ones, and make it all confusion.”

“Is it so?” said Dunstan, troubled inwardly to find how near instinct had guided her to the truth. “But, Rachel, cannot you read one word traced in golden letters above all the rest?”

“What is that?” she asked.

“TRUST,” he answered. And he bent down a little and touched her forehead lightly with his lips. “Is it so hard to read that, Rachel?”

Rachel did not speak, only laid her head for an instant against his shoulder, as if she would give him more eloquently than by any words the assurance that he asked. She could not suffer him to dream that her faith in him was less entire than his confidence in her; and yet, even as he spoke, there had breathed over her a vague misgiving, subtle, scarcely to be felt, impalpable as that faint sense of something in the air which even in the bright September mornings just hints at times that the year has passed its prime.

But doubt had vanished when she raised her head. There was nothing now but frankness in the eyes that were looking down protectingly upon her, nothing but strength and safety in that stalwart form.

She might trust him! Yes, and if he needed less at her hands now than when he was feeble and sore broken in soul and body both, it was only that he might give the more freely to her of his own abounding store.

Five minutes afterwards she stood at the gate,

shading her eyes with her hand as she watched him down the lane, the falling blossoms drifting upon her from the wind-shaken trees and nestling among the coils of her dark, abundant hair. But Dunstan did not turn as had been his wont to wave farewell to her from the plantation gate. He passed through it and went on unheeding, his arms folded tightly across his breast, his head bent down and his brows set like one in deep, unquiet thought.

When he had gone some distance, he paused an instant, struck his heel into the ground as if he had settled afresh some purpose within himself, threw back his shoulders, and went on with head erect. A faint perfume breathed itself around him. He glanced down. It was Rachel's violets that had been all crushed and broken by the strong pressure of his folded arms.



## CHAPTER XIII.

## A DEAD SPRING.

PLENTY of employment now for the Ginton gossips. There was quite a rage all the rest of the week for little impromptu tea-drinkings among the widowed and spinster portion of the community, as also among such comfortable elderly matrons as had got their families off their hands, and felt themselves at liberty now to devote themselves to matters of more general social interest.

All day long too, the inhabitants of the genteel residences in Alma Terrace were trotting about from one house to another, detailing or collecting additional morsels of information touching the state of affairs at Rooklands. Mrs. McWerther in particular, whose new spring bonnet and French parasol had just come home from Bedesby, felt

that it was quite a providential opening for spreading her plumes before admiring friends, to say nothing of the pleasure of displaying her superior acquaintance with the particulars of the event that had just electrified the village. For of course, having been an eye-witness of the whole proceedings, as much of it at least as had transpired in the church porch, she felt competent to enlarge upon it from the vantage-ground of personal observation, as well as to correct various inaccuracies of detail which had crept into the less authenticated statements.

Certainly, so far as Mrs. McWerther was concerned, Mr. Gilmour had fully redeemed his character from the imputation which she had been disposed to cast upon it. No outburst of grief, however public and affecting, could possibly have equalled in excitement that almost tragic termination of the mournful ceremony. There was a serious paucity of information, however, with regard to all that had happened subsequent to his removal to the Hall. Mr. Strangways, the village surgeon, who

had been summoned in haste and had accompanied him thither, had given place to Dr. Ransford, so that of course there was nothing further to be gleaned in that quarter; and Mrs. Kennedy being unfortunately from home, the only remaining source was closed, as it was not to be expected that her husband would condescend to those minor particulars of family life in which the female heart delights.

Perhaps this very dearth of detail gave a piquancy of its own to what little was obtained, stimulating the Alma Terrace and other ladies to yet more indefatigable comment and inquiry concerning the course and current of that slow dark stream of life which was oozing on now within the gloomy walls of Rooklands.

Mr. Gilmour had shown signs of returning consciousness before the village doctor, in hot haste, had reached the spot. He opened his eyes, muttered some unintelligible words, and made an ineffectual attempt to raise his head from Dr. Kennedy's supporting arm. But it was a task beyond his

powers. The stern master of Rooklands must go down that churchyard path in quite a different fashion from that in which he had walked up it an hour ago. He might chain down his misery if he pleased, but an enemy had fastened upon him now, over which there was no getting the upper hand. He must submit with what grace he could; which was a very ill grace, as might have been imagined. It had been bad enough, Michael said, when the family was away, and the place left that still and empty all the winter, while you might have thought there was a ghost in every room, let alone the white woman in the Cedar Walk. But that was nothing to what it was now, for the Master was worse than any ghost in the house; lying there neither to call alive nor dead, and his moans, when a bad turn came over him, were worse by far than any of the queer outlandish noises they were used to hear up and down the corridors and empty rooms on still nights when the wind was down.

It was partial paralysis of the whole system, Dr.

Ransford said, by which Mr. Gilmour had been attacked; the result no doubt, to a considerable extent, of the severe shock produced by the death of his son; though he acknowledged that for some time past he had detected slight premonitory symptoms, which had led him to suppose that such an attack might be not unlikely eventually to occur. It was a painful case, a very painful case, as he remarked to Dr. Kennedy; and Miss Winifred was greatly to be pitied, alone there with no friend to advise with, and her father in such a precarious condition. For though he might linger for months, nay, possibly for years in his present state, yet the probability was that the case would terminate fatally in the course of a few weeks; it might be even sooner than that. The vital powers in such cases frequently gave way at once, with as little previous warning as there had been before the first seizure of his patient.

Of course he said it would not be advisable to apprise Miss Winifred of this until it was absolutely necessary. It would only distress her, and

indeed might be productive of serious consequences. Dr. Ransford was very considerate in this respect ; He never acknowledged the presence of danger to those immediately concerned, unless his professional acumen was likely to be called in question from the withholding of the fact. Hope, as he used to say, was the best of physicians and the best of nurses too. For once let a patient, or his attendants either, know that he has been "given over," and if he has a chance you are pretty sure to destroy it for him.

Dr. Ransford was a prudent man no doubt. In some respects he spared his patients and their friends much previous suffering. Whether the blow, when it did fall, was less heavy or more easy to be borne for being unexpected, was perhaps another question. He suggested however, to Winifred, that an experienced person should be procured who would take the whole charge of her father ; and himself offered to select and send one from Bedesby, competent to relieve the family entirely from the responsibility of attendance,

an offer which Winifred gratefully accepted.

But the "experienced person" when procured—much, by the way, to Hannah's dissatisfaction, for the old servant chafed in secret that any "fremd woman" should be preferred over her head to wait upon her master—the "experienced person," a staid, demure, and highly-recommended individual, might make suggestions as many as she pleased, chicken broth and sago too, if she were so disposed, but as to having her about him, that Mr. Gilmour obstinately refused. The sight of a strange face, the touch of strange hands, seemed to irritate and distress him to such a degree, that Winifred, almost equally distressed herself, was fain to allow Hannah to resume her post.

All this, together with many additional particulars of smaller moment, the indefatigable Mrs. McWerther ascertained and circulated in little streams of gossip among her friends. She had heard too, though she could not vouch for the fact from personal observation, as she was happy to say she could with regard to Mr. Gilmour's appearance

both before and immediately after that shocking attack, she had heard that Miss Winifred herself had "gone off" most deplorably since she had left Glinton in the autumn. In fact, that she would hardly be recognised as the same girl now. Her colour had all gone, and when people had nothing but their colour to depend upon, they soon showed it when they began to fade. And she had lost flesh too until she was as thin as a lath, no doubt with fretting, for she was one of those weak characters who are never able to restrain their feelings properly.

It was a pity, Mrs. McWerther remarked; for though of course Miss Gilmour would come into the property now in lieu of her brother, still it would be very much against her settling advantageously if she had lost her prettiness. But then of course, girls who had nothing to recommend them beyond a mere pearly bloom, could not expect to preserve their attractions like those who possessed a more commanding style of beauty.

And Mrs. McWerther drew up her head and



thought complacently of her own two specimens of the commanding style of beauty. For that of the Misses McWerther was very well preserved indeed. The eldest Miss McWerther had been preserving hers for the last thirty years or more, and Miss Georgiana for not much less, without any sensible diminution of the charming flow in the lines of their Roman noses. So that in their case the "commanding style," as Mrs. McWerther observed, might justly be entitled to carry away the palm from the down and peach bloom style of beauty.

Mrs. McWerther's little stream of gossip, in conjunction with those of others of the Alma Terrace and genteel tenement ladies, trickled hither and thither till it trickled at last as far as the Brook Farm. And Mrs. Doyle, who like most of her sex, busy or idle, liked to have a little bit of news to tell, repeated to Mr. Dayne all that she had heard, one afternoon when she thought he looked as if he might be open to a little conversation.

Which was not always the case now. For though Mrs. Doyle was on terms as affable as ever with her lodger, yet she, in common with Miss Barbe, had discovered that he was much more indifferent than he used to be to making himself agreeable. Indeed, he scarcely ever used to stand now for a minute or two in the great farm kitchen when he came out through it, to have a little chat in a friendly way, which was what Mrs. Doyle had formerly so much enjoyed. And these two or three weeks past she had noticed he had been uncommonly quiet. It was not his "sperrits," she thought, for he didn't seem to have anything particular on his mind, and he carried himself now as well as ever he had done before his illness. Since her own troubles about David, Mrs. Doyle had acquired a firm belief in the existence of "sperrits," good and bad, considering them capable of accounting for almost any abnormal condition of either mind or body. It might be that it was his leaving Glinton so soon which was making him a trifle dull. Mrs. Doyle rather thought it was. For he was

only staying now another fortnight, and as she said to her husband, a kind-hearted young gentleman like Mr. Dayne couldn't live for a twelve-month in a place, and then pack up his feelings when he was going away as easy as he'd pack his trunk.

However, this afternoon everything seemed propitious. When Mrs. Doyle came into the kitchen after tea with the great basket of cowslips which she was going to pick in readiness for the cowslip wine that was to be made next week, Dunstan was standing in the open doorway, leaning at ease with his back against the wall, and poking up Cadge, who lay on the straw mat outside, with a long switch of the laburnum that drooped its yellow wreaths over the low-tiled pent-house.

For the last ten minutes he had been standing thus, looking up the lane, all white and fragrant now with its blossoming thorn, and considering in his own mind how he should dispose of himself this bright afternoon. For it was Saturday, when the men at the railway yard always left work early ;

and even now the church clock, which they could hear quite distinctly at the farm when the wind was in the west, was only striking five. He had about made up his mind to go as far as the Lodge and see Dr. Kennedy. He thought he should not mind doing so, now that Mrs. Kennedy was from home; and the last time he had met the Doctor, a week or ten days ago, in fact the morning before the funeral, he had turned and walked with him half-way down the village; and when they parted, he had told him, with that genial look and hearty tone of his, that where the fault was he hardly knew, but he believed they had not seen him at the Lodge since they had all come home at Christmas.

So Dunstan thought, as he had nothing else to do this evening, that he would wait till six o'clock, by which time the Doctor had usually got the business of dinner disposed of, and then stroll down to the Lodge and have an hour or two, perhaps for the last time, with him.

Consequently, when Mrs. Doyle sat down beside

the window with her basket of cowslips before her, Dunstan had nearly an hour upon his hands, which she just came in conveniently to fill up for him. And though he did not throw in much himself by way of remark, Mrs. Doyle could see that he was a good deal interested in what she had to communicate. As indeed was natural, she thought, seeing how much he used to be at Rooklands, and how friendly he was with poor Mr. Lewis before the family went away.

Some of the particulars which Mrs. Doyle repeated to him, Dunstan had heard, unknown to her, from Rachel, who had been once to the Hall, though without seeing anyone there but the old housekeeper; Miss Winifred was asleep, she had told her, on the sofa in the library, and they hadn't need disturb her, for it was little rest the poor child got at nights. She had taken on sadly about her father's illness, she said, coming so close on Mr. Lewis's death; and if they would let her, would be with her father day and night, which didn't do for a young thing like her. It would

wear her out in no time, and then there would be two to nurse instead of one; and the Master was a terrible handful, let alone anything else, for he couldn't so much as move to any purpose, or even speak so as to make himself understood. But though Dunstan knew all this, he was not prepared to hear that Winifred was so altered in appearance from the laughing girl that he had known.

