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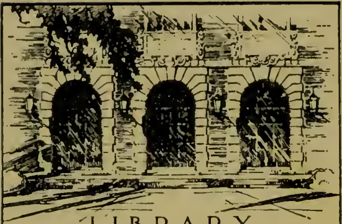

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LISABEE'S LOVE STORY.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"JOHN AND I," "DOCTOR JACOB,"

&c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
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BOOK V.

VERDICTS—OF HEARTS AND THE WORLD.

> "What! hast thou aught of suffering left to tell her?"
>
> ÆSCHYLUS.

CHAPTER I.

PICTURE to yourself the joyful, sorrowful, strange meeting, the sisterly embraces, the broken words of welcome, the broken words of explanation, the heavy, heart-chilling silence that followed all!

From such an incoherent story as Lisabee had been able to give, her father and sisters naturally supposed Arthur guilty of desertion. They could not impute—could any one impute his conduct to less guilty motives? His losses by the fire, his mysterious connexion with Versette, his hasty, stealthy flight—these circumstances might well have blackened a character even higher than his own. William Plumtree burned with rage, grief, and disappointment. Had he loved, admired, and trusted Arthur a shade less, he would possibly now have hated, despised, and suspected him a shade less—but all our gods die great, terrible, unexpected deaths. Where we plant flowers, uprooting is easy; cedars of Lebanon and stately oaks are not torn up without a whirlwind, a lightning blast, and cataclysmal rain. And William Plumtree had made Arthur the one great stately god of his life. Everyone else seemed dwarfed into insignificance beside him; who was so generous, so gentlemanlike, so wholly attracting, so apparently without a flaw as this lover of his Lisabee, this handsome man of the world, this proud, rich Arthur Leebridge, Esquire.

Then what would Mercy and Richard say? He remembered but too well now their words of caution, their insinuations against foreign-bred snobs, their reproval of his own elation, their well-meant anger at his acceptance of Arthur's favours. Could he go to them with this story of ruin and disgrace and misery? Could he listen to their comments upon it?

Though full of bitter sorrow for Lisabee's unnatural widowhood, he thought most of the consequences of it to others, to them all. And, what is always clearest and most cruel to men's observation, he saw the ultimate and outward effects of Arthur's desertion rather than the present and subjective ones. Lisabee's sharp agony, Lisabee's outraged love, Lisabee's bright young life dashed into the mire like a lily by a sudden storm—all this was obscured and lessened by the dull misery already come. He could not conceive that his child's inner grief must be deeper and less bearable than the outer one—the one palpable to Mercy, to Richard, to the village people, to the world. Whilst the sisters thought only of their darling's trouble, and of the best means of alleviating it, William Plumtree thought only of his daughter's disgrace, and of the best means of concealing that disgrace as much as might lie in his power.

Early in the morning, perhaps it might be five o'clock, the farmer dressed himself and crept down to the kitchen. Throwing open the shutters, he sat beneath the stream of grey light that issued from them, and after a long meditation began to write.

The words flowed slowly: hands that have guided the plough since they were strong enough to guide anything, are slow to wield finer instruments. When later, the sun dashed in upon the page, it lighted up but two or three lines of crabbed figures.

"DEAR SISTER," ran the letter, "I can't come to drink tea with you to-morrow as I promised, for Lisabee has come home on a visit sooner than we expected. Mr. Leebridge isn't coming home just yet, and Lisabee is a good bit knocked up after her journey those many miles. With love from all and hoping you are very well, from

"Your affectionate Brother,

"WILLIAM."

Just as the last word was added Greta came in noiselessly.

"How is she?" asked the old man, looking up.

"Better, father."

"Greta," he said, with a suppressed sob, "read this; we mustn't tell everybody about it, you know."

"No, father, I suppose not, and yet"—a deep sigh pointed the sentence—"and yet perhaps the truth were better in the end."

And she laid down the letter.

"But, perhaps, the truth never need be known," continued the old man, with wild energy. "I know what the parson preaches about truth and all that, but it can't do any good to tell people of Lisabee's husband being a villain—it can't, Greta; and we have thought so much of him, too, and he was always so like a gentleman in his behaviour, and so fond of poor little Lisabee! Oh! Greta, nothing is too bad for him; and yet, somehow, it's hard to fancy he's bad at heart, after all that he's said and done——"

"Let us hope that he is not quite bad at heart—that some explanation may be given by and by——"

"Explanation—what use is explanation? When a thing's done, and is the worst, wickedest thing that anyone could do, explanations may satisfy other people—they wont satisfy me. Were Arthur Leebridge now standing here, I should call him a villain; and were he to talk all day I should think him a villain; and be sure, Greta, a villain he is!"

"Hush! father," said Greta, very gently. "We must be gentle for her sake."

William folded up his letter without another word. Sorrow made him sullen and apt to take offence at trifles; he could not bear to be checked in his own way of giving vent to his feelings; and he resented consolation almost as an affront. Had Greta agreed with his hearty denunciations of Arthur's villany, had she called him a villain herself, he would have felt comforted and softened. As it was, he proceeded to fold and crush his letter into a hundred shapes before reducing it to the size of the envelope, and when the business was completed, went out of doors, morose and melancholy.

The early morning air, to which he had been accustomed from boyhood, soothed him. He made the circuit of the farmyard slowly, now pausing to speak a word to the horsemen busy in the stables, or the labourer preparing his hoes. Farmers have always their favourites of stock and produce; and William Plumtree's favourites were bullocks and beetroot. He scolded his horses, growled and grumbled at his pigs for fatting slowly, spoke in slighting terms of his sheep to their faces, and called the hens bad layers, before throwing down their matutinal corn. And he often practised little tricks on his pigs, sheep, and hens; giving them odd lots of corn and beans, musty peas, and rotten potatoes, chuckling the while over their gullibility. But he treated his bullocks with a never-varying respect, making way for the finest and handsomest as for the parson; inviting them to eat with all manner of flatteries and coaxings, quite blushing if the oil-cake came short, and the great calm faces looked reproachfully at him. He was in the habit too of stroking their necks and apostrophizing the rolls of fat on their ribs; whenever the ribs fattened slower than usual, the fact was commented upon outside the bullock-yard.

To-day the large, soft-coated, sweet-breathed things lay sleeping pêle-mêle in their cosy shed, a single streak of light stretching sword-like over the dark red, dusky mass; by and by, an impertinent cock flew up to the window, and raising his neck, flapping his wings, and standing on tip-toe, prepared to blow his shrill trumpet. But the farmer had no patience with cocks just then. Taking up a smooth round stone, he aimed it at chanticleer's most conceited-looking leg and sent him away, his mission unperformed. This little bit of tyranny seemed to soften and soothe William's temper. He leaned on the low open wall of the shed, and almost smiled, when there came a simultaneous snort, a shaking of sleek limbs, a shower of dust in his eyes, and the handsome, heavy, soft-treading animals crowded to the feeding-place. He piled some cut beetroot into the trough with a slow, practised hand, every onward movement of which was followed by the nearest bystander. In less than five minutes the fifteen heads were bent over the juicy food—eyes, mouth, and nostrils having precisely the same expression—shoulder, neck, and forelegs having precisely the same angle of inclination. And there was such an earnestness as well as simultaneousness in the act, that one might have thought the beasts understood the importance of their making hearty meals; indeed, they appeared leagued in a guild and corporation of eating —sworn to eat so much at any risk or cost. William watched the monotonously working jaws with a calm instinctive satisfaction. There is no solace for sorrow like that of a favourite occupation which has never too intimately tasted of our joys. Here Arthur had not come; his lavish praise of everything at Sycamore Farm, his interest in horses, and pigs, and sheep, his critical but amateur knowledge of farming, made all other places speak of him, look astonished and ashamed of him. But the bullocks were recently purchased, and ignored Arthur altogether; moreover they looked burly, and plump, and prosperous as if they could not possibly belong to a man in trouble, and never once pricked up their ears with an expression of sympathy. It was comforting that the day had not yet come—the day with its hundred voices, its hundred eyes, its hundred ears. Whilst the mist lay yet heavy upon the home-meadow and the cleared corn-fields looked brown and cold in the grey light of the early morning; whilst the shutters of the distant village remained closed and blank like the eyes of a sightless man, the farmer's heart could take a little rest. At present no one knew of Lisabee's shame.

He dashed down his empty basket and crushed it with his foot as if, like Clytemnestra, he were treading on the body of Agamemnon.

"Scoundrel!" he said aloud. "Were he here, I'd kick him over the farm-yard—ay, that I would."

And he made a circuit with an occasional pause here and there, and a declamatory denunciation of Arthur. One might have taken him for an orator practising little bits of effect to see that jerk of eloquence and gesticulation.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN William returned to breakfast about seven o'clock, he was surprised to find a young man eating eggs and bread and butter between Cissy and Mabel, as coolly as if he had lived at Sycamore Farm for years. This young man was handsome, well-dressed, and foreign-looking; but with that instinctive suspicion of foreigners which forms the eleventh commandment of some county people, the farmer eyed him from head to foot before venturing upon approach. At last, Mabel caught sight of him as he stood on tip-toe peeping into the room, mouth and eyes opened to their utmost extent, and ears pricked like those of a pointer on scent.

"Papa," she said, with her child-like smile, "this is Arthur's friend and partner Herr—Mr. Carl Zillner——"

William stood aghast. Carl rose quick as lightning, and with outstretched hand bowed, and poured forth a dozen voluble greetings.

"Arthur's friend who came all the way from Vienna to take care of Lisabee," added Cissy. "How can we thank him enough, father? And he's going to stay a week with us; isn't that delightful?"

But Carl might do homage, and the girls might apologize for him. William let his hands fall down like leaden weights, and made no other recognition of Carl's cordiality than to turn scarlet and recede a step as the other advanced. When he had quite backed himself out of the room, Cissy took breath and excused him in the best way she was able.

"You must forgive my father's strange conduct," she said ruefully; "this sad affair has made him quite unlike himself. He will be pleased to chat with you by and by."

Carl seemed in nowise disconcerted, but proceeded to decapitate his third egg with perfect equanimity.

"I'm quite ashamed to find myself intruding upon you in this way, mein Fräulein, but what could I do? Pray explain this to your Herr Papa—what could I do? To let your sister journey to England alone was impossible, and for my brother Albin, or sister Adelheid to accompany her, equally so. Now what with the explosion of the factory, and the explosion of my partner Leebridge, I had really nothing to do but explode also—and *me voilà!* Your coffee is superb, young ladies, but may I show you our way of making it—the real German way? You must give me half a measure of boiling milk, half a measure of the very essence of boiled coffee, and a handful of sugar. First the coffee, then the milk, then the sugar, bit by bit. That's it. Now what say you to German coffee?"

Nothing could be more natural than that the business of coffee-making should prove delightful to young people situated as Carl and the two girls found themselves—a great mutual trouble making them friends at first sight, and a variety of inclinations for each other strengthening the bond. Of all accidents and chances, none are so favourable to romantic feeling as severe and uncommon disturbance of domestic security. People are more daring, more susceptible, more open to impression when their conduct is likely to be overlooked in the general disorder. Therefore, though Carl had little but ruin in prospect, and the sisters a sorrow worse than ruin hanging over them, all forgot ruin and sorrow for the time because they were growing so interested in each other. Cissy, who was fair flossy-haired, and a coquette when opportunity offered, received all Carl's homages of compliment and the best part of his smiles, whilst Mabel's sweet, sad eyes, and sentimentalism, had justice done to both, by sighs of sympathy and little phrases of well-turned though spontaneous sentiment. Both girls had found a hero.

When Greta entered, the conversation took a different turn.

"We can't be sufficiently grateful to you," she said, in her quiet, elder sister-like way, "for taking such care of our poor Lisabee."

"Not a word unless you would kill me! What with your sisters' gratitude and your Herr Papa's agitation, I feel as if I must run away directly."

"Poor father! he is quite afraid of you, Herr Zillner," put in Cissy, adjusting her hair-ribbon. "On what account I can't imagine."

Carl bowed delightedly, and Cissy went on—

"But do persuade Papa to come in, Greta——"

"If you please, Fräulein, do no such

thing; Herr Papas are best out of the way when all sorts of mysteries are to be talked about. They are generally strict conservatives, and fancy that everything is bound to go on in the beaten track, making no allowance for accidents or impediments. Now, nothing can be more new, extraordinary, and unparalleled than this disappearance of Leebridge."

"I gather from my sister that the man who fired the factory had a spite against Arthur—hated him, in fact," said Greta, anxiously.

"That is true."

"Do you not think it likely that he may also be accountable for Arthur's non-appearance. If he were unscrupulous enough to commit the one crime, he would hardly shrink from the other——"

Carl looked grave, bit his lips, and smiled somewhat ruefully.

"Would you very, *very* much mind deferring your questions till after breakfast?" he said, and immediately afterwards, blushing at the semblance of rudeness such a request carried with it, added—"I beg your pardon—I—in fact, I want a few minutes in which to collect my thoughts—I hardly know yet where I am——"

"At Sycamore Farm, in the county of Suffolk," interrupted Cissy, "and I can give you more information at your pleasure."

Greta quietly and sadly acquiesced; the evil hour was put off. Carl felt happy.

Half an hour's laugh and talk with two ingenuous country girls seems little enough to make up a sum of happiness; but it is not the quality of our friends and admirers, rather the quality of their love and admiration for ourselves, that constitutes our felicity in their presence. Carl had been in the company of elegant Viennese belles all French flounces, graces, and coquetries—in the company of lovely princesses even—but he had never yet found any women so charming as these daughters of William Plumtree. And why? Because they both made a hero of him, looked up to him, thought him a man of the world, witty, handsome, perfect. Carl felt that so unalloyed a Paradise were worth keeping from the serpent by a little strategy.

CHAPTER III.

AS soon as breakfast was over, Cissy and Mabel fetched their hats and proposed doing the honours of the farm. Herr Zillner would be sure to like the dairy, the bullock-yard, and the orchards. Herr Zillner should see everything from father's well-stored barn to Mabel's tame bantams. The young girls led their happy visitor by a circuitous route through outbuilding, poultry-yard, and garden, nor rested till they reached the shadows of the yellow walnut trees. The breezy autumn air set the amber and scarlet leaves dancing here and there, and the over-ripe apples and plums fell every now and then, pointing the monotonous rhythms of the wind. But despite the haziness that hung over the garnered fields and the dampness and decay of the vegetation around, some cheerfulness entered into this autumnal picture. The well-built, close-packed stacks of red-gold wheat seen through the trees, the bustle of cowherd and milkmaid around the dairy door, the sweet smell of fresh whey and warm clean straw, the calm, contented look of the bright-coloured cows, the coquettish play of the pigs, the consequential gossip of the hens, the flappings and crowings of the young cocks, the glancing flecks of sun and shadow over all—here were at least the elements of humble happiness, such happiness as is easiest comprehended by children and dreamers and men and women in love.

Then the girls, poor children, could not feel wholly sad. True that their sister was sore stricken, well-nigh despairing. Her loss was their gain. With Carl's advent all had changed. They put on bright-coloured dresses, they tied their pretty brown hair with ribbons, they felt that some one had an interest in each of these harmless coquetries, and, as naturally followed, everything was new and beautiful to them. . Was it selfish, was it human, was it womanly? Ah, yes! We may sigh, weep, utter a thousand low-voiced sympathies when our friend or brother has pain, heart-ache, despair. It is not till we suffer ourselves that we turn our faces to the wall and give up the world. Only for losses that touch us nearly do we shriek, throw about our hands, crying—

"Quis desiderio sit," &c.

How much less hard to say to others—

> "Durum! sed patientia fit levius," &c.

Poor Carl! his evil hour must at last perforce come. In the midst of pleasant talk and subdued laughter, he saw Greta beckoning from the hall door. Wistfully, he obeyed the summons, wishing, almost indignantly, that Arthur had served him any other ill turn than this.

He entered at once into the subject as it had been left half an hour before.

"You think that this Versette may have killed your brother-in-law?" he said, with an expression of mixed pain and shrinking.

"What else *can* it be? Arthur was too good to forsake his wife—and, moreover, why should he have forsaken her? I can't believe that any man would have done so unaccountable a thing at such a time, much less that a man like Arthur should have done it."

"I, also, could have staked—why, my very life on his honesty," replied Carl, still with the same expression of face, "till——" His eyes quailed before the steadfast gaze of his interrogator. "I feel as if I ought not to tell you, and yet you must know"—Tears came into his sunny blue eyes, a pallor covered his boyishly rosy cheeks, and he glanced uneasily towards the orchard and the bright pink and blue dresses that fluttered amid the boughs—"Arthur has really forsaken his wife," he added, in desperate haste.

Greta spoke in desperation also.

"When—how did you find this out? Tell me," she cried, leaning heavily on the table and drawing deep, agitated breaths.

The quick buoyant air played hide-and-seek with the fuchsias and mignonette on the open window. Spots of sunlight lay on the tangled grass-plot, and the daisy border and the orchard hedge beyond. Beyond all —brighter, better than all—two lightsome girlish forms might be seen moving among the yellow boughs.

Carl turned his back upon the window, shut out blossom, sunbeam, sweet scents of autumn, dewy patches of turf, sky, twin heads of brown hair—all, and drew one hand across his eyes.

"Fräulein," he said, and the tremulous way of saying them conveyed far more meaning than the words themselves; "Fräulein Greta, is there no way of letting them be happy a little longer?"

As he spoke he pointed over his shoulder to the blue and pink blotches in the garden.

Greta hardly understood his motive. Women who have no cowardice themselves tolerate it in men, but never in their own sex. Greta appreciated Carl's emotion, but she saw no reasonableness in the occasion of it.

"Lisabee has the worst to bear," she said; "do not conceal anything, Herr Zillner."

"You shall know as much as I do at least. The fire happened on the fifteenth and there is no doubt of its author being Versette. Why Versette hated Arthur is—is—you need not learn that part of the story. It is enough that this fellow has played the very Mephistopheles with our poor Faust, and, by way of beginning, has fired the factory and blown up the stores. That seems bad enough, but he must have done something worse, or why should Arthur leave Vienna?"

"Arthur leave Vienna!"

"Yes; Arthur left Vienna. I can show you the copy of his passport visé made at Salzburg."

"I don't quite understand it," said Greta, putting her hand to her head. "What had Versette's deeds to do with Arthur leaving his wife?"

"Wait a little, dear young lady. I feel so confused that I hardly know how to dovetail the different parts of my story into each other. Arthur, you see, might, must have been forced to defend himself against a personal attack—perhaps the villain even tried to dig his sailor's knife into him, and—and if Arthur acted on the defensive rather too well, why—Versette might die!"

Greta's brave eyes dilated with fear.

"Oh, Herr Zillner! you mean that Arthur . . . . . murdered him!"

"We won't jump quite to such conclusions," Carl answered, with affected cheerfulness. "It is possible, nay, probable, that Arthur may have been led to do something which he could not undo, may have feared the consequences, and have run away from them."

"It seems too dreadful, too impossible."

"I own that it does. Yet what likelihood could account for anything so utterly extraordinary as Arthur's disappearance? We must take refuge in impossibilities."

"And whither do you imagine Arthur to have gone?"

Carl shrugged his shoulders.

"From Trieste one can go anywhere, and

Trieste is not far from Salzburg; but," for he saw that Greta's calmness was breaking down, "but, indeed, you must not tell this to her — to Arthur's wife — or to your sisters; perhaps something may happen in a day or two. Arthur may write, or we may get news from Vienna, or—oh, Fräulein, don't cry! all is not lost yet."

But all seemed lost to Greta. Arthur an assassin! perhaps a murderer! And Arthur gone—gone, utterly, from Lisabee and Lisabee's life! What else was there to lose?

She controlled her tears as well as she was able, and promised Carl to keep silent for the present. Bitter as was her own suffering, she could not remain insensible to his, fleeting, and boyish, and consolable though it seemed. He implored a day or two's grace, and she knew that his entreaty meant nothing more nor less than a day or two's happiness for her sisters. They had experienced but few red letter days—might experience fewer still in the future.—Greta's tender motherliness prevailed over a sense of duty, and Carl returned to the orchard, singing blithely.

Cissy and Mabel were reprieved for a little while.

CHAPTER IV.

LATE in the blowy golden afternoon, when the sun shone blood-red on the dairy windows and silver-bright milking pails, a low rumble of wheels might be heard outside the orchard of Sycamore Farm. It was impossible to mistake the peculiar sound of those wheels; no one's gig but Uncle Richard's could crunch the stones in that continuous, stealthy, cowardly way, as if they were human bones.

Richard led his horse to the stable-yard, but Mercy alighted at the back door, and entered unceremoniously. An unusual silence seemed to hang over the house—a silence suggesting sorrow and secrecy, but to Mercy secrecy only; and she peered hither and thither, in order that her inquisitiveness might not remain too long unsatisfied. The door of the keeping-room stood ajar, and Mercy took in at a glance every light and shadow, outline and detail of a picture which for others must have had life and beauty—poetry, even—but for her, ruin and bitterness only.

Carl sat in the midst of the three girls, and was evidently relating the story of Lisabee's late troubles and homeward journey. He spoke in a subdued voice, and, despite the dusky light, one could tell that his face was sad. His foreign dress, the girls' eager, sympathetic faces, the hush of each voice, the stillness and solitariness of kitchen, and dairy, and farmyard—all these facts were as so many syllables that spelt out the story. Something had happened to turn Sycamore Farm into quite another place from that of recent times. But for the presence of Carl, and his sweet, ingenuous temper making sunshine and singing everywhere, no ray brightened the gloomy, hopeless prospect.

Mercy felt this. Woman-like, she perceived intuitively how little of the truth William's letter had told her, and how much it had concealed. The appearance of the young foreigner, the grave faces of the girls, the evident neglect of every-day duties, courtesies, and comforts—for at any other time tea would have been spread on the table, and the sisters would have come forward and said a greeting—Mercy put these pieces of evidence together, and the result was a structure of misfortune fearful to contemplate.

Slow as she was to draw correct inferences, she was quick to draw inferences of some sort, and the first of them must naturally be William's ruin. The ruin had impended for months—years—nay, for the space of his mortal life. It was come at last.

She went upstairs with a bitter smile on her lips, thinking of her fruitless cautions, of the woful retribution come upon him for neglect of such caution, of a hundred things. Perhaps Lisabee had found Arthur to be already married; perhaps she herself was to blame; perhaps——

As a sudden over-clouding will obscure sail, buoy, and bark, so was Mercy's face now made dark, blank, inscrutable; all the surmises and prophecies, before so plainly written there, were at once and immediately obscured—washed out. She was by no means a hypocrite, but Lisabee's presence made her so. She felt most afraid of Lisabee in the time of Lisabee's humiliation.

The young wife lay on the homely little bed she had occupied since girlhood. But even to Mercy was made plain, as by revelation, much of the space bridging the two periods. Mercy was a spinster; had learned every phase and condition of spinsterhood by heart; all the easier could she understand what sweet and mysterious dignity belongs to a wife. For excepting to a few very strong or sunshiny feminine natures, marriage is utterly, wofully necessary. As life, which is of the earth, refines the gold of human character in its crucible—so marriage, like the refracting sunbeam upon scattered dewdrops, collects into a focus all that is tender and beautiful in womanhood. We behold a rainbow in the first instance; in the second, something almost as miraculous and as hard to describe.

Mercy had regarded Arthur's betrothed as a child—a nonentity, but she could not so regard his wife. Lisabee was not merely William's daughter now—the eater of his bread—the consumer of his scanty portion. Whether the marriage proved well or ill, she stood removed at arm's length from her father, her aunt, everyone. With the tact of her sex Mercy perceived this, and her perception went further still. She gathered from the merest waifs and strays of evidence that Lisabee was a girl no longer, but a woman; perhaps less wilful as woman than as girl, but infinitely, unspeakably different. The rings on her fingers, the costly fur wrapper lying under her head, the delicate foreign-looking articles of apparel scattered about, the pile of rich silk dresses just visible from the half open portmanteau, the very portmanteau itself of bright leather studded with silver nails—all these things were as so many lesser selves of Arthur, and fencing his wife from common scorn or assault.

Lisabee lay thus on her little bed surrounded by every possible evidence of her husband's former care for her. She looked dreamily towards the window, rejoicing that the higher boughs only of the walnut-trees —Arthur's trees—were visible. It pleased and soothed her to watch the sear leaves detached one by one and drifted out of sight. The surging autumnal wind, the mellow decay, the hazy grey sky, seemed right, natural, and not too sad now. Once there had been lustrous waxen foliage everywhere, swallows darting hither and thither, tiny wrens chirping on the lower boughs, not a brown leaf on the ground—and, at that time, summer and bird-singing and sunshine were right also. She went on to wonder why such sharp and painful contrasts should be part of the providence of God; why summer was not more like autumn, and autumn less distinct from winter; finally, why the perfection of life should end where sorrow begins.

She hardly started at her aunt's appearance, and only gave a little sigh of regret for the quietude robbed from her. What mattered it now that Aunt Mercy was dictatorial, Uncle Richard interfering? She felt to be no part of the Nettlested life, or indeed of any life. Mercy advanced to the bedside, gave a kindly kiss, asked a commonplace question or two, and then prepared to take off her bonnet. Lisabee watched her movements with straight-looking, unthinking eyes.

Mercy folded her shawl neatly and laid aside her bonnet, after having curled up the strings. Whilst standing before the glass, hair-pins in hand, she turned round quickly, saying—

"And how's Mr. Leebridge?"