“An' it's a bad sign, is that, Mr. Dayne,” said Mrs. Doyle. “If she's dwined down this way an' lost her looks, as they say she has, though I can't think myself but what there'd allays be sweetness enough left in Miss Winny's face to make it pretty, it must be she's been fretting herself ill. Poor young thing! I pity her, I do, shut up yonder, and never a one near her that she can tell her trouble to.”

Dunstan said nothing to this, only reared himself up from the wall, thrust down his hands into his pockets, and looked straighter up the lane, so that Mrs. Doyle now, even if she had not been

busy over her cowslips, could not see more of his face than was indicated by a bit of brown whisker through which the afternoon sun was shining.

Perhaps from his silence, she thought that he had heard as much as he wished about the state of affairs at Rooklands, for she turned the conversation now into another channel.

“Things is farrarder by a good bit this year, than what they was last,” she said by-and-by. “Them thorns in the lane was just coming out as it might be now, last May, and here we’ve had them white over this ten days or more.”

“I don’t remember,” said Dunstan.

“Nor I shouldn’t neither, I daresay,” returned Mrs. Doyle, “if it wasn’t that I reckon by our Susy’s birthday, an’ that was yesterday. She was five year old the day afore you come here first, an’ that’s a twelvemonth ago this very night. To think that time should slip by so quick! An’ we was just going to set us down to our suppers, if you remember, sir, and so as I thought shame to have



nothing but a bit of broiled ham to put before you ; an' you with such a journey as you'd had."

"A year ago to-day !" echoed Dunstan. "So it is. I hadn't thought about it."

And then he remembered too that it was just such a Saturday afternoon as this when he had gone out between those blossoming hedges, and down the steep green lane, and along the river bank into the Rooklands grounds where he had seen for the first time—but never mind now about that. It was all over now. And he bade Mrs. Doyle good afternoon, and sauntered out.

But he did not go after all to see Dr. Kennedy. Somehow he felt just now as if he did not care to sit and talk either with him or anybody else. He would go when he was more in the mood—tomorrow perhaps.

Five minutes afterwards Dunstan was strolling down that same steeplane towards the river side. Not that he had any purpose in going in that direction. It was a spirit in his feet, nothing more, that was leading him in the tracks of a year ago, and he



went on, hardly heeding whither he was going, until he found himself brought up short at the paling that marked the boundary of the Rooklands grounds.

The gate was swinging on its hinges, that same gate at which he had hesitated so long the first time he had looked over it. The river was swirling on between its rushes just as it had swirled on then; the larch trees dropping down their green tresses over-head, the wood-pigeon cooing far away in the covert, the blackbirds piping close at hand. He would go on, he said within himself, as he had come so far, and see Rachel; there was a path by-and-by, that struck across the plantation into a lane leading to the cottage. There was no reason why he should not do so. He wanted to see her—it was nearly a week now since he had been. He would go on.

He pushed open the gate and went through. That old lichen-crust ed gate! It had saluted him a year ago with just that same rusty creak when he had first opened it. A year ago! How many

things had fallen into his life since then—and fallen out of it too! Dunstan strode along. He must shut his ears to these intruding thoughts that would keep murmuring in his ears their stories of the past. He had nothing to do now with looking back. His life-path lay before him; a good broad path, a beaten track such as others had been content to tread before him. Work to do and will to do it—success perhaps, and a measure of renown. And by his side a faithful wife, and in years to come, children's faces round his board. Yes, it was all good, very good. It was what other men lived for. It would suffice him too.

There was a sound of falling waters in his ears. Dunstan remembered that too. It had lured him on once to see what lay beyond that beech-tree bole. And there was the willow-trunk bridging the stream, but not the sweet girlish figure that had stood on the green bank opposite, with the sunlight dripping through the arching boughs upon her golden hair.

He stood quite still beside the grassy mound

that the upturn willow-roots had made, steeping himself in the very spirit of the scene. Not as when he had strayed, a month ago, into the deserted garden of the Hall, half fearing, half longing to revive once more the fragrance of those blossoming days. But sternly now and sadly, of set purpose, he recalled it all, only that once and for ever, if it were possible, he might crush it out of his life and thoughts.

If it were possible! For Dunstan knew now—alas! he had known it long—that his love for Winifred had been not dead, but sleeping only, when he had craved so wearily for Rachel's. Sleeping, drugged and stifled by disappointment, jealousy, and pique; only to awake to troubled life as confidence returned. He felt it living now, leaping at its chain. Thank God that it was chained, and that he had power to keep it so. For he could never suffer it to wound that faithful heart that had trusted its all with him. Enough that he had turned Winny's love for him into indifference. He would not turn Rachel's into pain, nor

spoil her life as he had already spoiled his own.

For after all, it was spoiled. Dunstan had never been more keenly conscious of the fact than now, as he stood by that gnarled willow-trunk and watched the woven sunbeams glancing on the stream, just as he had watched them glancing long ago, with Winny by his side, before these tangled threads had woven themselves into the fabric of his life. Spoiled, at least, for the present. Doubtless for this loss, as for all others, compensation somewhere in the future did exist; but while a man is still on this side thirty, he does not readily reach forth his hand to grasp this "far-off interest of tears." His Present he understands, not that prospective good which all suffering, whatever its degree or kind, is intended to confer on those who are exercised thereby.

But Dunstan, ignorant as yet, that a man may live down anything if he has but the will to do it, felt as if things must always wear their present dolesome hue, as if the thought of Winny must always remain like a thorn in his side, as if he

would never care very much any more about that old dream of getting on in the world, nor much about the home that by-and-by would be his—only seem to care, for Rachel's sake, not for his own.

“She trusts me so,” he murmured to himself. “I could not fail her.”

And thus bracing himself afresh to his resolves, he turned away, not much the stronger, it is to be feared, for the means he had adopted to fortify himself against temptation.

A good resolution is a good thing, no doubt, and well in its way; but the fact is, what Dunstan wanted now was not good resolutions—he had made plenty of them—but simply a pair of moral blinkers, if one may use the term; something that would keep him from seeing anything but just what lay straight ahead. Many a man has made a fair start in the course he has marked out for himself, and come to a disastrous ending after all, from nothing but the want of these said blinkers. Dunstan had not thus failed in his career; he did not think he should. And yet he had a dim sense

of what he needed, and when he got away from Glinton, he said now to himself, where everything loomed upon him through this purple mist of memory, he would thrust the very thought of Winny quite out of his mind, forget her altogether. As if that was a resolution which it was either wise to make, or possible to keep.

A little further he went, just past the waterfall, and then he plunged into the briar-grown path that strayed through the heart of the plantation till it opened into the lane leading past the Cottage.

It was dense and gloomy here. The trees were mostly Scotch firs, tall and gaunt, with straight red-brown trunks and tatters of grey lichen dropping from their outstretched arms; no carpet of soft green moss and primula spreading at their feet, only a rough brown drugging of fallen fir needles, spotted over by way of contrast, with yellow and liver-coloured fungi.

Dunstan had left the spring behind him. These grim old trees were not given like their deciduous neighbours to the poms and vanities of woodland

life. They never condescended to mark the seasons by any change in their attire; the same dull suit they wore in winter served them spring and summer too—A sombre prospect, as Dunstan looked down the dusky vista, something like that other prospect at which he had just been gazing.

He reined up his thoughts with a jerk. They were off on a wrong tack again. Then he drew a long breath, and kicked off the top of a brown fungus that was spreading itself tent-wise over a little damp hole in the middle of the path. These thoughts of his had been giving him a great deal of trouble lately. He found it infinitely more difficult to keep them well in hand than to control the movements of all the rough navvies and railway men with whom he had to do; it rather took the pride out of him to feel that he who was master over them should not be master of himself.

And with that, his eyebrows took a firmer bend, and his face girt itself afresh, as he walked on with bowed head beneath the dark over-arching



trees. He had felt his weakness, and therein lay his strength.

“I will,” he said to himself beneath his breath. “She trusts me so. I will make her happiness, as she thinks to make mine.”

He went on, still the same set resolve tightening down his face, till he reached the point where the narrow path that he was traversing opened into a wider one, leading out into the lane. There were rifts here between the trees, through which the May sunshine came slipping down, and tripped across the path; that was not a sunbeam, though, yonder, just within the five-barred gate—Dunstan had heard the click of the latch, and raised his head to see who was coming through—not a sunbeam at all, only a little slim figure, clothed all in black; nothing bright to be seen, except one or two golden curls straying down beneath the close crape bonnet. But whoever it might be, Dunstan did not see her face, for she was stooping to disentangle her dress from the thorns with which the gate was laced.



But those golden curls could belong to none but Winifred; and the little figure—he would have known it among a thousand. He knew it was Winifred, by the feeling that oppressed him almost to suffocation. It had come at last; the moment he had dreaded, yet so longed for! He would see her, speak to her, perhaps touch her hand, knowing all the time that henceforth they must be not even friends, only strangers to each other. And she must know it, too!

As a knight closes his visor, and rides straight into the hottest of the fight, so Dunstan set his face, and went on to this meeting with Winifred. There was no retreating; already she had turned her face, and seen him. A different face, truly, from the one he had remembered her by so long. Its sparkling grace was all quenched out, its clear carnation paled and faded. And those laughing eyes that had tossed him that gay, half saucy glance the last time they met his own, were dimmed now, and heavy, as if they had wept till they could weep no more.

Winifred stood for a moment when she had come up to him, hesitating, as if she scarcely knew whether to speak or not. Then half timidly she put out her hand,

“I have wanted to see you, Mr. Dayne,” she said, in a very soft but trembling voice. “Lewis left me that little silver riding-whip of his to give to you; it was almost the last thing he bade me do; he thought you would like to have something that was his. I will send it by Michael to the farm, if you are there still.”

Dunstan took the little gloved hand that she had held out to him, though he felt it no more during the instant that it lay in his than if his own had been cased in mail. That sweet, quivering voice had well nigh unmanned him. He had to fight back a great rush of emotion before he could reply. Yet it was a relief that she had spoken to him of her own accord about her brother; it seemed to give them a common ground on which they might safely meet.

“Poor Lewis!” he said; “I shall be glad to have

it for his sake. He thought about me, then?"

"Yes," sighed Winny. "I ought to have sent it to you before, but poor papa has been so ill ever since—since we came home. It has confused me so." And the little wan face gathered a sadder shadow over it.

"I hope he is better," said Dunstan. "I have been sorry to hear of his illness."

"No," replied Winny; "we see very little difference in him. Dr. Ransford says he is afraid he never will be very much better. It has been a sad coming home."

She did not know, poor child, all that the physician had said to Dr. Kennedy. Perhaps it was as well; the day seemed to have enough for her with its own grief, for there was a weary, almost pitiful tone in her voice as she said these last words, that cut Dunstan to the heart.

She looked so desolate, so unfriended, as she stood there, her mourning garments drooping round her, her pale face looking all the paler against her black crape bonnet; so changed from the blythe,

birdlike creature, whose joyousness used to fill the air like a strain of living music. Dunstan could not help the tenderness in his accent, nor the long cherishing look he bent upon her as he said,

“I have been sorry for you, Winny. I have been very sorry for you.”

“I know you have,” she answered, with a grateful glance. “I was sure it was not because you had given over caring for us that you had never been to see us.”

She paused and looked up wistfully. Something seemed to waver on her lips. Then she went on rapidly, as if she must speak quickly or not at all,

“It has troubled me so, Mr. Dayne, ever since. It has indeed. I knew all the time that it was wrong.”

“Wrong!” echoed Dunstan. For just then he did not read her meaning.

“That day you came to Rooklands,” murmured Winny, “before we went away. But I did not think then that it was the last time I should see you.”

And a troubled colour flushed over the innocent

face, as if it had been only by a painful effort that she had brought herself thus to allude to the wayward act that had wrought such mischief for them both.