What an extraordinary and uncalled-for question! Yet if we put ourselves in Lisabee's place, it will seem neither the one nor the other. Remember that she knew nothing of her aunt's ignorance regarding Arthur's disappearance; she bore no part in the pardonable act of deceit resolved upon and executed at daybreak in the kitchen; she did not see Mercy's quiet entrance and evasion of the group in the parlour. The poor girl only comprehended an overt insult and a secret sneer. No wonder that she made a pitiful attempt at composure, at haughtiness, at any of her old moods, and failed. Raising herself a little on the pillow, supporting her weary head as best she could by her weary hands, she drew a deep agonized breath and said—

"I would rather have him spoken of as one speaks of the dead, aunt. It does not matter much to you, does it? And if he is really dead, there will be nothing to reproach oneself for."

Mercy did not drop her hair-pin, she

continued bending one stem of it straight; but her face and figure turned to stone in a moment.

"Has any sudden news come from Vienna?" she cried, sharply.

"No," replied Lisabee, shaking her head; "no news has come."

"Your Pa didn't even tell us Mr. Leebridge was ill. Is it fever, or inflammation, or what? A sad anxiety for you, my dear; but with God's blessing he'll get over it, being young; and——and——I s'pose he's laid by something for you."

Lisabee looked at her aunt as children look at doctors, awestruck, wondering at, almost admiring their power to put lancet or forceps just to the aching gum or tender tooth. Here, again, she did Mercy injustice. The good woman but exercised inquisitiveness tempered with economical speculation; of course it was a matter of moment whether Arthur had provided for his wife or not.

"We don't know that Arthur is ill; we don't know what has become of him," Lisabee made answer, every syllable being accompanied by a sob and a sigh. "Oh, aunt! I was almost too happy at first, and now all is hidden, swallowed up as in a grave. When we bury people, they do not rise again. Do happy times rise again? Will Arthur come back to me? Will he be again my husband? Shall we feel able to smile and laugh after awhile as we used to do?"

She stretched out her arms, asking in her despair some slight token of human sympathy and fellowship. To her the world and the present time seemed as church-yards, silent, sombre, tenanted by skeletons and shadows only. Frightened by her own fanciful sadness, she regarded Aunt Mercy as a visitant angel, and falling upon her breast, asked, nay compelled, the outgiving of such tenderness as abode there.

Mercy was taken aback. She allowed her fingers to rest gently on the girl's soft neck, wiped away a tear or two, and uttered a fervent ejaculation of pity.

Lisabee was recalled to herself then. She had learned from earliest childhood to anticipate her aunt's conclusions, but learned now for the first time to deprecate them, to soften them in her own favour. Since Arthur's disappearance, no thoughts of worldly gain or loss, no questions of future meat, drink, or the wherewithal to be clothed, had troubled her peace. In the presence of Aunt Mercy such subjects as money and a prudential use of it would have occurred to the mind of Egeria, nay, of Titania herself. Lisabee felt that, whether living or dead, her Arthur must rise or fall in Mercy's estimation according to the difference such states of being wrought upon her father's purse. Proud as are all true women, and especially all true wives, she would fain have Arthur honoured in the small Plumtree world still.

"Aunt Mercy," she said, humbled by the consciousness of her own pride, "Arthur did not take his money away with him; he left that for me."

In the sternest Roman times a criminal escaped death if fortunate enough to meet a vestal virgin on the way to it. So are our evil thoughts often met half way by the pure ones of others, and receiving a salutary reprieve, never again go in so gloomy and doomed a track. Mercy understood the simple speech and its underlying wile, but the lovingness and womanliness of both disarmed her rising dismay for a time, and she put back the pretty pleading head gently.

"Lie down and don't worry, my dear," she said. "Money or no money, it isn't your fault, and only what was to be expected from such a match——"

"Aunt!" almost shrieked Lisabee, "he may be dead, remember."

"There, there! lie still, and don't think of the worst. I'll go down and try and cheer up your poor Pa. I hope your sisters won't think of setting out tea in the best parlour for *me!*"

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CHAPTER V.

THE presence of Carl was a great and insuperable protection to William Plumtree and his daughters. Mercy and Richard could only glean the kernel of Lisabee's story from such waifs and strays of it as floated about hither and thither; for to ask an open question or to make an open comment seemed impossible for the present. There existed this difference between William and his brother and sister: —he put beauty and talent before money in his category of virtues; they put money first, and all other virtues and perfections after. Carl might be rich or he might not; his good looks and cleverness, moreover, his experience of the world, demonstrated themselves indisputably. William began to admire slowly. Mercy and Richard kicked against the pricks to no purpose, but admired, nevertheless. He was a wonderful young man, this Herr Carl—harum-scarum, but wonderful; spoke all the languages they had ever heard of; had visited all the countries the names of which were familiar to them; had seen living Emperors and Czars; could play on two or three instruments; wore a braided coat and an embroidered shirt-front; to crown all, stood six feet high in his shoes, and was handsomer than Arthur—than any one they remembered to have seen. Moreover, Carl possessed just the gift that Arthur needed:

he delighted in giving pleasure to other people, no matter of what homely, or dry, or antagonistic kind. He had the gift, or rather the genius, of liking everybody — often the gift of children, yet one not to be despised. Arthur was provokingly indifferent to pleasing those for whom he entertained little cordiality, would often rejoice to make himself inimical to their prejudices. Without being unamiable, from mere coldness, therefore, he contrived to become disliked by the very people who would have bent knee to him had he shown a little urbanity.

Mercy's wide-blown bubble of admiration received a sudden and painful collapse. The most casual of observers will understand the relative feelings of married ladies and spinsters regarding sugar. It may safely be said that hardly one of ten among the latter class does not feel and look lighter-hearted when you aver a predilection for unsugared tea; whilst matrons who remember how their babies' first love was for mamma, their second for her sugar-basin, are ever free-handed and lavish over its contents, ply you with the sweet crystals as if you were a toddler of their own, smile at and scorn your deprecation of them. Mercy remembered the days when lump-sugar was a luxury for squires' houses only, and, as a luxury, still curtsied to it and did homage to it. To see sugar-loving Austrian Carl (who had not yet learned the use of sugar-tongs) dip his hand into Greta's basin, and deliberately drop, not two lumps or three, but a dozen, into one cup, was little short of a stab to the poor woman's heart. She hardly knew how to control her horror, and could not control a slight blush of shame at such wantonness.

Carl, like most sunny-tempered men, had all but womanly tact. He knew, with no other reason for knowing than that of intuition, that between his host, hostesses, and their guests existed only the superstition of love, and he did his best to induce a little cheerfulness and cordiality. He played marvellous extravagances on the piano, performed tricks and barbaric war-dances, tortured both body and mind for their pleasure. Not till an hour and a half after tea came the hot water and beaker-glasses, with their sequence of brotherly and sisterly confidence. Then Carl and the girls withdrew. The door was shut. A long silence followed.

"This is a sad job for you, brother; I wish you'd told us afore," began

Richard, self-complacently, as much as to say, " *We* could have put all straight."

Mercy's heart was full to overflowing, what with the forsaken girl's needs and her brother's weaknesses regarding household expenses.

" As for that, if we'd known it a month ago, we couldn't have hindered or helped," she said; " for my part, I expected as much all along."

"I didn't," William broke in, with pitiful tears running down his rosy cheeks. "I didn't, and no wonder either. Mr. Paterson spoke up for Arthur so, and he looked such a gentleman, and wrote such beautiful letters from Vienna——"

"Sharpers always spell well, and write like schoolmasters, as I've heard say," Richard said. "A sharper, William, no doubt—a reg'lar sharper."

"But he got no money from me. He lent me a thousand pounds, you know, and has left everything belonging to him in Vienna for Lisabee to lay hands on. No, Richard, it's my belief he's got another wife somewhere, the rascal—the d—d rascal! May God forgive me for saying so!"

"There's no need to swear or take on," said Mercy, twirling her thumb; "and bad words are ill-becoming to you, William, who are a good living man, reading the Scriptures and taking the Sacrament regular. No, there's plenty to do besides that."

She sent her hint at William as a sportsman sends his stray shot, hardly expecting, yet hoping, that the bird may fall down.

The bird did not fall down. William

wiped his tears away as a chidden child might do, looking blank.

"There's plenty to do, true enough," echoed Richard, slapping his knees by way of emphasis. "Plenty, indeed!"

William said in a dreamy way—"Poor little Lisabee has a home to come to, that's one comfort."

"Home!" caught up Mercy—"home, William! As if you hadn't enough to do without keeping extra ones now!—and there's money, you say. Right is right, and justice is justice; let Lisabee live on her money if she has it——"

"Of course; but Arthur lent me money; I'm not going to turn her out, Mercy."

Richard pricked up his ears. Combats of any kind delighted him.

"Anyhow you must be put to expenses,

William, and what you ought to do is to cut them close. There's this young foreigner, a nice young man enough, and fit to sit down at any gentleman's table; how long is he going to eat you out of house and home, I wonder, and you take no notice?"

"He only came to-day, and is going away to-morrow—I think," replied William, praying Heaven secretly to forgive his little fib.

"The sooner the better; and the sooner Lisabee's money, as you call it, is seen into, the better too. If she's got any to speak of, let her pay you for her board and stay here; if not, and the thousand pounds has to go for her husband's debts, let her earn her own living."

"By God, she shan't, though," cried the old man, scarlet with excitement, and striking violently on the table. "If I have to sell off to-morrow and go into the workhouse, she shan't; if I have to break stones on the road, she shan't; if I have to beg my bread, she shan't. Listen you here, Mercy and Richard; you never had children of your own, and none know what it is but those who have 'em. I don't know whether I'm right or wrong, but I know this—if a stranger had said anything to me about turning Lisabee into the world, I'd have knocked him down, clean and straight. It isn't that I favour Lisabee more than the other little ones; I always wish to treat one child like another, and I'm sure her sisters would any of 'em go out as governesses to-morrow so as to keep her at home. Can't you understand it? If she stays here, we're kinder to her than we were afore she went away with HIM; if she goes out, we can't tell who'll be kind to her and who not, and—and——"

His face and voice were calmer now. He added, with a sweet, shy tenderness—

"She may have a baby, you know."

The effect of this speech upon Mercy and Richard was much as that of Mahomet's first vision upon Cadijah, or Joan of Arc's inspiration upon her fellow-peasants. They felt that William had removed himself from them by an insurmountable infatuation, yet they could not find in their hearts to despise it. He was blind; they knew his blindness to be something better than their own far-seeing. And added to this impression was the shock of insult that had gone before. There are different kinds and degrees of offence. By some we are stung with a hundred little scorpions; or our ears are scorched, our faces crimsoned as from a sharp blow; again, and generally when the offence is given unexpectedly and without stint, we are stunned as if a heavy thunder-clap had deafened, blinded, smitten us.

Mercy and Richard were bruised, battered, and bleeding by William's chastisement. He had given it figuratively and they suffered figuratively; but it was suffering nevertheless. Their tongues seemed dry, their voices sounded thin and hollow, red spots blurred their vision as if their eyes were bloodshot.

What they underwent, mental and bodily, was great; and William saw it, yet felt unable to soothe them without losing his position. He tried feeble, feminine ways of shifting to other consolations—pressed cakes and hot spirits upon them, uttered little prudent speeches about putting the bullocks upon beetroot, and curtailing oil-cake bills, brought out the weekly books, and counted how many pounds of butter had been sold. Alas! these arts failed utterly. He might as easily have taught a seal dancing as his brother and sister urbanity then. All the doors and gates of Sycamore Farm seemed to clap hands joyfully when the high, straight-backed gig drove away.

CHAPTER VI.

CARL had spent about a week at Sycamore Farm, when one morning an involuntary and unwelcome conviction flashed across his mind. It was time for him to go.

He found himself much in the position of travellers who, having discovered delicious tropical islands, dream away two or three days amid orange groves and fairy-like cactus thickets, forgetting to be hungry while so intoxicated. On the third day, however, a want—a bare, blank, outspeaking want—overcomes this enthusiasm for their new kingdom. They are hungry, and rainbow flowers and foliage do not satisfy hunger.

Carl was drifted to as fair a haven as the heart of a man could wish for; yet he must not stay. All the strange events of the last few weeks, all the pleasantnesses of this English home and its pretty young mistresses, all the quiet playful talks in breezy orchards and solitary fallow fields, could remove but not destroy the need of livelihood and of money. When poor Carl felt obliged to admit so prosaic a thought, and follow it out to its ultimate conclusions, he found matter for grave looks.

He had no money! In these days of universal respectability, when we are ashamed to own, however much we may bewail, the need of a five-pound note, this seems a ridiculous dilemma. Yet who would not far readier encounter trials of magnitude than some things that seem ridiculous? Carl smiled, but it was a smile of dismay, as he turned out his purse on the morning of departure. He had left Vienna hurriedly, had travelled with haste and great outlay, had squandered money in gifts to Cissy and Mabel, and now would have tossed up his cap at the finding of some mislaid crown. His whole wealth consisted of odd coins, amounting to about fifteen shillings.

One dilemma, like the prolific aphis, gives spontaneous birth to hundreds of others. No sooner was Carl aware of scantiness in this thing, than scantiness appeared everywhere. He needed not one five-pound note only, but a regular supply of five-pound notes. He needed not a single meal, but meals unfailing from day to day; not an abiding place for to-night, but for to-morrow, and many morrows. He shrank from returning home a beggar. Above all, he shrank from returning home an object of sympathy. Surely to a young man of twenty-three, glibly conversant with many languages, able to do a hundred things difficult to most people, having no pride as to gaining five-pound notes, meals and abiding-place would prove easy enough of obtainment in the Carthage of the modern world.

He resolved to get to London by road, rail, or river, anyhow, so long as the distance might be spanned with little cost; and once there, to make use of his father's name at the embassy. Dr. Zillner was a power and a potency in Vienna: Carl looked in the glass, and thought it a good thing to look gentlemanlike and Zillner-like. Baron O—— could not at least refuse him letters of introduction.

Partings between young people of opposite sex, who have lived happy Valentine episodes together in the unsophisticated corn-county, are sure to be sad. The men who return to the life of cities and intercourse with well-trained, even-tongued ladies, smoke and sing, and pretend to forget how much is lost; the maidens steal away to cry, but blush and smile only at saying good-bye. No one confesses to heartache.

Carl packed his valise, and finding that no train passed through Nettlested till late in the afternoon, proposed a nutting excursion to the woods. It seemed such a pity not to be happy for an hour or two, he said. Cissy and Mabel fetched their hats forthwith, too delighted to think of the five o'clock train any more. William made many objections, first and foremost of which was a goose for dinner; the wood was no wood at all, only a scrubby bit of choked up plantation; the paths were sodden and impassable; the girls would get bemired up to their ankles—and the goose would dry to a cinder ere they came back. But Carl contrived to outweigh all these arguments, and the three young folks set forward.

There had been a light frost. A sea-green haze still hung over the far-stretching fallows and ploughed lands, but the holiday-makers seemed to carry with them a brilliant circle of sky, leafage, and atmosphere. The sweet-smelling turnip-fields glistened with a deep, eye-reposing green; the purple beetroot showed its velvety volutes folded a hundred thick, the pale yellow stubble-fields encompassed and swept all like a smooth sea. But the hedges were a glory to marvel at. One could hardly reconcile the preconceived idea of anything so common as a Suffolk hedge-row with all this lavish and lustre of supreme loveliness. 'Twas as if Nature, like the Queen of Carthage, had put on her coronation robes to die in. The gold leafage of the hazel flowed right and left like an ample skirt decked with jewellery of scarlet and purple berry, whilst glossy embroideries of pink and white flowers and coronals of proud ivy and plumy clematis, might well recall a head so sadly crowned as Dido crowned her own.

Then there were flitting notes of birds;

the twitter of the ever-cheerful robin, the clear, sharp cry of the pewet, the republican call of the rook. Sometimes a sportsman's gun would sound from the distance, or a covey of partridges would whirr across the way, or a scared, wild-eyed hare dashed into covert, making little eddies of dead leaves as he scudded along. Here and there might be seen a heap of burning weeds, from which the soft, brisk wind brought warm smells and smoke into their faces; and whilst they walked, withered leaves fell upon their young heads like flakes of amber-coloured snow.

Soon they came to a wood, hardly a wood, except in the eyes of Suffolkers and young people in search of pleasure.

"There are no nuts," said Mabel, sadly. "We have come too late!"

Carl cut a stick from the hazel copse close by, and began climbing.

"'*In empty straw one always finds a kernel*,' we say in Germany," he cried with lighthearted defiance. "For my part, I prefer empty straw and stripped woods; one can then exercise one's ingenuity."

Cissy approved of his opinion and reprimanded Mabel's sadness by her looks.

"I can always find something wherever I look," she said, brightly. "You two stay here, and give me a quarter of an hour's range whither I choose. 'Twill be hard if I don't fill my hat."

She bounded forward and threaded the leafy arcades gladsomely, now pausing to disentangle her curls from the envious boughs; now looking back to nod happy prophecies. Cissy had a small womanly reason to be gay. Must the truth come out? She rejoiced then in the prospect of receiving Carl's last adieu. Being the only Amazon in the family, the duty devolved upon her of driving him to the Nettlested station. Cissy possessed no more coquetry or vanity than most women, but she was more exacting. Throughout Carl's visit, her chair must be placed beside his; her house duties must go, in order that she might enjoy his society; her pretty neck must have the adornment of new ribbons. Greta and Mabel were accustomed to such subservience, and took it as no hardship; the one re-furbished her sister's bonnet, the other relieved her of house-keeping. Carl and Cissy, therefore, had been thrown constantly together from the first. On this last day a great repentance suddenly took possession of the hitherto self-satisfied triumphant little heart. Cissy felt a twinge of conscious selfishness, and resolved to make an atonement.

Accordingly, she would not yield to temptation and usurp all Carl's homage during this nutting excursion, but generously left the field to her weaker ally. Hard as it was to separate herself from Carl's handsome face and sweet voice, she went on and on, dropping snatches of blithe song by the way. When half an hour had passed thus, she sat down beside a moss-grown pollard and cut Carl's name on it, wondering what he and Mabel were talking about. She guessed a hundred topics, but, strange to say, fell far short of the right.

Carl had hidden himself more and more from Mabel's eye, till at last he was not seen at all. She could tell of his nearness by such high-pitched greetings only as came now and then. "Are you there?" "Can you see me?" or simply "Mabel!" By and by, the hazel swayed heavily overhead, and Mabel was bidden to make an apron of her dress.

The nuts dropped down one by one, but Carl remained as hidden as Wordsworth's cuckoo. He could, of course, see Mabel; but this fact did not dawn upon her simple mind; and thinking of the enjoyment of the present hour, and of all the sorrow and shame and sombre monotony to come after, what wonder that tears dropped as well as nuts?

They dropped one by one, tears and nuts, keeping rhythmical time in the breezy autumn morning. Carl, looking down to win a smile or word, could hardly conceal an exclamation of surprise: he did conceal it, however, looked again partly in love with the picture, partly bewildered, partly pleased by it.

Mabel was a quiet young girl, with very lovely eyes and a tendency to be sad. She had neither Lisabee's arch beauty nor Cissy's dashing loveliness; but sweet eyes telling love-stories are sufficient for a dower. Carl might have thought so once or twice before; he felt sure of it now. Every one of those slowly dropped tears was a pearl, making as it fell, a chain to hold him slave for ever.

He parted the boughs a little and leaned forward. Mabel blushed, feeling sure that some sort of confession impended. They both sighed. At last Carl said—(it was as if a boy of fourteen courted a girl of twelve)—

"Are you sorry because I must go away, Mabel dear?"

A smile came then as young children's smiles come, whilst yet the tears are plain, and she bent her head lower for joy and sweet shame.

"Yes," she whispered.

"What would you give if I stayed and spent all my time in playing and talking with you?"

"I have nothing worth giving; and then——"

"And then—I must go. But listen."

He broke off a hazel branch, a small branch heart-shaped, and went on—

"As many nuts as are here, so many weeks and no more shall pass before I come back to you. Hold out your apron and count them after me."

The two clear young voices echoed each other eagerly.

"One—two—three—four—five — six—Seven!"

Was not theirs a childlike *auspicium?* Yet without priest, and waving wand and consecrated tent, they contrived to gain the happiest of happy auguries. Carl swung himself lightly to the ground, and making a cup of his palms, held Mabel's face close to his own. As if telling her some wonderful secret, not even guessed at before, to be wondered at ever afterwards, he whispered—

"We will be married by and by, won't we?"

Then the boy and girl kissed each other shyly and silently, lest the very woods had ears, and needing to take no more auspices, contented themselves with talk of the blessed number Seven.

Lest the woods had ears, was it said? What a folly so to speak! Not only have the woods ears, but the airy breezes and the moss-grown ferny banks. Else why such a lisping of leafy tongues, such a shrill trumpeting of merry winds, such a nodding of silvery plumes? There is no sally of piping fauns and brown-haired dryads to bewitch us now; but the woods are haunted still, though never so far from Cephisus. Love is the Diviner who shows us how much!

CHAPTER VII.

SORROW is like snow. The earth lies under a white pall; its happy pulses cease to beat; one hears no sound of singing in the woods: night and morning come without rosy warning. Great sorrow comes thus. The human heart is numbed rather than crushed. Nothing is missed but the faculty of living. By and by we can weep; then the breath of flowers is swept across our faces; we look around; the world was never more beautiful than now.

It was only when Carl went away and the life at Sycamore Farm fell into its old track, that Lisabee felt herself to be Arthur's widow; yet not wholly his widow; therein lay her chief and most humiliating sorrow. She could not wear weeds for him, though he was dead to her. Had tidings come of Arthur's honourable death, she felt how changed the expression of everyone's sympathy must be. Such sympathy as she was obliged to accept now hurt her, galled her like chains. After the fashion of young sensitive natures, she quarrelled with the very bread and wine that nourished her. Why was there such a difference between her sorrow, and her sorrow as it appeared to others? Why would people try to deceive her as to the magnitude of it, shed false lights on it, obscure it by shadows of their own creation? In losing Arthur she had lost all; but none possessed the courage to tell her so. Every effort was made to lessen her grief: not one to comprehend it. Her happy past was depreciated; she had to listen to moral reflections as to the worthlessness of her idol, and the fitness of losing it. A great sob of sympathetic despair would have made her solitariness less solitary.

William Plumtree and his daughters were hardly to be blamed here. They but acted as the whole world acts when called upon to mourn vicariously. People never dare to be honest when called upon to sympathize; they throw a handful of dirt upon your golden idol; they tell you, with the best of purposes, that there were two or three cracks in it; or they discover it to have been by no means golden—rather of baser metal. Let us have no more of this. Our love is dead; the world holds nothing more for us;

surely a tear were not too much to ask when we thus suffer!

Lisabee could not believe it right, or wise, or Christ-commanded, to look happy or hopeful yet. She had no springs in her heart—only the blackest, blankest Novembers. Was it incumbent upon her to pretend other things—to stick cut flowers above her new-made grave by way of simulating a garden? Duty or no duty, she held back from it. From fear of being a hypocrite she erred another way, preferring to suffer more than necessary to suffering one iota less. She was told again and again how good it would be to wake one morning and find Arthur forgotten, or remembered no longer as the Beloved. Of course she distrusted such sayings, feeling that a world draped with black for him must be dearer and better than a world garlanded to welcome new life and love. Herein she showed the essential unselfishness of womanly nature, since she had every reason to think her husband a traitor. But she never allowed the thought of his treachery to stay. The Past was as a shut Eden, and her love for him as an angel guarding its gates.

When Mr. Raven came with his mild purr of mixed treacle-and-brimstone doctrine, Lisabee felt as she used to do under a lecture of Aunt Mercy's. She rejoiced that she wore long skirts now, could beat her feet on the floor, and trample the hateful words. She wished that Mr. Raven were hateful also; his kindness hindered her scorn, and his softness swelled her heart till it felt near bursting. Why was it good to despise the world, the world that had given her Arthur? Why was it good to mortify human affection when the memory of Arthur's love comforted her, could but comfort her, more than the anticipations of heaven? She knew that she was wicked, but she felt that Christ forgave her. How she longed for such teachings as His were—Christ's. But she longed for them on earth; she did not feel ready to die. Mr. Raven did his best to subvert the old heresy about the bird you hold and the bird you may hold. Lisabee, like Ulysses, would rather serve in Ithaca than rule on Olympus. She loved life, even sorrowful life, as young, fresh human nature is wont and bound to do. Mr. Raven put no repentant Arthur in heaven, or she might have loved death too.

The worst of it was that she felt herself daily growing more ungrateful. She almost grudged such affection as she bestowed on her father and sisters, and she almost shrank from receiving theirs. They despised Arthur. What was hardest to bear, she felt that they had reason for despising him. And she loved him still with the love that is sweetest, strongest, saddest of all, the love of a simple woman who can love but once.

Her comforters outnumbered those of Job. There was Mrs. Raven, with her black silk bag full of original verses on lachrymose subjects; Mr. Raven, all tea-and-toast morality; Mahala, whimpering forth deprecations of the unhallowed passion of love; Smy., spasmodically cheerful; the Plumtree cousinship, with reproachful condolence that bordered on insolence; Mrs. Lyddy, with rhyming recipes for promiscuous healings, no matter whether of body or of mind.

Had Lisabee's marriage been less brilliant, less opposed to her prospects and hopes, she would not have suffered so much now. She had won such triumph as woman is born to—the triumph of a happy bridal; but the flower-crowns were dead, the green boughs trampled underfoot, and the triumphal arch, through which she had passed like a queen at noon, cast deep shadow as soon as the sun was down. Lisabee's sun was indeed down.