Dunstan's heart sank within him. He felt with a sharp inward pain that she might still be his, if he were free to win her.

"I have been sorry too," he said, "more so than I can ever tell you, Winifred; but it is too late now to undo the past; too late to do anything but forget it, if we can."

For one moment she stood looking at him, as if bewildered by his words. Then, past her paleness, her face flushed a sudden crimson, her eyes flashed with tears; she stammered out a few broken words of farewell, and before Dunstan had time to consider what he had said that could have moved her so, she had started from him, and was hurrying onward down the glade.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THROUGH THE BARS.

DUNSTAN stood gazing after her till the slight figure had disappeared among the trees. Nothing was left now but the sun-streaked avenue down which the tender green of some new-tressed larches showed soft and bright against the sombre foliage of the dark Scotch firs. He dared not have tried to stay her, though his whole soul went after her as he followed her with his eyes. That little truth-telling face had betrayed what it was misery as well as sharp joy to him to learn. She had not forgotten him, then! He had not killed her love into indifference. Would that he had! Perhaps it would be as hard for her now to forget him, as for him to forget that she had once been loved by him.

Once! Dunstan groaned aloud. There was no one in that woodland solitude to hear him, and a groan is Nature's anodyne. Often it is only pride which makes men refuse themselves its comfort, when racked by pain of either mind or body.

Winnie, poor little Winnie! And for one moment, through some loophole in his conscience, the thought peered in upon him—which would be the greater wrong? He thrust it back. His debt of honour must be paid. That was a question which had been decided long ago. He had settled it afresh, and for ever, but one short hour since.

But it was a different question now from what it had been even then, when he had stood beside the fallen willow-tree pulling up these resolutions of his to see how far they had taken root. A different question altogether. He had not seen Winnie then. Now he had felt again the witchery of her presence. That little pale face would be always looking up to his, the troubled voice sounding in his ears like a perpetual reproach. This love

of his, that he had thought once to cast aside, was wrapping round him like a Nessus shirt—a feeling that he could not tear away, a part of his very being, yet one that was causing him now such cruel misery. But there was no help for it. He could only bear it, and hide it—if he could—from Rachel's eyes at least.

There was no one in that dim, still, parlour at the cottage, when Elspie opened the door and showed him in.

“The mistress is ben the house, sir,” she said. “She'll aiblins come when she kens you're here.”

Elspie was no great friend of Dunstan's. She was the only person whom Rachel had taken into her confidence, and the impending household change was by no means agreeable to the old Scotchwoman, who mourned in secret at the thought of having to abdicate her place in the red-tiled kitchen, where, for five-and-twenty years, she had cooked and scoured, and of following her mistress “naebody kenned whaur.”



“He may sit a wee whilie. He’ll be nane the waur o’ waiting,” she said to herself as she went back to the oat-cakes which she had left crisping before the fire. “Folk shouldna bring sic dour looks when they come a-courting.”

Her cakes had scorched while she had been away, a circumstance which did not tend to mollify her feelings. If there was one thing more than another which put Elspie wrong side out, it was having a batch of these oat-cakes of hers “fired” beyond the regulated tint of brownness. It touched her pride, for Elspie considered herself an adept in oatcake, and a “weel bakit bannock,” she used to say, “was food for a prince, but if it got a taste o’ the fire, you might as gude eat a charcoal chip as it.”

And so it fell out that while Elspie waited to roll out a fresh batch of cakes, at least ten minutes had elapsed before Rachel came down-stairs, unconscious of her visitor, and went into the parlour with a pair of fine white curtains in her hands, which she was just going to put up in place of the ancient

brown moreen ones that did duty year by year throughout the winter.

It was a "dour" face certainly that met her eyes as she stepped unobserved through the open door. For Dunstan had not heard her step approaching; everything about Rachel was so soft and noiseless; and as she came upon him unawares, the print of pain had not had time to efface itself before he started up to find himself in her presence.

"There is something wrong," she said, troubled to see the dark shadow on his brow, "there is something wrong. I am sure there is."

And she put down the things she was carrying, and came towards him anxiously, looking at him with pitiful inquiring eyes.

"Wrong!" echoed Dunstan, recovering himself with a sudden start, yet speaking with the forced carelessness of one who strives to hide what he has been surprised into betraying, for he would not for the world that Rachel should guess what wretched meditations she had interrupted. "There is nothing wrong with me, Rachel—not that I am aware

of, at least, and I suppose I ought to be as wise as you upon the subject."

"But something was troubling you," she urged.

"Nothing that need trouble you as well," he answered. "Cannot you believe me, Rachel? Don't look so terribly uneasy, or you will make me so too, in spite of myself. We men have more things upon our hands than you. We cannot always be making-believe that it is holiday."

Rachel said no more. Whatever that gripped brow and close-set mouth had meant, it was something in which he did not care that she should take a part.

She sighed a little. It had not been so once, when every passing cloud had but served to draw him the more closely to her side, yet seeing that he was unwilling to be questioned, she turned with a woman's ready tact to other matters, trying to divert him even from the thought that she had noticed anything amiss.

But there was no pleasant flow in their conversation. It went on heavily, with many gaps and breaks—not the pauses of a sweet, contented silence, each feeling it enough to have the other near, but unwilling blanks, which neither of them seemed able to find words to fill. For a sense of mutual constraint was lying heavily on both. It pressed with a dull weight on Rachel's heart; this was the first time that she had known Dunstan to withhold his confidence from her. It pained her. She felt, with the quick instinct of love, that something was standing now between them, which, slight though it might be, he would not suffer her to put away. And as the little scarlet pimpernel folds its petals, even while the skies are bright, against the coming storm, already her too sensitive soul was closing up within her.

Not that Rachel would be everything to Dunstan. A woman seldom can, never ought to be that to any man. In all things, save the power of loving, she must content herself to hold the second place. For here, as elsewhere, the law holds good,

that the less cannot contain the greater. Always, if the husband be what God intends him to be, the head of the wife—and Rachel did thus with reverence look up to Dunstan as her future lord—his larger nature may surround her own, may satisfy it on every side, but cannot be contained within it. Some overflowing there must ever be, and that woman is hardly to be counted happy, nor her love worthy, who would bring down the man's larger life to the measure of her own. Yet Rachel felt pained to have been thus repelled; and that something had been sorely troubling him, not all Dunstan's light denials could conceal from her; for she knew too well the signs of every varying mood, to be readily deceived, and her watchful love had given her long ago the key to all she saw written on his face.

At last Dunstan rose to go. It had not been many minutes that he had stayed. It had seemed to him like hours. For however he might try to brave it out, it had been a terrible strain to keep up appearances with Rachel, while that remorseless pain was dragging at his heart.

“I must go now,” he said, wearily. “I have matters to arrange.”

In truth he had. Matters which would require a considerable amount of arranging before they were likely to be settled to his satisfaction.

Rachel rose also, to walk with him—as their custom was—down to the garden gate. They always parted there. The snow had lain deep sometimes upon the ground, and the winter’s wind been hissing through the trees, when she had stood beside it, feeling no touch of cold as Dunstan’s farewell smile fell like living sunshine on her face.

It was pleasant out of doors. The air was balmy with the breath of the blossoming orchard, the lilacs and laburnums were full in bloom, and the great horse-chestnut-trees that towered above the cottage roof were whitened over with their little pyramids of snowy flowers. All around was the still sweetness of a soft May evening, and as they passed together out of the trellised porch into the quiet, scented air, Rachel felt the weight

lift itself a little that had been pressing down upon her.

“How pleasant it is out of doors,” she said. “Everything is so fresh and green. The spring never seemed to me so beautiful as it has done this year. I have been revelling in it so since I got well enough to go out.”

Dunstan did not speak, but he drew her hand silently within his arm, as they paced together down the turf-bordered path, and pressed it lightly to his side—very lightly; but Dunstan and Rachel were sparing in those outward demonstrations which make up the staple endearments of ordinary lovers. It would have seemed as much out of place to pet and fondle Rachel, as to toy with a Madonna. For hers was that saintly beauty made to be worshipped rather than caressed, and her love a faithful passion, that lay pure, warm, and silent in her breast, ready when need should come, but too sacred to be drawn forth lightly into common day. But with that faint pressure Rachel felt as if the way were being opened again between

them which that comfortless interview in the parlour had seemed to close ; and when, at last, they paused beside the wicket-gate, her face had almost gathered back its quietness.

“We shall have rain to-morrow,” she said, as she looked out across the lane and over the meadows to the low fir-clad hills that girdled the horizon. “The sun is going down behind a bank of clouds.”

“I daresay,” said Dunstan absently ; and for a while they stood silent again, Rachel watching the crimson glory as slowly it melted into the dim hues of the heavy mass of vapour that was gradually obscuring it.

“I must go now,” Dunstan said at last. “Good-bye, Winny !” And he took Rachel’s hand in his.

She looked up surprised. He did not seem conscious of the mistake that he had made, but it reminded her of what during his uneasy visit she had not thought of telling him.

“I had almost forgotten,” she said. “Do you



know, I am going to the Hall to-morrow, to stay perhaps a day or two. Mr. Gilmour has been asking for me. It is strange; he used to take a good deal of notice of me when I was a child, but he has hardly spoken to me now for years. I thought he had quite forgotten me. Miss Winifred came down this afternoon to ask me to go. If you had been here a little sooner you might have seen her."

She stopped abruptly. She felt her hand held in a sudden gripe. Again, as she glanced in Dunstan's face, there was that cramp of pain across his brow. But this time Rachel did not question him. A light that was like darkness had flashed across her mind. Her hand dropped nervelessly from his grasp; Dunstan did not notice that it was chill and trembling.

"She has been here?" he said hoarsely. "But I must not stay. Good-bye, Rachel." And the next moment he had turned away, and she was standing alone beside the gate, watching, with a

strange quiver at her heart, his retreating figure, as he strode along beneath the whitethorn hedges across to the plantation gate.

## CHAPTER XV.

## A SOUL IN TEARS.

“IT is so good of you, Rachel—it is so good of you—to come and stay with us at such a time as this! It feels such a rest having you in the house. I don’t know what I should do now without you.”

And Winny laid down her head on Rachel’s knee, as she sat beside her in the dusk on a low seat in the deep bay window of the library, and drew closer around her the arm that was folded with a sort of grave protecting tenderness about the little drooping form.

“Papa has been so different,” she went on, “so quiet since you came. It was getting so miserable before; he used to seem as if he were always wanting something, and we could none of us make

out, as you can, just what he meant. And he used to lie moaning so, and sometimes look so strange and wild. And we daren't even let Mrs. Lofthouse go into the room, he would become so angry if he only saw her. I believe he had got it into his head that she was somebody else. And, you know, Mrs. Bray has never had much to do with sick people, and poor old Hannah can't manage anything very much just now, and I am just worse than nothing. Oh, Rachel, I can't feel enough how good it was of you to come!"

"But, Miss Winifred, dear, it has been no trouble to me to come, and both you and your father have shown many a kindness to me that I have never been able to make any return for."

"Oh, no, Rachel, I haven't, I know I haven't! And last year, all the time Mr. Gillespie was so ill, I might have done such a many little things for you, and I hardly came to see you once. I can't bear to think about it, and yet you have kept on being my friend, just when it seemed as if there was no one else to be one."

But those were not all tears of repentant gratitude that Rachel felt now bedewing the hand which Winny was still clasping and caressing; and it must have been something more than this which brought up that long sobbing sigh from the little overladen breast. Rachel felt sure of that; but she let the child's trouble have its way, whatever it might be. She had been wearied, doubtless, and overworn with grief, and watching, and anxiety, and these tears would ease her better even than any soothing words.

It was a warm, calm evening. As they sat beside the open window, there stole in upon them from time to time out of the fragrant dusk a breath of heavy balm; no leaf stirred on the still tree-tops, not even the pattering of the slight aspen leaves, as the green tide rippled up the wind, disturbed the deepening hush. Rachel could hear each long-drawn breath and catching sigh, and past all the sharp distressful doubt which that one word of Dunstan's the other evening had left behind it, her heart yearned out in tender sym-

pathy towards her innocent, unconscious rival.