It seems a thing to smile at, but is a truth nevertheless, that in the eastern corn-country nothing confers so much satisfaction and dignity as one's creditable appearance at church. Since the babyhood of William Plumtree's little ladies, he had always reviewed them on Sunday mornings, admiring their little pink legs and consequentially-worn white frocks, their curled hair and bright hat-ribbons; later, he had looked almost lover-like upon their sweeping skirts and pretty bonnets, without a momentary question as to any one's daughters surpassing his own. He was not alone in this. From the parson's family downwards, every inhabitant of Nettlested had an ideal of Sunday dress, deportment, and dignity, though none supported their own better than William Plumtree and his daughters. William wore black cloth and a silk pocket-handkerchief, the young ladies carried their heads proudly as befitted Pierrepoints, and followed the Psalms with that peculiarly sweet, clear, and perfect intonation inherited from their mother. And since Lisabee's marriage, *going to church* had been a constant ovation to them. The tiniest toddler of the Sunday-school tickled their vanity by looks approving of prosperity; the well-to-do people did homage by all kinds of ill-timed bows and observances; the parish-clerk, who never forgot to give due emphasis to the persecuted companion of "the Pee-lican in the desert," remembered that Mr. Plumtree, of Sycamore Farm, was now one of the God-favoured, and read at him the description of the prosperous man, whose "wife is as the fruitful Wine, and whose children as the A-live branches around thy table." Since the day on which Arthur had led Lisabee as a bride up the aisle, looking totally ignorant of the crowd agape with homely homage around him, he remained the hero of the Nettlested congregation. Arthur had shown himself haughty but generous, and never was seen such a perfect gentleman in Nettlested, never. But now all things were different, wofully different. The glory was gone from William's shining coat and his daughters' pretty gowns; they felt that, as wearers of rags and tinsel, they could hardly appear more abject, more humiliated in the eyes of their neighbours. They also felt that the garland of yesterday was turned into the scourge of to-day. For however meekly we may take an undue piece of fortune, it is sure sooner or later to wear a retributive aspect, and this without fault of our own. William Plumtree and his daughters had never been arrogantly happy or lifted up beyond the occasion; all the more were they hurt by the injustice that now reproved them. In the side-long looks of the farmers' wives, in the missed curtsey of the school-children, in the rector's sermon on high-mindedness, in the clerk's long drawn-out echoes of such texts as anathematized vanity and worldly pomps, they read but a single and bitter truth:—Disgrace is never forgiven.

Disgrace must be borne, however, and secret sorrow, and the loneliness that seems lonelier every day—by what helps and influences God alone knows.

Poor little Lisabee! Hers was too young and fair a head to be thorn-crowned. Let us pray that some saving Aurora may erelong dawn upon her Calvary!

BOOK VI.

MINCHEN.

> "Whether this being was woman, child, or sprite of some world less known to us than this, is easy to guess at, hard to say. In good sooth, her manner of loving might make make-believes, fables, miracles, all extravagancies possible of credence."
>
> Old Spanish Love-Story.

CHAPTER I.

ON the night of the fire, Arthur Leebridge and the woman Bäbele were driven quickly through the narrowest and darkest streets in Vienna.

At any other time he would have smiled scoffingly, nice gentleman that he was, to find himself in such a position; he would certainly have opened the carriage windows to let out the plebeian air, perhaps have proposed that the good woman should ride outside. As it was, he forgot everything but the almost brute-like instinct of prey raging within him, and that every advancing step brought him near Konrad Versette.

When the wheels rested, and the driver let down the steps, he sprang out and gave Bäbele his hand courteously, hardly remembering who she was.

The carriage rattled away over an uneven pavement, and with it went the light. The darkness, the puff of air, the satisfactory ejaculation of the woman, sharpened Arthur's senses in a second. He turned round and caught her arm.

"Hist! leave me at the door and fetch a policeman," he whispered.

Bäbele swore obedience ten oaths deep, and the two crept like cats along the hot-smelling, break-neck cul-de-sac, above which lived respectable men and women, and below which ran a noisome sewerage.

The woman stopped suddenly, and laughed with ill-concealed self-congratulation.

"He isn't here!" she said; "and Jesu-Maria Josef, if the little audacious Terrifier hasn't cleared up the dumpling soup, and sleeps after it unconcerned as a crab unboiled."

Arthur could see nothing, but made a plunge at her arm. His attempt failed, and he had recourse to words.

"You dare not beat her!"

"Beat her! Ask me to beat myself, to offend the Blessed Virgin by not going to confession, to eat a sheep's foot on a fast-day, to betray my modesty—and I'll do it; but let that sweet little lady feel the weight of my hand—never."

And by wonderful chance Bäbele's bushel of falsehood contained a kernel of truth; she durst not beat Minchen.

"Shall I strike a light?" she went on. "You will then see how I've plucked myself as bare as a goose to make the young lady's bed warm, and how much it costs to keep her by the size of the saucepan she's clean emptied. I laid my hand on it by chance, and oh! what my feelings were on finding it empty, the Virgin and St. Peter only know."

She contrived to get a light by some occult process, and Arthur, for the first time in his life, found himself face to face not with the poverty that weeps, that is hollow-eyed, and that rejoices to number its ribs, but with the poverty that forgets the leanness of yesterday in the fatness of to-day, that dovetails its moralities into its manners, and diffuses a kind of loose cheerfulness over both. There was warmth in the room, and when Bäbele's feeble lamp burned brighter, Arthur contrived to see one or two objects clearly in the confused picture before him. The first happened to be a man's gloves—respectable, well-fitting gloves; the second, Minchen's curled-up figure. He knew also that the room had dowdy articles of comfort in it—a tattered rug on the floor, a cupboard holding brandy and strong-smelling meats, a shut-up bed, besides the tiny clothes' hutch which served as Minchen's.

The child lay on a heap of old clothes, a dingy feather pillow almost covering her to the chin. Lying thus, so beautiful, so fresh, and so delicately coloured, she reminded you of those soft, bloomy fruits that are reared upon repulsive hotbeds. Even her breath was sweet and perfume-like, as if she were incapable of drawing anything but sweetness from the filthy atmosphere she breathed.

Arthur thought otherwise. To him Minchen appeared a part of Bäbele, as participator if not in her evil, at least in her content with evil. He should make an effort to save her, but rather out of consideration for her childhood than for her relationship to himself.

He took up the gloves quietly and stuffed them into the still smouldering ashes of the stove. When Bäbele flew to the rescue, he warned her off with a look that expressed even more than the words accompanying it.

"Worse women than yourself would have waited till the child was gone before resuming the life of the abandoned, however much they might love it," he said; "remember, Bäbele——"

"By the holy saints and martyrs, by the marrow-bones of the Pope himself, I swear I've only had my brother to sup with me —a steady, good sort of man he is, too, and master gardener to the Grand Duke Salam——"

"Hold your tongue, and go and fetch the police."

"And the Grand Duke gave him a silver watch last Christmas for his care of the cucumbers, and those very gloves in the bargain. Pray let little Missy stay. Don't I bring her up to pray to the Virgin and say the litanies? And could her own mother tell her prettier stories than I do, besides teaching her the dream-book and the ghost-book quite through?"

"I tell you the child must go," interrupted Arthur, impatiently. "Of course you will be rewarded well for your care of her, and rewarded well for your care of somebody else, too."

He showed her a little roll of half-florin notes (there was no coin in circulation a few years back throughout the Imperial domains), and added, in a loud key——

"Help me to catch Versette, and you can give up your bad courses for a time. Mind, not a kreutzer is yours till the fellow is safely lodged in the police-station."

Bäbele again protested her innocence, and again abused Konrad. Arthur must wait a while, however. The concentrated essence of devilry, the crowned king of impdom, the out-doer of all hitherto done wickedness—we are now condensing Bäbele's epithets—had not yet returned home. Meantime she would fetch the gendarme, and make all things sure.

Arthur knew Bäbele's utter faithlessness, but he also knew that money could make her true. Troubling himself little as to the delay, he sat down on the only empty chair, turning his face, he hardly knew why, towards Minchen.

There are some children, and Minchen was one, whose very beauty gives one a sense of uneasiness. She had a real child's face—peachy cheeks; eyes all inquiry and uncertain affection; lips soft, small, and sweet to kiss; a brow smooth and white as sea-washed shell. Yet, child as she was, you thought less of her as the present visible child than as the future unseen woman; you loved her and pitied her, you knew not why, unless for some prophetic intuition of sorrows, perhaps of her own making, perhaps of God's sending—hard to bear, anyhow. You almost wished that such a child might die early, and the woman never be.

These reflections came naturally, came bitterly to Arthur Leebridge. He felt guilty of Minchen's existence—of her innocence—of her rare, abounding beauty. He could not look upon her as he might have looked upon an ordinary, a sickly, or a deformed child. This little creature, with her superb eyes, her arch imperious lips, her perfect, graceful limbs, must demand more of him than an honourable payment of money and a cold-hearted oblivion.

What should he do with her?

The thought went and came like a sharp

pain. There was no getting rid of it—no softening it. His child claimed something of him, must it be love, or care only, and that doled out like alms by strange hands?

Again, Minchen's safety involved the sacrifice of Lisabee? Which of the two must be spared? By insuring his wife's peace of mind, he was made answerable for an opening life, by charging himself with that life. Lisabee must forgive him much, and he hated the alternative of being forgiven even by Lisabee. The slow minutes seemed turned to leaden weights beating the two ideas upon his brain till they became torture. He tried to escape from them, to concentrate his thoughts upon the incendiary—the seizure of Versette—the future re-building of the factory. Confident as he was in his own resources, the possibility of ruin never occurred to him. He knew that there would be a hard battle to fight, scattered forces in the way of capital to collect somehow; economies and expedients to originate, but absolute need of money and absolute defeat he ignored utterly. Arthur had it not in his nature to cry surrender. He would fight whilst arms remained to him, and in default of arms would seize the ship with his teeth. A very determined young man was this, and one having no fatalism in his philosophy, rather holding the good things of Providence as so much right for the mightiest. It would be hard, almost impossible, to express his contempt for the opposite theory of thankful, unlimited, unasking acceptance.

The minutes came and went like his own dreary thoughts. He felt alone with them. Minchen seemed apart from all. She almost shone in the dark room, so contrasted to squalor was she, so soft and bloomy and rounded. Once she turned restlessly and beat her little hands, murmuring in her sleep. Low and indistinct as were the words, Arthur caught at this meaning without effort.

" Wicked papa shall be shut up in prison for ever—for ever," she murmured, recurring to the last word as bees to clover-blossoms.

Arthur shrugged his shoulders and bit his lips. Was his child already taught to curse him? He owned to no love for her, yet he shrank from the testimony of his hate, and stranger still hardly felt conscious of having earned it.

So the time wore on. Arthur began to feel like a man in prison—to long for light, for air, for the power of moving freely. He tried to fan the feeble lamp into cheerier shining, to obtain, if only by stolen snatches, a breath of purer atmosphere. In vain; the window did not seem made to open, and the door creaked at the merest touch. He feared to awaken Minchen and sat down again.

When the clock struck four his patience gave way; he determined to leave the place and let the police take their chance with Versette. The close atmosphere, the child's retributive face, the night's adventure, had made a moody and melancholy man of him. He began to care very little what became of Versette, or Bäbele, or Minchen, so long as they disappeared from his horizon altogether. He felt himself to be what the child had called him, "wicked!" But Lisabee did not know.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN Bäbele found herself alone in the street, she began to doubt as to the expediency of fetching a policeman.

She longed for Arthur's reward much, but she dreaded Kurt's punishment more. Arthur could but give her money, Kurt would not hesitate to give her blows. Then she loved Kurt, as all women of her stamp love handsome blackguardly men young enough to be their sons; and she had little love for Arthur, which was natural also.

Arthur's anger would be sharp and cold; Kurt's gratitude would have delight and satisfaction in it; flattering words, rollicking feasts, perhaps a kiss over brimming cups—she decided to leave Arthur. Hastening riverward, she cut a straight and speedy way through mazy streets and crowded passages, all pitchy dark, finally emerging, not into light, but into lesser darkness.

Before her lay the river—a snaky, slimy surface, with islands and wood-rafts making blotches here and there; on the right bank rose the City, its crests and pinnacles sharply cut against a brown sky, St. Stefan's overtopping all like the highest summit of a mountain ridge. On the left stretched the forest-like Prater, purply black and turning every darkness but its own into twilight. Bäbele entered a narrow street, where signs of life, love-making, and merry-making met her at every step, The love-making and merry-making were a little lawless perhaps, but infinitely to Bäbele's taste, and she did not hurry on her way. When at last she came upon Kurt, sleepily nursing his knees over a plentiful supper, her greeting took rather an ambiguous turn.

"Herr Konrad," she said, seating herself smilingly opposite the dish of sausages, "I've been on my knees for two blessed hours praying the rich Englishman for mercy, but he's determined to have you, lights, liver, and all. You're to go back to London with him, and at the city of England, in the sight of the Emperor, the Fathers of the church, and the Polish Hussars, be branded on your collar bones, and then your head will roll off as neat as a turnip."

Here Konrad woke up a little, and put out his hand, grumbling. He wasn't going to buy sausages for her. What did she want and what did she mean?

Thereupon Bäbele grew tearful, red, and indignant. Kurt softened a little; promised her supper by and by. Let her say her say first. But to get a story from Bäbele was as difficult as to catch a sparrow by throwing salt on its tail. When Kurt had arrived at the vaguest suspicion of a meaning, he found things looking rather black for him, and forgot all about the sausages. Bäbele helped herself furtively, and even moved the beer-jug within reach.

After a little quiet munching on her part, and not a few dark looks crossing the sailor's face like clouds, he bent forward and whispered—

"The Englishman fired his factory himself, my girl; you and I know why, don't we?"

"Oh! of course, Herr Konrad. May St. Anthony burn me with billions of purgatory if I ever thought you did it! And pray excuse me for helping myself to sausage—I thought you invited me—and the Englishman is a very imp of wickedness!"

Kurt smiled. He saw that the woman understood him, and admired the cleverness of which stupidity is sometimes capable.

"But I must get out of Vienna somehow or you'll have to eat a very devil's pudding with me, and I do think you deserve a little money for your pains—at any rate, you'll expect a little."

Bäbele dropped her fork, and smiled. Some people smile with their souls, others with their bodies; her smile was peculiarly of the latter. She would fain have embraced Herr Konrad, but he declined the honour.

"You wait here," he said, "whilst I go and get my money; it is hid up here for safety, sewed in an old boot, and laid under the highest tile of the house-roof. I shan't be long, and meantime look out that no one touches my sausages."

It must be stated, to Konrad's credit, that he did not lie from habit, but from personal regard to Bäbele. She was of so imaginative a temperament that he felt ashamed of being plain and truthful with her. Thus arose the fabulous hiding-place of his money, and the fancifulness of his excuse altogether. Bäbele guessed as much, respected his motives, and proceeded to take the best possible care of his sausages by eating them herself.

Meantime, Konrad put on his cap, and dashed into the heart of the dark portentous night, himself hardly less dark and portentous. He was conscious of an apparently harmless design, that of acting up to his ideal. Some men have noble ideals; they are hardly to be expected of Konrad Versettes. He had reason for hating Arthur, and he wanted his hate to be of the best kind. Konrad's hate partook of the sailor's colouring—smelt of powder, had a flash of clean steel, a string of whip-cord, a bodily smart in it: he could not conceive of any hate that hesitated at these.

His last meeting with Arthur, and its unexpected conclusion, added new zest to such ambitions. To have half made up his mind to evil and then be frustrated, seemed a poor piece of work; to have succumbed like a craven to the proud Englishman's threat was the extremest of mortifications.

Whether he had wholly intended to drown

Arthur and his wife in the lake, was as yet a mystery to himself. The devilish impulse of mischief, the freshly-awakened malice against the seducer of his betrothed, the all-powerful instinct of caste, had driven him to the conception of such a treachery, but he doubted yet as to his capability of carrying it out. He believed better of himself, and this belief goaded him into gloom, dissatisfaction, and fresh crime. Konrad Versette may as yet be called a half-villain, because he tried to make himself bad rather than trust to the involuntary action of his badness.

He felt too late that the fire would not harm Arthur much—would not sting his shoulders or blister his cheeks, for he was rich; whereas for himself, Konrad, the galley chains seemed already to clank about his feet. Whether he stayed in Vienna or not was matter of little moment. Justice had long fingers, and the law loved its own. But it was less the certainty of punishment, than the fear of receiving punishment in vain, that incited Konrad to further ambition of evil. He wished to balance Arthur's penalty with his own. This seemed but fair and right.

The emotions of his mind kept pace with his impetuous physical movements, and not before reaching Bäbele's door did anything like settled determination take possession of him. Then, as if suddenly cooled and calmed by the sight of Minchen sleeping so unbrokenly and Arthur watching near, both rapt, unconscious, and for the nonce harmless, he gazed and thought.

He gazed and thought. Not of mercy, or

of drawing back, or of retribution to come, but of the mode and manner of his vengeance. His hot southern blood was up; his fingers' ends had sudden fiery spirits put into them; his clasp-knife lay like a nestling next his heart.

What need to delay?

No need, indeed. Arthur rose, moved hither and thither, stretched his arms impatiently, approached the door in a pioneer-like way, reached his hat; lastly, as if on after-thought, paused before the sleeping child. Konrad heard and understood a sound of rustling paper-money. He understood also, for he was not destitute of a certain brigandish susceptibility, why Arthur's hand closed tenderly over Minchen's, and having closed tenderly over it, lay there.

Whilst standing thus, contemplating with a feeling akin to marvel his child's rare, untutored hedge-row beauty, unforgetful of the mother, Arthur was as completely thrust into another state of existence as the star-studying mariner who should lose his balance and fall forty fathom deep into the cold night sea.

He felt a sharp, searing, sulphurous pain, then a blinding lightning blast across his eyes. Lastly, darkness—numbing, icy, impervious of sense, of surroundings, of the entire circle of his living bodily being.

Konrad, finding that his deed looked so much more evil than he had expected it to do, stood aghast. It is simple to understand why a crime should appear doubly criminal after committal, but Konrad in no wise understood it. He was absolutely plunged like Arthur into another phase of being. Before, what so easy as the possibility of altering circumstances at will? Now, what so difficult? And he had not looked for such a change of relations. Arthur's blood made peace between them, but at a cost too great to reckon.

Konrad stood aghast.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN Minchen awoke, her blue eyes were a miracle to behold. The naughty papa there—lying on Bäbele's own bed—pale, his head swathed in white linen, his body prone and helpless. What did it all mean?

She made a dash at Bäbele, who slept dog-like on the floor.

"Bäbele, what made papa come here? How long will he stay? Wake up and tell me. I've been thumping you ever so long; if you don't wake up, I'll give your breakfast to the cat, and eat your dinner myself.

I'll run out and spend all the money in your pocket—I'll——"

"Yes, go and do all that—you'd better, you grateful, nice-behaved little termagant; you'd just delight to see me a-starving, I know, but I'm not going to, and though the police are going to put *you* into prison this very day, I am all right, the Virgin be thanked!"

"*Me* into prison!" cried the child, a little disconcerted; "Uncle Kurt won't let 'em."

"No," snorted Bäbele, still half-asleep, "but Uncle Kurt is gone, and so you must help yourself if you can!"

"Uncle Kurt gone?"

"Clean gone, I tell you, and you may as well expect the halfpenny you put into the poor-box to come back again as to see Herr Kurt. If I were to whip you till I turned you into an Albino—if I were to eat tarts and chocolate cake and feed you on boiled shoe-leather and wood-ashes—if I were to dress in silks at a florin a square inch, and put nothing on you but a petticoat made of old curl-papers—a pin would your Uncle Kurt care or hinder——"

Minchen's face had gradually changed from intense amazement to dismay. She gasped now as if Bäbele's words were stifling her, but pointed to Arthur with a little hand that dared to be imperious still.

"If Uncle Kurt can't, *he* will," she said. "I'm not a bit afraid of you, Bäbele, though grandfather is dead and Uncle Kurt away."

Bäbele jumped up, and exerting all the strength of her wiry frame, lifted Arthur like a child from one side of the bed to the other. When she had accomplished this feat, she looked round triumphantly at Minchen.

"*He* help you, indeed; pray let us have no more of that," she said. "If I were to cut you up into mincemeat and eat you smoking-hot from the oven, no help or pity you'd get from him. But I'll promise not to beat you or eat you either if you'll behave like a little lady and do what you're bid."

"And you won't wear the silk dress unless you buy me one like it?" asked the child with eagerness, for she was somewhat of a coquette.

"That I can't promise," replied Bäbele, gravely; "nor yet to eat any of the boiled shoe-leather, unless I get tired of tarts. But listen, Minchen; what some people call behaving like a lady, others don't, and I may as well spend my breath now, and spare it by and by when it mayn't matter to me how you behave."

"Shall I go away with papa?"

"With the police, you mean. Most likely. Leastways, you're sure to go with them if you offend me; but now I'm going to tell you what I call being a lady. You mustn't tell anybody the truth; you mustn't let people into the house unless they look as if they knew all about it; you mustn't play in the streets unless you can keep from blabbing about your papa——"

"How came he here? Do tell me, Bäbele," Minchen asked, with arched eyebrows and pursed-up lips. "I'm going to be your friend, and he's my papa—I ought to know."

"So you shall. Last night, then, St.

Martin appeared to your Uncle Kurt in a vision, and said he must kill a man——"

The child did not forget that Arthur belonged to her.

"Papa is not killed? He will get well."

"If you mind what I say he will; if you don't, I can't answer for it."

"But what can my minding you have to do with papa's getting well, Bäbele? You're a silly old woman to try and stuff such fibs into me."

Bäbele was by no means wroth, only somewhat flurried and hard pressed for logic. She seized upon the first that came handy.

"To do with it? Just this, that if you don't try to please me, I'll take your papa as you call him——"

"He is my papa, Bäbele."

"And throw him like a dead cat right on the ramparts."

"The police would get hold of you, Bäbele, that they would, and serve you right too. I'll run out and tell everybody in the streets the first time you are unkind to my papa."

Bäbele felt that the time for jokes was over. Something must be devised to silence Minchen's all too ready tongue, and check Minchen's all too shrewd conclusions. An appeal to fear had been tried in vain, an appeal to fiction also; suppose she resorted, by way of experiment, to the truth?

She did so. Placing Minchen opposite to the apparently lifeless figure of Arthur, she said solemnly—

"Minchen, your Uncle Kurt has run away, and left us to save our necks as we could. If you hold your tongue we may manage to keep our secret till the gentleman, your papa, is well, and then he would tell his own story; if not, well—you and I should suffer for it, that's all!"

Minchen was quite woman enough to comprehend Bäbele's truthfulness, and the occasion of it. Had she lied till sunset, the child would have doubted and perhaps betrayed her. She told the truth, Minchen felt sure, only because of some dismal necessity.

Then Bäbele, finding that Minchen was ready to aid and abet her in all things pertaining to Arthur's safety, went out, as she said, for a doctor. The child, meantime, must watch.

Minchen, contrary to Bäbele's expectations, accepted the command graciously. Having dressed herself with demureness, she sat down by Arthur's bed, proud and pensive.

All children are metaphysicians, especially those who have suffered. Minchen had suffered in the loss of her grandfather more than sounds credible. For a week she had drooped like a newly-caged bird, forgetting to eat, to drink, and to sing. Only within the last few days had she pecked a crumb or two, shaken her wings, and cleared her throat in preparation for singing anew.

Arthur's presence worked miraculously. Her metaphysics no longer ran in the old groove. Strange, deep-lying questions of relation—Fate, the fitness and right of things, the wisdom of waiting—opened themselves to her. She must settle every one, and make theories as numberless as they were complete.

First and foremost, what effect would the circumstance of Arthur's presence in Bäbele's house have upon her own future?

The blue eyes dilated and danced at this stage of inquiry, like joyful waves that feel the sun. If she were a gentle little handmaid, perhaps Arthur's heart might soften to her after all. To go away with him—the thought escaped from her lips like a happy bird; but she silenced herself, crossed her hands on her bosom, and went on thinking.

To go away with him, with her papa—what a triumph over Bäbele! What a beginning of joys for herself! Minchen hardly remembered the minor advantages of such an event; the one glowing harvest appeared to her as in a dream. She bent forward and brought her round rose-bud face close to his pale, marble-like one. How beautiful he looked! How beautiful and unlike every one else in the world, at least in her world! The transparent complexion, the delicately-cut mouth, the proudly-arched nose, the great square brow, the massive white throat. Minchen gazed much as Haidee gazed on Juan — a new, strange, exquisite emotion thrilling her whole being the while. She compared him to the pale Christs of the altar-pieces in St. Stefan's, and to the drooping, thorn-crowned sculptures of the cemeteries. She wondered whither his life, his soul, his thinking, speaking self had flown; and once or twice she drew deep breaths as he stirred gently, fearing, yet dreading to see him rise up, as of old, the haughty, unfatherly Englishman.

It was strange, and herein lay one of the chiefest mysteries of Minchen's character, that she never once doubted her power of winning Arthur's love. If the contemplation of her tattered serge frock and coarse stockings sometimes recalled the fact of Arthur's exalted station, she consoled herself with thinking that he had a soul above serge and stockings—that he was generous, and would most probably rejoice at her poverty, thereby finding more opportunity of giving. Minchen was not, like the violinist, a simple-minded idealist. She loved money and all that money could bring. She perhaps loved Arthur with a different love because he was rich. What so pleasant as to be dressed in silks and jewellery, to ride in carriages, to play with little princesses, having a papa who could shake a magic wand at will?