“What is it troubles you so?” she whispered, as she drew her a little closer to her side. “Tell me, darling. It makes a pain easier to bear sometimes, when we have told another what it is.”

“But I don't know what it is,” said Winny, with her face buried still on Rachel's lap. “I don't know what it is, and yet I do. Oh! Rachel, I wish I dare tell you, but I can't. It makes me feel so bad only to think about it.”

Yet, by-and-by, in broken words, with many pauses, tears, and blushes, Winny found herself pouring all her little story into Rachel's ear. Somehow she felt so sure that all would be safe with Rachel—she knew she might trust her. And Winny's was one of those guileless, simple little hearts, which yield up everything at the touch of kindness. It had been so hard to keep this sorrowful secret locked up so closely all these weary months, but she could not tell it to Mrs. Kennedy, and there was no one else to whom she could so

much as whisper it, certainly not to her father, who, since they had gone abroad, had seemed to take less notice of her than even he had done before.

But she little knew, poor child, how each word of hers fell heavily on Rachel's ears as the mould upon the coffin lid.

“I was so sure he cared for me, Rachel, and after awhile I could not help beginning to care for him a little too, though I would not for the world he should have known how much. And papa knew about it too. Mr. Dayne said he did, so that I didn't feel afraid, and he used to come so often, and we were so happy together.”

It was a cold trembling hand that Winny was holding now, warm only with the tears that trickled down upon it. She did not notice that.

“And then Cyril Kennedy came home; and somehow, after awhile, it seemed as if things got wrong, and I was vexed because he was not so nice with Cyril as I wanted him to be; and then I behaved ill to him, I am sure I behaved ill, because it made

him angry ; and then he did not come any more, and we went away, and I never saw him any more. And oh, Rachel ! after we had quite gone, and I could not even hear anything about him, then I found out how much I cared for him ; and Mrs. Kennedy used to think, when I could not help crying sometimes, that it was about Lewis, and so it was, because he kept getting always worse instead of better. And she was so kind, and so was Cyril. And that was another trouble, because one day, when we were sailing in a boat, he asked me if I would not be his wife ; and he said he had thought about it ever so long, and he had been working so hard to make me a home ; and that made it worse than ever, because it seemed so ungrateful in me not to be able to do more than just like him the same as I always had ; and yet, you know, I could never care for anybody else when Dunstan had given over loving me—and he did love me once, I know he did, or else I never could have cared for him so much.”

Winnie raised her head and moved aside. The



arm that was folded round her still shook back a little, as if it would relax its hold.

“I tire you, Rachel—I lean too heavily against you.”

“No, dear, stay as you are.” And the circling arm drew her only the nearer again. It was dusk, and in the shadow of the curtain, Winny, with the tears yet standing in her eyes, heard only the tenderness in Rachel’s voice, but did not see the whiteness of the quivering lips.

She laid down her head again.

“But this is not all. Oh, Rachel! I don’t know how to tell you, and yet I want you to know; but I met him in the plantation that day after I left your house, and he spoke so kindly to me, and I thought, may be, after all, it was going to be all right again, and I told him I was sorry. And then, and then—”

Rachel shivered inwardly. It was the same afternoon that Dunstan had been to the cottage. She knew now the meaning of that burdened look and absent mood which had chilled and saddened

her so, she scarce knew why. In one moment she saw with terrible distinctness, as by a flash of sudden sympathetic light, into each recess and corner of his consciousness. That strange second-sight so fatal often to those who are gifted with it, which pierces at times through all disguises to the truth, revealed it now to her. With a pang of quick despairing love she read the secret which Winifred's confession had unwittingly betrayed. It was not herself then, it was this little drooping creature who sat weeping by her side who held the key of Dunstan's heart. It was to this golden haired girl, and not to her, that he had given long ago that best and richest gift, which once in truth bestowed, neither man nor woman can ever take again.

She sat still, waiting with hungry ears for the rest of Winny's tale. She knew the worst, and yet she would fain hear all there was to tell. At last Winny went on again, nestling herself yet nearer to Rachel's side, as if she needed some close comfort before she could find courage for the rest,

“And he said, so was he, but it was too late to be sorry now. And that has made me feel so miserable, for I know what he thought I meant. And it wasn't that, indeed it wasn't, only I couldn't tell him so! And oh, Rachel! it makes me feel so wretched, that I don't know what to do. It feels worse even than that he should have given over loving me. He said it was too late to do anything but forget it all—and I can't forget, and I don't think I ever shall.”

And the voice that a year ago used to carol out from morning to night so merrily by the stream side, and through the wooded walks of Rooklands, trembled into silence with a long sobbing sigh that seemed, when it was spent, to bring her round to quietness again.

But not by even a closer pressure of the circling arm did Rachel show now that she had been so much as listening to Winny's moan. She was gazing out with blank and straining eyes into the dusk, as if already her thoughts were following through the gloom the swift retreating phantom of

this perished faith of hers. It was to this then that those chill previsions pointed which more than once had vexed her peace, while as yet no thought of untruth in Dunstan had breathed itself into her mind—to this sad ending of her dream. She could not quite forget her own bitter woe to give to Winny the word of comfort which in that moment she was herself so sorely needing; comfort, alas! that might all too easily be given; for it needed only that she told her how Dunstan held the memory of her still within his heart, and how through the crevice of that one unwitting word the secret had disclosed itself which might else have continued hidden from them both.

Suddenly, as they sat, a dark shape came wheeling by the window and dashed with a muffled sound against the glass. It was only a bat, which, daylight gone, was making its nocturnal rounds; but Winny started up with a little cry, quivering in every limb,

“How it frightened me!” she exclaimed. “It has made me tremble all over.”

Rachel, too, was shaken back, from the stupor that had been creeping over her, to the world of waking life.

“You are weak, dear, and you have been exciting yourself too much. Now that I am here I must try and take care of you a little. It is rest and quiet that you want; I ought to have sent you to bed instead of letting you talk to me so long.”

“It would have been no use,” said Winny, in a weary voice, “I should not have slept. It has done me more good being with you than lying by myself awake.”

Yet when Rachel bade her, she went away meekly like a child to the great quaint chamber, with its cobwebbed cornice and grim tall windows and flapping hangings, where years ago she used to cover up her head, golden curls and all, to hide away the ugly face that seemed to be always staring down at her from the top of the big carved wardrobe that stood against the wall, and where now, night by night, ever since they had come

back to Rooklands, she had cried herself to sleep.

Poor little Winny! for she was not at all strong-minded, as our readers will have long ago perceived, indeed, considering she had had what is called a "disappointment" to get over in the best way she could, she was lamentably deficient in that respect. Mrs. Kennedy had been right in deciding that, with no fortune but herself, she was not the wife for Cyril. Clearly, nothing would ever develop Winifred Gilmour into a judicious woman of the world. She had neither tact nor *aplomb* nor dissimulation enough for that, not even as much pride as might serve to keep her from crying when her heart ached, which it did very often just now. For though, as we have before remarked, Winny was not at all a clever girl, yet she possessed that one crowning gift and accomplishment of her sex, the power of loving, as few even among women do. And so, when she found that this Dunstan Dayne, who had wooed her so tenderly, and won from her the best she had to give, cared no longer about keeping it, but just bade her forget him, as

he had no doubt already forgotten her, what could poor Winny do but make her moan, like some little helpless bird that has been tumbled out of its warm lined nest, and lies with broken wing, cold and hungry, on the ground.

Mrs. McWerther, if she had known all, would have shaken her head, I fear, in charitable disapproval till it was well-nigh shaken off, at the bare idea that a young lady in the position of Miss Gilmour of Rooklands should be so essentially weak-minded as to give way to her feelings to such an extent. And certainly, looking at it from Mrs. McWerther's point of view, it was foolish, very foolish, especially, as she would have said, when there was really nothing to make a trouble about, but rather the reverse; for when the best was said that could be said, it would have been a poor match, a very poor match indeed; and with prospects such as Miss Gilmour's were now, she ought not to think of marrying under a carriage and pair at the very least.

Foolish indeed, so far as worldly wisdom went, and yet a foolishness that had in it a touch of some-

thing half divine. For to give, only to receive as much again, is a wisdom that is of the earth earthy ; but to give on, hoping for nothing in return, has in it an element that links even a poor human love with that which, being infinite, can never fail, but abides ever, steadfast, unchangeable ; having loved its own, loving them even unto the end.

Wherefore let none of the strong-minded sisterhood look down from the depths of self-complacency on our simple-hearted little Winny, because she so far forgot herself as not to be able quite to forget another. She would be a nobler woman for it all when the first bitterness had passed, as, thank God, in a sweet and kindly nature all bitterness does pass at length, into a strength and wisdom that else it had never known.

Rachel looked in an hour later as she went past Winifred's chamber to her own. She had gone straight from the library to Mr. Gilmour's room when Winny left her. The heavy treading that from time to time she had had heard sounding overhead as they sat together told her that Hannah,



while she was away, was having a restless watch by the sick man's bed. With quick eye and practised hand, albeit with a stunned and sinking heart, Rachel had seen and given the needed help, pillowed up the aching form, and bathed the burning brow and hands, till the fitful moaning lulled itself into the dull lethargic sleep that lasted sometimes for many hours together. Then she left the old servant in charge again, with injunctions to call her, and not to disturb Mrs. Bray, if her master woke again in the same distressful state; shut the heavy double doors with cautious hand behind her, and went softly away to her own room.

Another day in this dreary old mansion had worn itself away, a day of watching and anxiety and fatigue. For since her arrival at Rooklands, Mr. Gilmour would hardly suffer Rachel out of his sight. There seemed to be a strange composing power about her voice, her touch, her presence, that soothed the troubled soul as well as the death-struck body in which it was tormented. For it seemed at times as if some spirit from beneath

had been suffered, through the chinks which disease and pain had made, to writhe its way into that stern and iron-bound frame. The strong man armed had been compelled to yield, and one stronger than he was holding cruel sway. Only when Rachel was near, tending him with look and word and deed, the unquiet mutterings ceased, and the shadows gathered less darkly over the trenched and haggard face. He would seek her with his eyes, moan wearily if she were absent; and when she came near him, would hold her hand in a long retaining grasp, as if with her beside him, peace and healing passed into him, and the vexing spirit were for a time cast out.

It seemed as if it were to be Rachel's fate to be brought thus into close proximity with the sick and dying. For years she had been oppressed by the sight of her foster-father's sufferings, until with her own hand she had wiped the death-sweat from his brow, and closed the eyes that would never look out again the misery which he refused, by even a groan, to utter; then at the farm, watching by Dunstan

Dayne, while life and death fought grimly for their prize; and now here by the bedside of the stern Master of Rooklands, giving him, not such tendance only as a sick man asks at a nurse's hands, but more than this, defending him by her pure and quiet presence from the assaults of those relentless unseen foes, which, now that the body's strength was broken, thrust so sorely at the haunted soul.

It was but little respite that she had, except when he fell into one of these long lethargic sleeps; then she went for awhile to Winifred, who seldom now entered her father's chamber—the sight of her seemed in some way to disturb him; or she lay down, dressed as she was, upon her bed, and slept until he woke again. But it was not rest in sleep that Rachel went this evening to seek, as she closed the door on Hannah and her master, and stole with muffled tread along the moon-streaked corridor to her room. Before rest could come to her, or any sleep but that of absolute exhaustion, she must wrestle mightily with herself, fight down, if she could, this horrible pain, that was beginning

to lay its iron grip upon her. For at the first, when the truth, inexorable, keen, and sharp as death, had flashed itself upon her, the shock had been too swift and sudden for her to feel at once how much, by a single blow, had been cleft away that was as a part of her very life itself. Like a man with a limb shot off in battle, who scarcely feels it at the time, who fights on, it may be, for awhile, with his remaining arm, until with night, instead of sleep, the sore stiff agony comes on that turns each severed nerve into a thread of living fire—so the need for exertion had staved off for a time the suffering that yet must have its way. But now, as she closed behind her the thick oaken doors, and crept silently away, there was no longer anything to stand between herself and the full consciousness of her loss. She must go—there was nothing else for it—and look her misery in the face.