Passionate, enthusiastic women, who have grown up like the wild flowers, chance-sown, are always Minchens in this—they have a double nature, part ideal, part practical, and the two, equal yet distinct, revolve round each other. They can love till life becomes concentrated in love; at the same time they can throw themselves into very matter-of-fact, realistic phases of existence. Whilst Minchen contemplated Arthur as the devotee contemplates the saint, the thought of his possible gifts was never wholly absent from her mind. Hanging over him, she took in every sign and suggestion of his gentlemanhood—the perfume of his hair, the fineness of his linen, the costly pattern of his gold chain—to her these were not merely distinctions, but attributes that made him doubly and trebly to be loved, that made his love of priceless and perilous worth.

CHAPTER IV.

BÄBELE brought home a quack doctor with her; a plump, parroty, lemon-complexioned Jew, who appeared in Minchen's eyes to be the very crown of Æsculapian wisdom. He compressed Arthur's wound with his dingy thumb and finger, made horrible, knowing grimaces over it, brought out pot after pot of unguent balsams; and, solely to humour Bäbele's superstitious nature, concluded by one or two cabalistic signs. Minchen longed to ask him when her papa would open his eyes, speak, recognise her, be enabled to run out and buy her fine clothes, but dared not. With the never-resting fancifulness of childhood, she amused herself with comparing him to the big, blackish-green parrot in the Imperial gardens of Schönbrunn. As he bent over Arthur, his long, narrow head, with its sleek raven locks and yellow face, and his round, sloping shoulders, clad in shiny green cloth, might well suggest such a comparison. His hands, too, partook of the nature of claws, being almost transparently thin, pointed, and having nails half an inch long,

It must be said that the Herr Doctor, as Bäbele called him, did his work quickly and well. He acted the part of nurse also, not only carrying Arthur into a small inner room, formerly tenanted by the violinist, but arranging his bed so as to give as much chance of comfort as was possible with slender means.

Minchen was despatched to keep watch, and accepted her office readily, though she kept her ears open to the dialogue going on in the outer room. She understood all that they said, and most of what they meant without saying. She knew that Arthur's hurt had come by foul means; she knew that there existed a great difference between Bäbele's doctor and Dr. Albin Zillner; she knew that Kurt must remain hidden for dear life, and that only through Arthur's mercifulness would Bäbele escape punishment. Lastly, she knew that Arthur was likely to be ill a long, very long time.

She chided herself for quailing so little before the last fact. She felt conscience-smitten, yet could not resist an unscrupulous craving for Arthur's love and the opportunity of winning it. He would be with her, near her—hers only, hers helplessly. The beautiful young lady, his wife, could not find him out and steal him away. She was safe, alike from Kurt's hatred and from Lisabee's love—both equally feared and equally formidable before. Some such emotion stirred the child's heart as stirs the heart of the young mother when anticipating the sweet, helpless love of her baby's first years. Nothing by any possibility can come between the two phases of feeling—the mother's outgiving devotion, the infant's blind dependence.

Minchen loved to think that she should tend Arthur with strength, lift his feeble hands, moisten his pale lips, raise and support his weary head. She hardly felt like a child—how could she, being hardly a child? and she considered herself in every relative aspect as a woman. Arthur's possible coldness, the numerous difficulties of an entrance into the world of princesses and silks, the probable triumphs and not improbable mortifications of it—all these were reviewed again and again, but never otherwise than as a woman would have reviewed them.

Again, the picture of her future life with him was always such a picture as a girl in love would paint. No one else, least of all the beautiful lady his wife, was to have part or lot in that unspeakably fair future. Every kiss, every caress, every low-voiced endearment was to be her own and her own only. She planned, not only a future of feeling and romance, but a future severely practical also. She was to choose his house, his carriage, his servants, his profession, his clothes even—to fulfil in every respect the post of little wife to him. He would procure for her barbers, lady's maids, milliners, till from their united labours she saw herself rising, Phœnix-like, a new, a lovelier, and a more loveable Minchen. It seemed impossible that all these outward attributes should not make her more loveable. Rosy silks, pearly feathers, embroidered shoes, lace mantillas—never was such a queen of the fairies as Minchen imagined herself about to be ere long.

Then the triumph over Bäbele! Bäbele had mocked, had threatened, had tormented. Could she, ought she allow her to go unpunished? She could, perhaps—for all children are magnanimous in their theoretic judgments—but decidedly she ought not to do so. The right balancing of the world depended upon Bäbele's condign punishment.

When she had been duly brought to submission, a few golden gifts might not be amiss, to prove the lofty generosity of her enemy and to humiliate her to the dust.

Minchen's dewy, gossamer dreams were suddenly snapped by the shrill whisper of Bäbele.

"Come out here," she said, "and creep as if you were walking barefoot on carving-knives."

"Well!" replied Minchen, distancing herself a few paces from Arthur's bedside, yet keeping Bäbele away. "Well!"

"I can't tell you there. Come out and stand close to me. If not, and you live to be as old as Methuselah, you'll never know."

Minchen obeyed, feeling such a secret to have some temptation about it. No sooner did Bäbele see a way cleared than she sprang cat-like to Arthur's side, bent low, and began emptying his pockets.

The child turned scarlet, and stood shaking with rage like a full-blown, large-headed poppy. Fear of disturbing Arthur alone prevented her from fighting Bäbele with such arms as Nature had provided her—teeth, nails, feet. Arthur lay ill, and his safety made Bäbele's.

Bäbele returned to the inner room, wearing a smile mixed up of self-satisfaction and offended innocence.

"It was well worth while your putting on such a look, Miss Make-mischief-out-of-nothing! Isn't your papa, as you call him—though I'm bound he's my papa quite as much as yours—isn't he to have a drop of wine every blessed second, besides brandy, to the cost of a florin, in less time than dumpling soup takes to boil thick? Feel in your pockets, and hand me the money, if you like—I'm willing enough to take it. Come, look sharp; kreutzers are no more use than potatoe peels—bank-notes or nothing?"

Minchen answered, with quiet dignity—

"Did his coat go for wine, and his hat for brandy, pray, Bäbele? Look me in the face and say Yes."

To her surprise Bäbele obeyed the summons fearlessly.

Minchen felt herself, as weigher of the world's justice, a little reproved. She put the question more meekly.

"I don't wish to offend you, Bäbele, but it puzzles me dreadfully to know where his hat and coat can be. He had such a beautiful coat on that day."

"Oh! of course he had—sky-blue satin, I dare say, with scarlet crocodiles embroidered on the flaps, and as many gold buttons dotted about as I say Paternosters in a day. Everything is beautiful belonging to MY PAPA. I expect his very indigestible organs are made of solid silver, and as to his having such common things as liver and lungs and such like, that's quite out of the question——"

"You're a vulgar woman, Bäbele, and I don't want to hear you talk so. Where is papa's coat?"

Bäbele looked at the child admiringly. She respected those who had no respect for her; she almost loved those who showed this disrespect opportunely.

"Well, as you are a good-meaning little lady at heart, spite of your alligatorish, obstreperous ways, I'll look about for the gentleman's coat."

"Papa's coat——"

"His as is called papa's coat, then, which was a beauty to be sure—dark coloured cloth, foreign-looking, and made without a seam behind——"

"Bäbele, you did see my papa yesterday, then, you naughty, naughty fibber."

For a moment Bäbele was somewhat disconcerted. Quickly rallying herself, she made answer in the gravest of voices—

"See him! I did, indeed, Minchen, and I shall never forget it as long as I live."

"Was he dying?"

"Why, he is alive now, child!"

"Did you see him when the knife was being driven into him, and he called out, and nobody, nobody could hear?" asked Minchen, shuddering.

Bäbele drew a solemn look by degrees over her features, as one draws a veil. When the solemnity had reached her chin, she said—

"I saw him, coat and hat and all, in a vision!"

Minchen seemed willing to drop the subject.

CHAPTER V.

MINCHEN seemed willing to drop the subject; not so Bäbele. She knew, with the keen intuition of the ignorant, that every additional evidence against Kurt Versette was advantageous to herself; that each shade of blackness imparted to his story made hers all the lighter; in fine, that Konrad's guilt was hourly becoming too evident and too striking to need the suspicion of accomplice.

She gloated over the disappearance of Arthur's habiliments, and over the conclusions to which such a fact led her.

Kurt had escaped, without doubt, hitherto by virtue of Arthur's dress and Arthur's passport. He might escape ultimately, but only so far as personal security went. His villany would outlaw him for ever, and his outlawry made her own glorification. In nursing Arthur devotedly, she entailed upon herself his everlasting gratitude—and florins. For not informing his friends, she could plead utter ignorance of his abode—of his name—of a hundred things.

Bäbele's glorification was well earned beforehand. Putting out of the question all circumstances, whether of birth, breeding, or temperament not bearing upon the subject, it must be confessed that she had to undergo a fiery ordeal. Towards evening, Arthur showed signs of incipient fever; the signs rapidly turned to diagnosis; before dawn he was wrestling and raving with the white heats of delirium.

Arthur's ravings were far less frightful than those of coarse, full-blooded, warm-tempered men. He showed even in his illness the stolid calm and gentle, nay, icy self-possession for which he was remarkable; but ignorant people are sure to confound fever with madness, and in Bäbele's eye he was mad. She trembled before madness as she trembled before lightning, hail-storms, evil prognostics, and Popes. Yet, tremble as she might, Arthur's madness must be faced by her alone.

Minchen, on the contrary, felt no fear. Why is it that children are never frightened and never surprised of their own accord? She watched Arthur's white working face and wild eyes with occasional fits of trembling, but the trembling came as summer winds to lissom boughs which are shaken unconsciously. When Bäbele retired every now and then to say a Paternoster or touch her crucifix, the child reproved her; it was wicked to be afraid of papa—her papa, who was a gentleman, and would hurt nobody.

To both Bäbele and Minchen the time was one of privation and painfulness. Bäbele had hardly time to eat or sleep; Minchen's appetite and capability for sleep must be satisfied somehow, and finding opportunities at odd times she slept on the floor like a kitten and bought wedges of black bread whenever she could lay hands on a kreutzer. The woman's health did not suffer because she lacked susceptibility; the child's, because her susceptibility was childish and at one with physical comfort. She saw no reason for starving though her papa lay so ill: as to sleep, it came without any reasoning beforehand.

The Herr Doctor and Bäbele were much better physicians than one might have supposed; but there was little need of professional knowledge. The art of healing cannot be better condensed than in two words, "Preserve life;" and in cases where such preservation depends upon the simplest rules of hygiene, the savage is almost as reliable as the skilfullest surgeon. Bäbele and her coadjutor administered the essentials of life diluted to their patient's capacity, and only withheld what nature rejected. Nothing is easier than to discover empirically upon how much or how little nature can support itself—nothing more difficult than to dictate to her.

In one thing Minchen thought herself superior to them both. The doctor and Bäbele turned a deaf ear to his oft-repeated, almost pitiful entreaty for water, only doling out drink to him as they thought fit. Minchen secreted one or two ten-kreutzer notes, value twopence-halfpenny each, with them purchased half a pint of sherbet on the Graben, and believed, ever after, that without sherbet Arthur must have died.

She worked other miracles also, making her little hands icy cold on the flagstones in order to cool his brow, lulling him to sleep by the lowest of lullabies, tempting him to swallow wine as one tempts babies. If throughout all these ministrations the thought of golden recompense—love, companionship, gifts—was uppermost, who can wonder?

Minchen loved as mortals love, not as the angels, and expected grand, brilliant blossoms for every seed she sowed. In her opinion, the love she gave was quite worth all that Arthur could give; had she loved less passionately, she might have been more humble. The deepest love is always proud and exacting.

It would be needless and painful to follow Arthur through the numerous stages of his illness—the first blank silence, the after nightmare of delirium, the torments of raging fever. He could hardly be said to have had any sensation during the four-and-twenty hours that followed Kurt's blow; or, if sensation at all, only such as admitted of pain. Memory, passion, the desire of action, home ties, the instinct of self-preservation—all these were effaced from his mind as completely as the picture-clouds of yesterday's sunset from to-day's sky. He did not feel; he was sensible of pain—pain essential, concentrated, acute.

This lasted till fever came on, and with the fever various phases of visual and mental illusion. At one time he had lost all the attributes of corporeity but that of vision. He was an entity, but an entity without body, hearing, voice; simply a living, wandering, conscious eye.

At another time he became the victim of his former love of calculation. From his boyhood, algebraic puzzles had delighted him, and now his bed, nay, his entire being, was assailed with figures and signs. Look whichever way he might, he saw nothing but angles—A's, B's, and X's, divisions and quotients were hissed into his ears; he fancied himself alternately a parallel ruler, a compass, or a T-square.

But the hallucinations of delirium are not subjects to dwell upon with pleasure. Arthur suffered no more and no less than most people whose brain-fever is brought on by sudden or long-silenced mental surexcitation.