She paused as she came opposite Winifred's room. The door stood a little ajar, a light burned dimly within, for Winifred, with that vague in-

instinctive fear of the unseen that had possessed her from a child, and which, since her brother's death, had but increased as her strength and spirits drooped, dreaded, as children do, waking in the night to find herself alone in the dark. Rachel had gone in each night since she had been at Rooklands to give a comforting good night, and press a tender kiss on the little weary face that would look up with a sort of sad content into her own, as she stood for a moment stroking back the silken curls with a soft, caressing touch such as mothers use when they bend over their little ones at night. For it was strange how, though but a year or two the elder, Rachel seemed yet to be set as by half a lifetime beyond this clinging, girlish nature, which already was twining itself about her, like some fragile little plant, that, torn from one, must clasp its tendrils round some new support.

But to-night Rachel felt as if she must pass on. She shrank with a touch of jealous bitterness from giving so much as a gentle word or look to one rich—although she knew it not—with that love

whose loss had beggared her. That one drop of self which stains the fairness of even the sweetest human soul, spread for a moment over hers, till every thought was darkened towards this little sorrowful creature, who stood between her and all that made life worth the having. Yet another impulse urged her on. Rachel could have died just then, if so she might have borne Winifred with her where Dunstan's arm could never reach her; and yet she would see her again, and that now, would look with wakened eyes on this young girl whom Dunstan Dayne had loved before, and better far than her.

She pushed the door a little further open, and went in. But there was no need to mask with quietness the disquietude within. Winifred was asleep—Rachel might look her fill, and go away unseen—sleeping with the tears still glistening on the long, curved lashes, that drooped heavily, like flowers weighed down by rain, upon her cheek. Rachel stood shading the light with her hand, and gazing down upon the silent face, until, with a

quick, accusing pang, jealousy passed into remorse. So innocent and helpless, so wan and weary, was that little thin appealing face, that the soul within her bowed itself in shame at the harsh thoughts which a moment ago she had suffered herself to harbour. The old tide of humiliation and self-distrust came surging up again,

“It must be so!—it must be so!” she moaned within herself, as she stood, her eyes fastened hungrily upon the sleeping face, and the pain tightening each moment round her heart. “It must be so! He could not help it. So sweet and fair, she was made to be beloved. And I? O God! why did I love him, when I was so unworthy of him?”

A faint movement stirred the golden curls that rippled round the sleeper’s brow. Rachel moved hurriedly within the shadow of the curtain, then noiselessly she slipped out of the room, and stole through the silent house to the solitude of the drear, half-empty chamber, which, with some little difficulty, had been furbished up into a state of

extempore accommodation for her. Dreary, indeed, for through long disuse there was not in all that dilapidated mansion, a single room that was fit for her reception, except the one which poor Lewis had occupied, and that, as by tacit consent, was left now, swept and garnished, as Mrs. Bray had kept it all the time they were abroad, a place too sacred to be tenanted save by the memory of the dead. As in the garden, so in the house, such order as a pair or two of aged hands had been able to maintain had lapsed by degrees into disorder and decay, and the old housekeeper, whose sense of family propriety would not allow her to put a guest of the Gilmours into the chamber in the servants' wing, lately occupied by the ex-nurse from Bedesby, had been fain to assign to her the vast echoing apartment, which, spite of its mildewed hangings, and worm-eaten pannelling, and odour of desertion and decay, came nevertheless as near to her ideas of comfort as any other which she could select.

But it might have been luxurious as a duchess's



boudoir, Rachel would have seen nothing of it all as she sank upon her knees at the foot of the bed, and laid down her face upon her knotted hands. She did not weep; hers was that dry-eyed wretchedness that knows nothing of the luxury of tears. It was a horror of great darkness that had fallen upon her, a darkness that might be felt, through which nothing, not even an unspoken prayer, might penetrate; for to Rachel's quivering conscience that moment of jealous bitterness towards Winifred had been a sin shutting against her the ear of God himself. She was alone, in that loneliness of soul which is deeper far than any outward solitude. Alone! with no hand, whether human or divine, that in this worse than Egyptian darkness, might clasp itself with hers.

Rachel had lived through many years before the dim morning light began to mix with the sickly rays of the candle that was burning still where she had set it when she first came in, before the tarnished mirror that hung over the ancient walnut dressing-table. She

was a grey-hearted woman when she raised her head from the clasped hands where all night long it had been pillowed, and looked round into the grizzly dawn—a woman who from this time forth had known the worst, as once she had known the best, that life would ever have to give her. She who, a while ago, had known love by its gladness, must know it now by its bitterness of woe. One duty stared her in the face; what might lie beyond she did not stay to question—enough that this was plain, that she had strength to do it. She rose, cramped and stiffened now, for through that long night watch she had not once stirred from the position in which she had bowed herself at first, pushed back the thick damp hair that had fallen over her face, then quickly, as if she dare not pause to think, she drew off the emerald ring that she had worn ever since the night when Dunstan Dayne had placed it on her finger, folded it in a piece of paper, and laid it safely in one of the little drawers within the dressing-table.

She shut the drawer; it fastened with a spring

which Winny had explained to her the first day that she had come—the house at Rooklands abounded in these antique pieces of furniture, every drawer and door of which shut and opened on a theory of its own. This done, she lay down, dressed as she was, and presently, overpowered by utter weariness and exhaustion of body, soul and spirit, she had fallen into a deep, undreaming sleep, that lasted until long after the grey dawn had brightened into full morning light, and the little household at Rooklands had risen to meet another dreary long June day.

## CHAPTER XVI.

FREE!

MRS. DOYLE had been quite to the far-end of the garden to gather that bunch of parsley that she had just brought in. It was somewhat more crisply curled than that which grew against the wicket-gate, and on this particular occasion Mrs. Doyle was minded to have everything on Mr. Dayne's dinner-table, down to the most minute accessories, arranged in the last degree of perfection. She disposed the parsley in a wreath of crumpled sprays around the willow-patterned dish whereon reposed a couple of cold roast ducks, the plumpest and biggest that her poultry-yard was able to provide. Martha had raised her voice indignantly against so premature a sacrifice, "It was a sin an' shame," she averred,

“to go an’ kill them there ducks for Mr. Dayne, when they wasn’t over half the size that they’d be if they was let to live a bit longer. An’ if he must have duck to his dinner there was no call, as she could see, to kill two on ’em for him; he couldn’t eat ’em both at a time, she reckoned; but she never did see a woman to equal t’ Missis for taking her own way, say what you would again’ it. However, there was one comfort, they wouldn’t have no more lodgers now, for her an’ Ben was going to be wed as soon as harvest was sided out o’ t’ way, an’ t’ Missis ’ud find it ’ud make a sight o’ difference when *she* were gone. There’d be summut else then to do, than to be fettling up after lodgers from morning to night, as she’d been a doing of after Mr. Dayne sin’ ever he come.”

But Mrs. Doyle had leisure now to “fettle up” if she were so disposed. She stepped back when she had completed her decorations, and eyed the general effect with serene complacency. It looked uncommon nice, she said to herself, and the ducks was done to a turn, and had browned theirselves so

beautiful they'd make you eat them only to look at them. Just she wished Mr. Dayne would come in, it was better than five o'clock now, and he mostly was in at two, and folks never relished the victuals as they should when they got put past their time; though he had told her he'd likely be late in, made her have the ducks cold instead of hot.

But Mr. Dayne had quite other matters to attend to than the consideration of the cold roast ducks which were beginning to lie somewhat heavily on Mrs. Doyle's mind. It was a high day with him, for the works were completed at last, and the trial engine had been running up and down between Bedesby and Glinton, preparatory to the line being opened, with due form and ceremony, the ensuing week. Dunstan himself, however, would not be present to share in that concluding triumph, nor to assist in the discussion of the dinner at the George Hotel at Bedesby, wherewith the proceedings were to be solemnly wound up. He was going away at once to this foreign appointment. Only that morn-

ing he had received intelligence which must hasten him off even earlier than he had intended—no time for more than just a day or two in London, by way of interlude between one year's work and that of another. It had been, as he said, rather a near run to make things fit in at all, the works at Glington having been so retarded. However, upon the whole he felt rather glad of it than otherwise. For it was not rest he wanted, but something which, by compelling him to keep incessantly at work, might thrust aside those carking thoughts that else would be worrying themselves over other things.

Mrs. Doyle's mind was set at ease at last.

"Yon's him!" cried Martha out of the kitchen, where she was scouring down the dresser before the window; and the next moment Dunstan came up the yard out of the lane, and walked with his wet boots straight through the kitchen, and up to his room, utterly ignoring the straw bass that lay outside the clean sanded doorstep, a fact which Martha privately put down among her other

grievances against lodgers in general, and Mr. Dayne in particular.

But the elaborate garnishing went all for nothing; Mrs. Doyle might just as well, for anything that Dunstan saw in it, have got the parsley by the wicket-gate, as that which she had gone so far through the rain to gather. And the roast duck that had browned itself so beautiful was dismembered, and not much more, for hardly had Dunstan sat down to table, when Martha thrust her head inside the door,

“Here’s one wanting you,” she said, the remembrance of the wet boots sharpening yet more the shrillness of her voice. “It’s t’ old man from Rooklands, an’ he won’t send no message, he’s bown to see you hisself, he says.”

Dunstan laid down his knife and fork,

“Send him here,” he said, and Martha disappeared, to be followed by old Michael himself, who came shuffling into the room, and having made his “obedience,” stood fumbling in the pocket of his red plush waistcoat for a little packet, which he



extracted at length, and placed in Dunstan's hands.

"It's Miss Dallas has sent it," he explained. "She telled me I wasn't on no account to give it into no one's else's hands but just to you, and there was no answer nor nothing, she said."

Dunstan took the packet, but did not open it. He had somehow a curious misgiving about its possible contents.

"Then Miss Dallas is at Rooklands still?" he asked, half wondering; for it was nearly a week now since he had seen her at the cottage, and she had told him then that she was going only for a day or two.

"Yes, sir; Miss Winny got her persuaded to stop on a bit. You see, sir, he's taken to her uncommon, has t' Master, while he can't abide her hardlins to be out of his sight. Things is in a queer way now at Rooklands, sir," and the old man shook his grey locks and sighed; "they're in a queer way; an' Miss Winny, she's just set and pined the day through, since ever they come home,

though she's looked up a bit, an' all, while she's had Miss Rachel with her."

Dunstan set his teeth, but said nothing; he dare not trust himself either to hear or ask anything about Winifred. He dismissed Michael, and closing the door upon him, opened the packet he had brought. It was wrapped up in paper, carefully tied and sealed, and addressed to him in full. Inside that was a small leathern box, and in that lay the emerald ring!

Dunstan took it out. There was a slip of paper folded round it, with these words written on it in Rachel's full yet slender hand, "Take back your ring, Dunstan. It is no longer mine; and give me back the promise which I cannot keep."

That was all; no explanation, no excuse, just the bare, blank deed! Dunstan felt for the moment a heavy throb of relief as the thought leaped out upon him that not even honour bound him to Rachel now. And yet, mingling with this, there came a sense of uneasy self-reproach, a doubt which he would fain dispel, whether Rachel did truly shrink

now as she had shrunk at first from linking his fate with hers; or whether it was somehow that his secret had escaped him, and that in thus releasing him, she was but relinquishing a love which she felt to be no longer hers.

Be that as it might, the fault was none of his. He had kept in deed, as he had striven to do in will, the promise he had given her. And yet, though she had freed him, and that of her own accord, Dunstan could not so easily free himself. A strange tie bound him still to Rachel, a tie, not of love, not of complacency, not even of honour only, but a subtle bond, which yet he could not break, that held him like a spell, and which, even now, when his whole being was crying out so passionately for leave to give himself again to Winifred, made him transfix himself with the resolve still to keep to Rachel the promise which he had wrung from her reluctant lips, unless he were assured that she did in truth desire to be released.

Impatient, prompt, he must be satisfied at once.

He left his unfinished meal, took his hat, and went out to seek her, not at the cottage, where, expecting to find her there, he had been intending this evening to pay her his farewell visit, but at Rooklands. Rooklands! Winny's home, where everything would be steeped with the feeling of her presence, where he might even meet with her again! And he had craved so for one last glimpse of that sweet girlish face, to see it once more, himself unseen, knowing that he should look on it no more. For disguise it as he would, even from himself, it was always Winny's face that through the lattice of his thoughts was looking in upon him—Winny, as he had seen her that evening in the wood, whom unruly fancy would keep bringing to his side, pleading each time that it should be the last.

There was no sunshine dripping through the cedar boughs as he pushed open the gate and passed into their dusky shade. The evening was dull with wind and rain, the path sodden with wet, that path where Winny's little footsteps had

so often kept time with his as they paced together side by side, in those days that seemed almost to belong to another life than the one which he was living now.

Michael let him in. The old man had only just got home, and seemed half surprised to see him.

Miss Dallas was in the Master's room, he said; he would let her know that she was wanted. Dunstan went into the library. There was no one there, only a something in the empty air that seemed to unchain at once all those feelings of unsubduable regret, of hungering that would not be appeased, after Winifred herself, which he had thought to keep so firm in leash. He did not sit down. He felt as if impatient to meet his fate. He was nerving himself desperately, almost doggedly, to knot round him afresh these coils which, if he chose, he might slip off now with ease, with honour, nay even with a show of generosity. He had but to take Rachel at her word, and these bound hands of his might clasp with Winifred's

again. Yet he could not do it. Something still constrained him. It was not attraction, not his sense of honour, not even a quiet, passionless regard for this deep-eyed, low-voiced girl, whom once he fancied he had loved! rather it was a strange inexplicable fascination, that wound itself about his will, holding in check even this compelling passion, which, the more he strove to thrust it back, leaped up the more wildly to fix itself upon him. He stood as within a charmed circle, longing for escape, yet powerless to effect it, until with her own hands Rachel should herself unweave the spell that held him there.

He waited a long time in the library, but no one came. He paced uneasily up and down the room, listening with sharpened senses to each sound that echoed faintly through the house. He was in a haunted atmosphere. Everything about him spoke to him of Winifred; the last time he had been in the room was the evening when he had called and found her there with Lewis and her father. The empty couch stood up against the wall, there

was the great vacant chair, and the low hassock beside it on which she had sat, with the firelight shining through her curls, turning them to tendrils of burnished gold. There seemed to be a lingering of her presence in the very air; he felt it quivering around him with a strange persistent power. To have had her near him at that moment, released himself from this viewless thralldom, free to win her for his own, half his life would have seemed not too much to give.

There was a hand on the latch. For an instant every pulse stood still. It might be—No, it was Rachel; but not the Rachel whom he had parted from a week ago at the white gate of the cottage garden. Something in her face stilled him as by a swift revulsion into a pity that was like remorse—it was like the face of one who has watched beside the dead until, into the living features, there has gathered the shadow of that awful quietness that nothing any more shall vex.

But it was only her face; her voice, when she spoke to him, was just as it had always been, full,

soft, and changing, albeit a little graver even than its wont. They were grave matters, though, on which they touched—this strange malady of Mr. Gilmour's, that baffled the physician's art, and the break which the death of Lewis had made in the little household; then they passed on to Dunstan's concerns, his going to Bedesby, the trying of the line that morning, the successful issue of the whole affair. Neither of them mentioned the name of Winifred, nor did they so much as allude even to the message which had hurried Dunstan to the Hall. They had always talked together rather as friends than lovers—there was nothing now to mark any difference in their mutual relations. Yet behind everything that Dunstan said, one word only was struggling for utterance. He could keep it back no longer,

“Rachel!” he exclaimed at length, plunging, as his manner was, abruptly into the subject which he could approach no other way. “Rachel, why did you send me back your ring?”

“Because it was not mine to keep,” she answered.



The quietness had trembled, not out of her face, but from her voice. She had known that this must come, yet she could not quite compose herself to meet it.

“But your promise, Rachel!” urged Dunstan, though blenching as he spoke, from words which might bind him to what he would give worlds to lose.

“I could not keep that either. Forgive me, Dunstan, it was a promise I ought never to have given. Release me from it—I could be no true wife to you.”

Dunstan felt baffled by her answer. He looked at her bewildered. How could it be that he had seen no hint of this before? For though Rachel might well have doubted him, he had never mistrusted her. Would that it had been possible to do so! Anything, even the sting of treachery itself, rather than this firm faith in her devotion, which so long had held him falsely true; true to her, while he could not, alas, be true to himself!

With eager scrutiny he searched her face, seeking hungrily for something that might feed his

doubts. A cruel quest, but in it lay his only hope. Rachel's eyes fell troubled before that keen disturbing gaze. Her shrinking soul gave up its secret. Slowly, over the grey stillness of her face there crept a flush that deepened like the sunset glow upon some pale cathedral front. Dunstan saw it; but that was not what he sought. His heart sank heavily within him. For a moment he quailed before the resolution he had made. He might win her too easily to his side again. It would be too terrible to succeed. Then with one sharp stroke he cleft through the temptation.

"Rachel," he said in a thick struggling voice, and as he spoke, he drew her two hands wildly into his, and held them in a tight, despairing grasp, "tell me this truly, and you shall go! Is it because you cannot love me enough to be my wife?"

The hands he held were chill and trembling. Dunstan did not notice that. He was shivering with suspense, awaiting, as for dear life itself, the words on which his fate depended.

Rachel glanced up for a moment into Dunstan's face. It was no enigma to her now. With the swift, sure instinct of a love too strong to die, she divined the thought that was sharpening each feature into that expression of expectant pain. It needed but a word, and she could heal his heart, but to do it she must break her own.

Rachel had never told a lie in her life. She looked now into Dunstan's face; her voice did not falter, but her eyes fell before him,

“It is!”

Dunstan went home through the rain that had begun again to fall in drizzling fitful gusts. The burden had fallen from his shoulders, yet a dull, inexplicable weight oppressed him still. It was the shadow from Rachel's life that was resting on his own. For in the world of spirit there are strange, mysterious, bonds which the will is powerless to sever, subtle influences passing control or ken of any human being. Not even Rachel's self-renouncing love had availed to put quite asunder from

herself the soul to which her own was wedded. It might by-and-by, but she was too near him yet, and Dunstan felt it, though he knew it not. He had not had his coveted glimpse of Winny. He had not dared even to ask after her. He was leaving Glington to-morrow—he was leaving Winifred, and leaving her meant losing her. Small hope now that his should be the hand to pluck the fair flower that once had bloomed for him. She was the heiress of Rooklands now. The heiress of Rooklands—and that meant that she would be a mark for every greedy suitor within hearing of her name. Poor Dunstan! He could have felt willing just then for Winifred to have been poor and plain—some dressmaker's drudge or milliner's apprentice; anything that should only have kept her hidden, unknown, and safe for him! A vain wish. He must let it all go. His destiny was behind him, compelling him onward. His fate was before him. He must go forth and meet it, whatever it might be.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## THE OLD BUREAU.

RACHEL crept slowly away. A heavy weight seemed to be dragging back her steps. There had been none of that excitement in her deed which might have served to tide her over the suffering of the hour. She had gone through it quietly, deliberately, as a skilful surgeon might set himself, with shivering heart and steady hand, to amputate a limb from his only child. It had been like the tearing of life from life; but she had done it, and done it well; Dunstan was free, and he did not even guess at what a fearful cost his liberty had been bought. There are many who, in a moment of unwonted impulse, will perform an act of noble self-denial, and afterwards regret the sacrifice. Rachel had urged herself on slowly to her fate,

feeling at each step how thick must be the darkness that should close around her, when, with her own hands, she had put out this one spark of joyful love that had lit up the darkness of her lonely life. And now she had passed into the cloud. But from all suffering, when nobly borne, there comes strength; perhaps it is not too much to say that the highest strength is never given except at such a price. In that hour, Christ, the Pitiful, the Merciful One, was crowning her, but it was with a crown of thorns. Rachel had work to do yet, and it was thus that she was being prepared for the task that had been prepared for her.

She went back to Mr. Gilmour's room, where Hannah sat half dozing in her chair beside the handful of fire that was smouldering at the bottom of the vast yawning grate. He had been sleeping when she left him. He was awake now; his eyes gleaming with a dull, restless light from beneath their beetling brows, as he lay shadowed by the dusky hangings that fell from the tall carved canopy of the bed.

He turned his head upon the pillow and glanced towards Rachel as she entered. She obeyed the look, and going towards him, sat down where he could hold her hand in his. She had learned to comprehend even his gestures, for it was seldom that he spoke, and it was just that, she knew, that he wanted her to do. He lay for a long time as if satisfied now that he had her near—silent, yet awake, until Rachel's arm ached as her hand lay imprisoned thus in his; for with the feeble despotism of sickness his will compelled her own, and until he slept she dare not venture to unloose his clasp.

Twilight deepened into dusk. Hannah had gone away; she had watched the night before, and now Rachel was about to take her turn. Winifred stole softly in to look at her father, and say good-night. He took no notice of her; it was rarely that he did, except to evince uneasiness if she were by. She reached over him, as he lay stretched out stiff and straight as though he had been upon his bier, and laid her warm young

cheek against his haggard, bearded face. She might have kissed a granite block, and received as much response. The rugged brow contracted with a frown; Rachel saw her lips quiver for a moment, then she had gone, and her own solitary watch began.

The murky light that for awhile had lingered in between the mullions of the window, had blackened into night—a stormy night, with shrill gusts of wind and driving rain. The fire was burning low and dead. Rachel drew her hand cautiously from that of the sick man. He made no effort to retain it; he was asleep at last. She took a piece of chip and stirred the embers silently together, then she laid on some fresh coal, lit the chamber lamp, and sat down in Hannah's chair, to keep vigil there until the morning broke.

It is a weird and dreary thing to watch by night beside what, for aught we know, may be a dying bed, even though it may be that of one we love. But Rachel was feeling now too stunned by what she had just gone through, too utterly exhausted



by that terrible vigil of the night before, to be capable of either thought or suffering of any kind. Her faculties for a while seemed dulled—a sort of waking lethargy was creeping over her, which after the intense continued strain of the last four-and-twenty hours was itself like the rest of sleep. The wind rose high, the rain beat angrily against the window. It sounded like a lullaby in her ears. She grew drowsy, her thoughts confused themselves, a little longer, and she would have been asleep, when suddenly a crack of thunder came crashing through the storm, and broke the stillness of the room. The noise startled her; she roused herself and sat upright in her chair, dreading lest slumber unawares should steal again upon her.

But that moment of half forgetfulness had refreshed her. She was able now, without an effort, to keep herself awake. For a long time she sat gazing absently into the fire as it leaped and flickered in the grate. The clock in the Hall tower chimed three-quarters, and ceased. There

was only the pelting of the rain against the window, and the wind shrieking and complaining among the elms outside. The clock struck again—she counted out the twelve hoarse strokes; then another quarter chimed. The night was wearing itself away. And still the storm kept on; still the rain beat down, still the wind went howling round the house, like some unquiet spirit seeking an entrance, and vexed at finding none.

Rachel moved her position a little, and pressed her hand tightly across her eyes. She was becoming conscious of a strange, inexplicable sensation that was creeping slowly over her—not drowsiness, but a feeling as if gradually something were being drawn outwards from herself. Mechanically she turned her head towards the curtained shade where Mr. Gilmour lay. His eyes were watching her through the gloom; there was a steady glitter in them now, unlike their usual restless light. She rose, hardly knowing that she did so, and went up to him. He extended his lank, sinewy hand, and closed his fingers round her own,

“I know what you have come for,” he said, in the dull harsh whisper in which he usually spoke. “You can have it now, but not just yet. Sit down awhile, Rachel.”

Rachel sat down beside him upon the edge of the bed, a nameless fear folding coldly round her. For within the last hour or two a change had passed upon the sick man’s countenance; the caverns beneath the hanging brows seemed deeper than their wont, the stern set features looked sharpened, even through the beard that grizzled half his face. Rachel had seen Death before, and she recoiled as she felt within herself that this might possibly be his shadow falling already in advance upon the grim head that lay pillowed there before her. But she seemed unable to do anything more than just sit there where the sick man’s hand had drawn her down, paralyzed, as it were, by his fixed regard. By-and-by, if need were, she would rouse the others—for the present she would keep her watch alone. She did not even wonder what his words had meant. He had wandered sometimes in his

mind, doubtless he was wandering now. She felt sure of it when next he spoke,

“We will go as far as the head of the glen, Rachel,” he said. “It is a long time since we were out together. I want to ask the gamekeeper about the grouse on the Drumlochrie moors.”

Some long-ago time it must have been to which his thoughts were rambling, for never in Rachel's memory had the Master of Rooklands been known to sleep even a night away from the Hall until he had gone abroad last year with Lewis.

“So long since we have been out together. But change your dress first, Rachel. Put on the white one with the crimson stains. I always liked you in that dress. You used to know what became you best, and you don't look well in black. Why are you wearing it?—the child is not dead, is it?”

Rachel looked, with a vague surprise, into the trenched grey face. Was the tide of life then, as slowly it ebbed away, leaving bare at last upon the strand some secret of his early years, that till now its waves had covered? Was he confusing her

with some one else, betraying thus unconsciously things which else would have remained concealed until the sea gave up its dead ?

“ It is as well, perhaps. I never could understand what you saw in that child to care so much about. It needed a mother’s eye to see any beauty in it—I saw none. You loved it better when it came than ever you loved me. You know you did, else why did you keep clamouring so about what could not be. If you would only have listened to reason, and stayed quietly where you were ! You should have trusted me, I would never have let you want. But you were always self-willed, Rachel, always self-willed.”

He ceased awhile, and lay twining her fingers about his own, in a dreamy, purposeless way, just as Rachel had seen him sometimes, when Lewis was a boy, playing with the child’s flaxen locks. Presently he went on again, his eyes resting on her still, but with a blank, fixed gaze, that seemed rather to be looking beyond her than in her face,

“ But we will not quarrel, little one ! there is no

time now for that. Change your dress, and I will take you up the glen. I shall have time before I go away—the white one with the crimson stains. It was very wrong though, and foolish too. I cannot have you coming after me here again. And to be sitting in the snow like a beggar, outside the door, and that child too in your arms! You knew I could not let you in.”

Rachel clutched her hand suddenly away. She was gazing now at Mr. Gilmour with dilated eyeballs and white parted lips. A wild suspicion had torn through her mind, too wild, too impossible for it to do more than flash through and be gone. The bronzed hand fell heavily on the coverlet. He went on in the same hoarse, maudering tones,

“You are getting angry. It is just like you, Rachel. Be quiet, now, and you shall have it. You may as well; it is of no consequence, now that Lewis is dead. It is in that bureau, open the lid; the key is on my watch-guard there.”

He dragged himself up a little on the bed, and pointed to a walnut escritoire that stood in a deep

recess beside the window. A cumbrous piece of furniture, of antique workmanship, and richly carved; with brazen claspings, tarnished now by age, and open-work plates of quaint device let into the panels of the doors and lid, that caught by fits chance gleams upon them from the flickering fire.

“Get it,” he added in a thick impatient voice, for Rachel was still sitting motionless—“get it, or the sun will be gone down; it will be too late to go up the glen.”

Rachel rose, her pulses beating fast, which a moment ago had nearly ceased. But a little while since and she had thought that nothing could lie below this rankling pain that was heaving its sullen current through her life; now she found that there were depths in her being still unstirred. She took the key and unlocked the lid of the bureau, impelled as by a sudden insatiable desire to fathom this mystery, if one it were, that lay half revealed and half concealed before her eyes.

The lid opened without much difficulty. There was another one inside, of open-wrought metal like

the plates in the panels of the doors. Rachel tried to lift it. It was fast, nor did there seem any catch or spring by which to raise it.

She looked round perplexed; Mr. Gilmour was watching her movements,

“There is a spring,” he said, but speaking in a voice so faint and dull, that it was with difficulty Rachel caught the words. “Press that cipher in the middle.”

She did so. The lid lifted itself, and disclosed a recess, filled with loose papers, and several drawers of different sizes, all inlaid with the same fine metal as on the outside.

Again she looked round for instructions. The eyes were watching her still.

“The large drawer,” he muttered huskily. “The middle one.”

She tried it, it was fast; with feverish impatience she pressed her finger here and there upon the carved metallic plate, supposing that like the lid it opened by some hidden spring. But it refused to yield. The old bureau apparently contained more



secrets than the one of which she was in quest. Rachel looked in vain, though, for directions now. There was a strange twitching about the sick man's mouth ; she could see his face working as if convulsively beneath the untrimmed beard. With affrighted haste she shut back the lids and started to his side. It was over in an instant ; he was murmuring something again. She bent over him and listened.

“It is too late, Rachel ! The sun has gone down. It will be dark in the glen.”

The light flickered dimly in the hollow eyes. There was a moment's pause. Then the lips moved again. Rachel felt a chill breath upon her face as she stooped low to catch the failing accents,

“It must be cold there sitting in the snow, and the night is dark.”

She shuddered back ; a deeper darkness than that of night had plunged over that unquiet face—the master of Rooklands would need nothing any more at her hands, except to close his glazing eyes.

Rachel was bending now, not over the dying but the Dead!

She drew back, awed by that dim irrepres-  
sible dread which the presence of death inspires ;  
then with chill fingers she closed the eyes that  
would never again open on the light of day, and  
went towards the door—she must tell Winifred  
that she was fatherless, and summon the old ser-  
vants to perform the last offices for the dead.

But with her hand already on the latch Rachel  
paused and turned. It was not suspicion, it was  
conviction unreasoning, yet profound, that was  
thrilling through her now. She went back to the  
old bureau, lifted its lids again, and with trembling  
haste applied herself again to open the mysterious  
drawer. It gave way at last ; with unconscious  
hands she had touched the spring that fastened it.  
She drew it out. There was not much in it—a  
packet of yellow letters tied round with a piece of  
string, a gold wedding ring, having a long tress of  
yellow hair knotted through it, and a piece of folded  
paper that lay loose by itself. With a kind of blind

instinct she seized it and opened it. Her eyes ran wildly over its contents. The secret of a lifetime was given up at last !

It was a formal marriage contract, drawn up between Laurence Gilmour of Rooklands, Daeshire, England, and Rachel Dallas of Glen Ochrie in the parish of Kilbiggan, Scotland ; signed by the contracting parties, and dated September 12th, 18—.

Rachel folded up the paper, but kept it still within her hands. Her agitation had died away, she was calm enough now. For it is not at these supreme moments in a lifetime that the spirit is shaken out of its own control ; that comes later, when the passing tension is withdrawn. Rachel saw clearly enough about her now, her whole being seemed to be roused into a state of preternatural activity. That shape behind her was the father whom she had never known in life ; this faded signature had been written by her mother's hand ; and with a throb of wild delight she felt that at last the blot was wiped from off that mother's memory, the shadow lifted that had brooded over herself so

darkly and so long. As Rachel Dallas, she had many a time bowed her head with a bitter feeling of humiliation. As Rachel Gilmour, she might lift it now, secure in the possession of a name to which she had a right.

And upon that there rushed, distinct and sharp, the thought that it was Winifred who was now what from childhood she had felt herself to be. Rachel knew enough of Scottish law and custom to be aware that this was a valid deed, one that would be acknowledged in a court of law, a deed that would establish the fact of her mother's lawful marriage, and of her own legitimate title to the inheritance to which, as daughter of the owner of Rooklands, she would now succeed.

She sat down, holding the folded paper still, as if jealous of even so much as putting it out of her hands, and thought into the whole bewildering affair; felt rather, for things passed before her with a vividness too intense and luminous for thought. A while ago and she had suffered, through Winifred, the loss of that which to her was dearer than all else

beside. Now a strange fate had made the balance even. One act of hers, and her rival's life would become a shame and misery to her. For a moment a thrill almost of exultation trembled through her. Dunstan's love could never be hers again, but she might stand between him and Winifred, at the least she could blast and blight the happiness that had been filched from her.

She crushed the crawling thought. But she had felt her weakness—she dare not trust her strength. Temptation might return; return and find her unable to resist it. There was but one way of safety—she must put it out of her power to be even assaulted by it again.

She took the paper that was still gripped in both her hands, and held it over the embers which were smouldering in the grate. But she did not drop it in. Another motive, less sacred only than that deep despairing love, restrained her still. The memory of her mother stayed her hand; she drew back the paper, unscorched as yet, and turned towards the bed on which that stiffening figure lay.

But it was the darkness only, not death's awful beauty, that Rachel there beheld. Scant atonement truly to the quiet dust that for twenty years had slept beneath the sod, to have it published to a careless world that the unwept stranger had been the wife of what lay stark and silent here. Enough that one heart kept her memory green, fair, and free at last from even the shadow of reproach!

And for herself? Rachel unfolded the paper again, and tore off carefully the double signature. That she must keep—it was her own. Then she stooped over the fireplace, and paused for a moment, gazing into the red dull heart of the fire before she gave finally into its safe keeping the secret that she alone possessed.

Nothing is too hard for a woman's love. She will give up friends, comforts, home; endure poverty, reproach, and pain, part with even life itself; all is sweet with love to bear it for. But Rachel was giving up all, and receiving in return nothing, not even the cold meed of thanks. For the essence of her sacrifice lay in this, that not Dunstan him-

self might know that she had made it. And that is the true test of devotion—not to bring an offering that shall be smiled upon, but whether it be great or small, to be willing silently, and if need be, unknown, to leave it and to pass away. None but the noblest form of love, that which for love will conquer love itself, could have strengthened Rachel for this last surrender.

Once more she opened out the folded paper, read it again and again, as if she would burn in the words indelibly upon her brain; then she dropped it into a red cave among the embers. She watched it writhe and crackle as the flames lapped round it; then they died down, and there were only the sparks quenching themselves out one by one upon the black and shrivelled scroll. The little holocaust was over, the sacrifice completed. Rachel might go to Winifred's chamber now and wake the sleeper there.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## THE UNFILLED CUP.

IT was a year and a half after this that the Glington bells rang out one Christmas morning a soft and merry peal. It was the wedding-day of Dunstan Dayne and Winifred. The secret which for twenty years or more the old bureau had held, had been kept as safely since, locked up in Rachel's breast. No whispering gossip had so much as guessed that the fair girl, whom Dr. Kennedy that morning gave to Dunstan Dayne, to have and to hold until death them did part, was other than the lawful heiress of Rooklands. Winifred had staid at the Hall until after her father's funeral, then it was shut up, the old servants were pensioned off, and Dr. Kennedy took her with him to the Lodge to live with them. He was not her legal guardian,



for Mr. Gilmour had died without a will, so that, until she came of age six months afterwards, the estate of Rooklands had been administered by the Court of Chancery; but save the Doctor and his wife, there was no one else to whom, in her orphanage, Winifred could turn as to a friend. So he made a home for her, and she became to him as a daughter.

It was not till the Christmas after he had gone away from Glinton that Dunstan came back to it again. Then he took a week's respite from his work, travelled night and day over sea and land, and got to the village in time to go to church on Christmas Day morning, which also was Winifred's birthday, her first birthday since her father's and her brother's death.

She was there in the Lodge pew, not very far from that of Gideon Doyle, where Dunstan sat, and saw her standing beside the Doctor grave, fair, and pale, with her soft golden curls shading the sweet girlish face, just as they used to do in those long-ago, happy days. Once while the carol was being

sung, the blue eyes, looking round by chance, met those that sought her own, and by the swift flutter of their down-dropped lids, and the flush that mantled in haste over the white forehead, Dunstan knew that Winifred had not forgotten him, any more than through those long months of absence and of silence he had himself forgotten her.

Mrs. Kennedy, too, saw the crimson token, and a little castle came shivering to the ground that she had been fondly rearing anent Winny and the stripling, who was singing so lustily in the carol, by her side. But she was magnanimous enough, notwithstanding, to put out her hand and stay Dunstan, as she passed a little in advance of the others out of church, and, with one of her brightest smiles, not only to invite, but unmistakeably to press him, to return to the Lodge with them to dinner. And Dunstan felt, happy fool that he was, that only the observances of time and place restrained him from carrying that well-turned hand to his lips in a very transport of gratitude, and penitence, and joy.

Surely, if not the merriest, that was the happiest of all the seven-and-twenty Christmas Days that Dunstan Dayne had spent since he had laughed and leaped in his mother's arms to see the snow-flakes fall, soft, pure, and light, upon the ground. The happiest, too, that Winifred in all her young life had ever known, though Geordie, who, on this festive occasion, shone out resplendent in a fresh suit of knickerbockers, not one whit inferior to that ill-starred set whose disastrous history has already been recorded—Geordie, we say, confided privately to Abigail, as he regaled himself on a supplementary custard, which she had saved for him from dinner, that he wished his mamma hadn't asked Mr. Dayne to come, for he had been and gone and said something to Winny to make her cry. He was sure he had, for she was wiping her eyes when he found her in the conservatory, after they had lost her for so long, and were wanting her to help them with a dance; and Mr. Dayne had been there all the time, he knew, for he had seen him coming out just a little while before.

And it must be owned that Winifred's eyes did look a little suspicious when the Doctor, as he led her off in Sir Roger de Coverley, insisted, in his quizzical way, during the intervals of the dance, on knowing where she had been hiding herself so long, and how it was that she had been so still ever since they came home from church; to all which Winifred could answer nothing except by blushes which told a great deal more certainly than she would have chosen to have put into words.

Yet they might, after all, have been tears happier than even smiles; for when the dancing was over, and the company was all gone, and Dunstan Dayne, who had danced twice with Winny, and who went away the last, had been invited, with the utmost cordiality, by both the Doctor and his wife, to come again the next day and see them, and when Mrs. Kennedy went back into the drawing-room to Winifred, who had not gone out with the rest to the door, as was the manner at the Lodge, to see their guests depart, and took the girl

in her arms, and looked down into the fair young face with,

“Well, Winny?”—Winifred’s head went down until the golden curls fell like a veil over the crimson cheeks, and somehow the words dropped out,

“He asked me, and I couldn’t say ‘No!’”

And so it fell out that when another Christmas Day came round, the good Doctor had to part, on Dunstan Dayne’s behoof, with the bright-haired girl who had been to him almost instead of the daughter he had—lost. And there rang out from Glington Church tower a peal merrier even than was wont to be heard on this gladdest of all glad-some days. And with the sweet riot of those wedding-bells still sounding in their ears, telling to all the listening air a tale so sweet that the angels, who neither marry, nor are given in marriage, might pause regretful in their choring to hear of joys unknown to them, a less scrupulous historian, perhaps, might leave these two young folks, whose fortunes we have thus far followed,

merely adding, for the reader's satisfaction, that "both of them were very happy ever after."

But not often in this troublesome world may the story of a life be thus wound up. For the good God, who has given to his children all things richly to enjoy, knows that it needs a steadier than any weak mortal hand to carry brimming and unspilled the cup of human gladness. Some drops sweeter than the rest must ever be left out, until, led up the shining steeps by that pitiful strong right hand, there be given to the spirit, serene and purified from earthly frailty and defilement, another cup, filled now with heavenly joy, which draughts, deep as eternity, shall not exhaust.

Dunstan Dayne's was a childless home. The old Hall at Rooklands, which, as years went by, and he prospered in the world, was restored and repaired into what would be described by the advertisements as a "commodious family residence," never echoes with the sound of children's voices, children whose life is drawn from his, and who, when his head lies low, may hand down to

others yet unborn the name their father bore. Winifred, as his wife, is dearer now to Dunstan than ever she had been in the days when he had wooed and lost, and then again had won her. But with the larger happiness there has but come the larger need, that unsated thirst for something still withheld, which this world's joy must ever leave behind. To win his wife, to make a name, had been the young man's dream; to gather round his hearth fair daughters and brave sons, the hope which advancing years have but more surely quenched.

Twelve years have slid away now since the evening when first we saw Dunstan Dayne sitting in that dingy lodging in St. Clement's Inn, with no companion but his bit of smoky fire. Twelve years! and each one, as it passed, has laid some new gift within his hands—each one has but increased the preciousness of that crowning gift of wifely love which is given by Providence to few with such unstinting hand. The world, speaking in its own dialect, has long ago pronounced him

a successful man. And truly when a man, who has started friendless and nearly penniless in the race for riches, finds himself, while still but midway on the arch that spans the space between the cradle and the grave, in possession of so commodious a family residence as the Hall at Rooklands, with an estate, though small, yet unencumbered ; no need any longer to toil for bread, and blessed with a wife, loving, loveable, and leal, as Winifred Dayne, then the world may be justified in envying him as a successful man.

If only with success there came content ! If only it did ! But it so seldom does. He must have been a wise man who first, with homely wit, imprisoned in a proverb the truth so widely owned, "None but the wearer knoweth where the shoe doth pinch." Winifred knows full well what brings that shadow on her husband's brow, when after an evening at the Lodge, where they have found the Doctor romping with his grandsons, they come home, to be greeted there by silence only. And amid all her household happiness the



childless wife will shed now and then a quiet tear as the thought pricks through her that she, whose life is rounded by her husband's love, is yet not all in all to him.

Rachel Dallas lies under the sod. Not where the children pluck the daisies and play at hide-and-seek among the mossed tombstones in Glington churchyard, yet not the less sweetly does she sleep in her far-off, unnamed and unremembered grave. After Mr. Gilmour's death she remained with Winifred at the Hall until the funeral, then she gathered together her small possessions, left Elspie in charge at the cottage, and went out with a little band of nurses to the Crimea. She could never go back to even the unsunned quietness of the days when she had not yet learned, first by its joy, and then by its bitterness of woe, what it was to love not wisely but too well. Already news had come to England of the sufferings of its sick and wounded soldiers; David Doyle might be among the number; and Rachel, touched with pity and compunction, as she thought that but for

her such jeopardy might never have been his, offered herself among the first of those heroic women who, that brave lives might be spared, shrank not from perilling their own.

A hard rude office truly. The metal need have been tempered long and fiercely that should stand a strain such as was put upon it now. For it was not the romance of work which those Crimean nurses went forth to meet—its drudgery rather, and a drudgery whose menial toils demanded not less bravery of devotion perhaps than served to nerve the six hundred themselves when they rode dauntless through fire to death. In that vast lazar-house of war Rachel saw, for three dread months, what misery the human frame can bear before body and soul are wrenched apart. She stood with pitying words and helpful hands by many a loathsome suffering bed. Many a dying eye turned on her its last look of gratitude; then strange hands closed her own—the hospital fever had struck her down—and strangers bore her to a stranger's grave.

A wide space to outward seeming between that sad and lonely ending of a life more sad and lonely still, and a lot so fair and prosperous as was that of Dunstan Dayne and Winifred! A space which it needed the hand of death itself to span; yet Rachel's life, though not like Dunstan's in human parlance a success, was not a failure. There are heights and depths of bliss reserved for those who in this world have suffered and been strong, who have fought long and sorely with their own sad doubting hearts, nor won to peace until by the good deliverance of death it was brought to them at last, which can never be known by those who have had nothing in their nature or their lot against which mightily to strive.

But of these things this is not the place to speak. We must turn now to wind up a little further the skein of events as they relate to the other personages mentioned in this history. David Doyle, who had gone out among the first of the Crimean troops, came home among the last, un-

scathed by sickness or by sword, though bronzed, bearded, changed, till none but his mother knew him for the same. He had not once met with Rachel, for it was among the sick and wounded only that her work had lain, and though he still thought gravely and somewhat sadly of his early love, yet months and years, with kindly hands, had in part effaced the memory of his trouble. In process of time he comforted himself altogether, and Lizzie Day, now Lizzie Doyle, calls to her poultry and her children in accents, if not as faultless, yet in her husband's ears as pleasant as ever those of Andrew Gillespie's foster-child had been.

Gideon has not given up his farm. He will have to work on now till old age comes on. But the cares of life sit easily upon him nevertheless, more easily than his best plush waistcoat, which was made for him five years ago, will ever do again. Mrs. Doyle is comely and kindly as ever. Mr. Dayne, of Rooklands, comes down now and then to the farm, and has a chat with

her about old times. Martha and Ben get along pretty well together, which, as Gideon says, is as much as could be expected, "considerin'." Mrs. Kennedy is gracious and brilliant still, though years are beginning somewhat to tell upon her. The Doctor, too, acknowledges occasionally to others besides his wife that he is not so young as he used to be, and has sometimes to beat a retreat, and take refuge in his study, in order to avoid a threatened game of romps with the petticoated youngsters, who in twos and threes are always swarming about the Lodge. For the Doctor is never so happy as when the little plagues are tormenting him, as he says, to death; and Cyril's wife has brought him now, in addition to her ample dower, as many as seven chubby boys, though never yet the daughter so greatly longed for, whom her grandfather might teach sometime to spell out the letters on the gravestone of his little May.

Job Dolson, too, is trotting down the hill. He is tyrannized over considerably by his housekeeper,

who though in other respects she makes him sufficiently comfortable, yet is afflicted with a certain asperity of temper which does not tend to elevate her sex in the good opinion of her master. Job still appreciates the society of the Doctor, with whom he continues to have many points in common. He enjoys a "crack" with him occasionally, as he sits sunning himself before his door, whence, though superannuated now, he can keep an eye on the church, and shake his knobbed stick at the village children if they are romping too uproariously among the graves. Dunstan Dayne, too, stops now and then for a word or two with the old sexton, who likes to remind the new Master of Rooklands that he was the first person whose acquaintance he had made in Glinton.

"He's a likely gentleman," said Job the other day to himself, as with spectacles straddling awry across his nose he peered after him and Winifred, who were walking through the churchyard on their way to the Lodge. "He's a likely gentleman, an' I don't grudge him Rooklands, though it didn't

seem, when him and me was set talking in that there porch the first day he came to Glington, as things 'ud hand out so as ever he should get hisself sattled there. An' a good sattlement it's been for him, an' all; better nor what he deserved, I reckon." And Job glanced aside to where a thick slab, put up since Dunstan had come to Rooklands, marked the resting-place of Rachel Dallas, who died Dec. 25th, 18—, with these words beneath—

Also, to the Memory of  
RACHEL DALLAS, daughter of the above,  
Who died in the Crimea, October 25th, 18—.

"I've a guess at a thing or two," Job went on, talking to himself; "there isn't a deal goes on in this here parish, but what it strikes clear to my eyes, though I sees more by a good bit nor what I says. It's a still tongue makes a wise head. He's a likely gentleman, though, for all that, an' Miss Winny's done none so badly mebbly; nobbut it's a pity they've none to come after 'em. But I could ha'told them that. It's the Weird o' Rooklands that's wore itself out, that's what it is, an' they'll have to die,

an' leave their lands to strangers instead o' to children o' their own. It's queer how things comes round at last. But it's a queer world is this, a queer world!" and Job shook his grey locks with a puzzled air, "there'd need be another to straighten things up in, for they seem mostly askew here."

Truly, Job, they do! Yet seem so only. A little while, and we shall see that each bewildering turn in this so crooked life leads onward to an end from all eternity marked out; that the blunders, follies, failures, the defacements and defilements even, of this poor and sad humanity, are but steps in that appointed way by which the soul must travel, until, this mortal journey ended, the Golden Gates are reached, and the Great Father, who has watched and waited long, puts forth his hand to receive the children of his love.

THE END.



# MESSRS. HURST AND BLACKETT'S

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