After so much passive suffering, it is grateful and pleasant to hear of some faint claims being made upon life and all that is lovely in it. Versette's treachery had laid Arthur very low, yet not lower than the remorseless storm lays the strong-rooted larch-tree.

One morning an end came to Bäbele's machinations, and to Minchen's unspoken fairy-tales. Arthur looked for the first time like the Arthur they had before known ; tried to rise, to learn more than they could tell him, to possess himself of the strength lost so late and so utterly.

CHAPTER VI.

MINCHEN was the first to receive testimony of Arthur's returning consciousness. Looking at her, not as a gradually-recovered parent looks at his ministering child, rather as a heart-sick emigrant who should suddenly see some one able to tell him of home, he said—

"Does my wife know?"

Minchen shook her head and Bäbele dashed forward from the inner room. Arthur put his hand to his brow and stopped the cataract of explanation that he saw was ready to drench him. A few minutes of silent thought were sufficient to make all clear. He sighed heavily, closed his eyes, and seemed to relapse into his former state.

Bäbele left her household work and hovered around him with as much obsequiousness and dutiful attention as were possible to practise silently. Minchen sat still, feeling that the crisis of fate had come.

Two or three hours passed thus when Arthur again revived. He swallowed some warm soup that Bäbele had prepared, was strengthened by it sufficiently to raise himself a little and ask one or two questions.

Minchen held her breath to listen.

"How long have I been here?" was the first question.

Bäbele's answer, or rather volley of answers, was cut short by the sick man's impatient, almost agonized command—

"Fetch a carriage."

All the protestations and deprecations that Bäbele felt called upon to make, Minchen in no wise cared to hear. Neither did she listen to the condensed entreaties and promises that followed. Nothing contained interest for her that did not bear upon her own future, and as yet no reference had been made to it whatever.

By and by, Bäbele tied her embroidered head-kerchief beneath her chin and prepared to go out. The child's heart beat quickly. Was her papa really going away?

She sat by his bedside, looking simply a frightened, lovely child. No one, least of all Arthur, could have suspected all the expectant, passionate suspense underlying so pearly, peachy an exterior. Tears rested on her rounded roseate cheeks.

Who thinks more of children's tears than of clover dew?

When she dared to look up, Arthur was contemplating her. The manner of his contemplation, calm, unloving, pitying as it was, chilled her. She turned away her face, eyes and cheeks lit by a sudden emotion that was half shame and half despair.

Arthur motioned her to approach.

"What is your name, my poor child?" he murmured.

The child had laid one dimpled arm upon his pillow, and there resting her head, with all its wealth of dark hair, brought her ear close to his mouth. She rose now and looked at him earnestly, her eyes brimful of the bewilderment to which she dared not give utterance.

"What is your name?" he repeated.

"Minchen—Minna on the baptismal certificate, you know."

He paused to gather strength, and by and by went on slowly—

"Minchen, you are going away from this place. Are you glad or sorry for it?"

Her heart leapt joyfully as a fountain to meet the sunlight. But she answered mechanically—

"Glad."

"That is right. And now listen, and bear in mind what I say to you. You will never wear rags again, or play in the street with beggars' children, or go from day to day untaught. I shall place you in a nice school, where you will be cared for and instructed in what is needful and right. Say, will you respect my wishes, and forget, in so far as you can, the evil teachings of the past?"

He waited for an answer, but none came. Misconceiving her silence, he made himself plainer.

"Will you be a good child, Minchen?"

During the last few minutes she had been as completely and as bewilderingly lifted out of her ordinary existence as the aëronaut who doubts whether the next moment may prove an elevation into cloud-land or a death-plunge into the deep seas. She felt as if dark wings were folded over her eyes; fire seemed to tingle in her brain; an icy hand to still the beating of her heart. Arthur had so carefully kept their individualities apart, so directly put his affection out of the question, that she could but waver in dread.

He moved a little further from her, and added—

"Perhaps it is best to make no promises. I have nothing more to say to you, Minchen."

Minchen knew her sentence now. Trembling with a passion that Arthur might well mistake for wilfulness, she remained by his bedside with averted face, her wild hair thrown back, her feet beating the ground.

Arthur glancing at her, congratulated himself that this little lawless gipsy was provided for, and then ignored her presence altogether.

Minchen's heart had never before yearned so fondly for her father as now. She heard carriage wheels on the rough pavement below; she knew that he would soon be borne away from her, and for ever; she longed, nay, panted, to throw herself in his arms and ask a mite of love, yet dared not. A minute passed thus.

Then the carriage wheels stopped. Voices and footsteps sounded in the passage. A joyful look passed over Arthur's face. Minchen heard all, saw all, understood all. The door through which he passed to health, to freedom, to love, shut her from him utterly: and he was glad.

She sat quite still whilst he was lifted carefully into the carriage, and the driver and Bäbele occupied themselves with pillows and wraps. But when Bäbele drew back, and the driver mounted his seat, making a sudden movement forwards, she dashed past the woman towards the open street.

The carriage was yet within reach, and she reached it. Resolving to follow

Arthur to his home, and to clasp his knees with many promises of obedience and love, she clung to the pole, flushed, panting, reckless.

For a few minutes the task seemed a possible one. The driver did not urge his horses, and the street was almost empty. But soon came abrupt turnings, crowded pavements, wheels grating each other, policemen vociferating.

With the pertinacity of a woman and the courage of despair, she held on. Mud splashed into her eyes, blinding them, horses' feet bruised her own. Losing breath, she felt herself dragged a pace or two, when giddiness came and the merciful gendarme and ended all.

But not the anguish. Looking after the rapidly disappearing carriage with straining eyes, the child forgot her bleeding hands, her harsh reprovers, the beating of her poor sick heart, and uttered a wailing, wide-heard cry.

"Papa," she said—"papa, let me go with you; I must go with you, papa."

And the stern gendarmes laughed, and the gaily-dressed ladies plucked up their skirts and passed on, and the brilliant world of Vienna streets was but barely unhinged from its smooth-going.

Why not, indeed? What is a child's broken heart?

BOOK VII.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END.

“The rest is silence.”—Shakespeare.

CHAPTER I.

THE first snow had fallen in the corn-country, turning the pointed wheat-stacks into mosques of pure white, the bright green pastures into a crystal sea, sprinkling the plantations with fairy-like blossoms.

On the fallow lands and wide-spreading deserted sheepwalks, the air blew keen and sharp; but every farmstead formed a centre of warmth and cheery, sleepy life. Only to enter the stackyard was to be warmed with the smell of straw and hay; whilst the neat house, stable, and bullock-sheds teemed with the sweet, healthful, slow-drawn breath of animals.

The first snow brings novelty and pleasantness with it to master, man, and beast. Time is no longer priceless, since the short days suffice for sack-mending, chaff-cutting, stock-feeding, and such field-work as is possible. The horses feed slowly, as if aware that they will not be needed till the sun is due south, and the bullocks stare with the consequentialness of laziness, conscious of having no work at all. One misses the cluck and chatter of hens everywhere, for with the warmth-loving instincts of old women, they only leave their roost when called to feed; but the cocks strut about to see what is going on, and the guinea-fowls perch on barn-tops screaming and flapping their wings in unison.

Only the pigs experience no novelty whatever, unless an extra abusing. They are hardy and easy-going, and like hardy easy-going people, are put off with just what does for nobody else. When the horses are marshalled out to water, the little black and white colony is driven hither and thither; when the bullocks choose to have an airing, they slink aside as street boys before the Lord Mayor; they are even guarded off from the quotidian meal of the hens by wary sentinels.

All goes on much as usual elsewhere. The farmers drive to market a little brisker perhaps, and with warm mufflers round their shining red faces; but they loiter on the market-place as in July, and never finish their business before dusk.

William Plumtree's face shone with its

old lustre now. Great misfortunes that do not affect our small comforts are much less apparent to us than small ones that do. Had he been deprived of an acre belonging to his farm, the loss, though unimportant in itself, would have chafed him at every hour. He must alter his division of ploughed land, pasture, and root; he must calculate upon a relative difference between profits and capital; he must be constantly reminded of his former possession. But Lisabee's sorrow was not an inconvenient, ever-present sorrow. After the nine days of wonder and gossip and impertinent inquiry in the village, William Plumtree felt that he might hold up his head again. The sleepy corn-country folks soon forgot the story of Lisabee's desertion; and soon at church, fair, and market, no face reminded the father of having a dastard son-in-law. Seeing that other people passed over his trouble lightly, William was enabled to pass it over lightly also. Moreover, his home-life had suffered no change. The Plumtree sisters were gifted with that happy faculty of divining the legitimate boundaries of grief. They wept with Lisabee, but when they had wept with her, they rose up to fulfil the duties of the day. Their sorrow did not pass away, but it became bearable.

To William, then, the daily meals, the talks round the fire, and the church-going were precisely the same as of old. He remembered Arthur bitterly and wrathfully at times, but refrained from expressing his bitterness or wrath before his gentle daughters. They were alike victims and partizans, and herein they shared the common fate of women, loving, defending, suffering for the one who had brought them such sweet joy and such unspeakable loneliness.

It was twilight of the first wintry day, and William Plumtree, ever first on the premises at morning and last at eve, yet lingered among the farm buildings. He sniffed the air of the stables, tried the locks of the fowl-house, assured himself that the ploughman's lantern had dropped no spark upon the hay, and finding everything right, strolled into the road. This habit of strolling is constitutional with the agricultural class. Turn whichever way he will, a farmer feels certain of seeing something in which he takes interest, either crops, cattle, or corn, as the case may be. William could just discern the portly outline of his wheat-stacks, and the sight warmed him, brightened him. Beyond was a sight that warmed and brightened too—the parlour windows a-flame with firelight, and shadowed ever and anon by slight figures.

He hesitated before unlatching the garden gate, deriving satisfaction from the raw, wintry outdoor day past and the warm cheery, idle evening to come. Both seemed alike good and Heaven-sent, both daily toil and nightly rest constituted the passive but principal pleasures of his life.

He was aroused from his abstraction by a footstep sounding on the crisp road, a footstep so quick, sharp, and light that he felt assured it belonged to none of his own people. Suspecting, or rather recalling sheep-stealers and barn-thieves, he stopped short to obtain a near view of the stranger. The faint, albeit fixed light that hung on the snow-covered landscape only admitted of partial portrait-taking. William saw a light well-made figure, a pale beardless face, a gentlemanly habiliment, and no more. He put his fingers to the gate-latch, but a quick forward movement on the part of the stranger caused him to draw back. The gate clicked and William stood still.

"Don't you know me, sir?" said a voice bell-like clear, yet with a ripple of emotion in it, and Arthur, for it was he, held out both hands, too full of joyful expectancy to say more.

William seemed stunned as with a sharp blow. His hands dropped down.

"You! Mr. Leebridge!" he stammered.

Arthur showed sudden animation.

"Dear Mr. Plumtree, it is indeed no other than I, Arthur—Lisabee's husband, and now we shall all be happy again."

He held out his hands once more, only able to comprehend William's slow cordiality by assigning to him a mental paralysis from over-joy. The farmer still drew back. His face, figure, voice, were stiffened and hardened to the utmost as he echoed Arthur's words,—

"We shall all be happy again!"

"There is nothing the matter—she is well?" Arthur cried eagerly. "Let us go to her!"

He pushed past his father-in-law, and was about to open the gate, looking, oh, how gladly! towards the old farmhouse and the firelit window, and the shadow moving across it.

"Stop a bit, Mr. Leebridge!" interrupted William. "Just take your hand off the gate, will you?"

"For Heaven's sake, sir, tell me what you are driving at! You forget all that I have suffered. Let me go to my wife!"

"Your wife! Your wife! You may well call her so, Mr. Leebridge! When a man hides away from his creditors, and leaves his wife in foreign parts to shift for herself as she can, and never gives sign that he's alive for weeks and weeks—when a man does that, the less he troubles his wife the better. Lisabee's got a home here, and, by Heaven! I'll keep her in it out of harm's way. Don't stand there looking at me," exclaimed the old man with scarlet cheeks and bright eyes. "What I've said, I've said, and there's no need either for you or for me to say a word more. You shall have back your money safe and sound, and well would it have been had I summered you and wintered you before touching it."

"This is injustice, and, I can't help saying so, folly, sir. Give me at least five minutes in which to show you that my sufferings have equalled Lisabee's, that I have been a victim also."

"Folly or no folly, victim or no victim, you left Lisabee in Vienna to help herself as she could; and never, by my consent, shall she speak to you again. When I'm dead and gone she must please herself."

"No one has the right to divide us," said Arthur, quietly; "if you persist in judging me unheard, she will not——"

The farmer seemed struck by the last part of this speech. Perhaps he compared the single and married phases of Lisabee's life, the one so homely, so troubled with household cares, so unsuited to her, the other so unexpectedly bright, so free from old cares, so fraught with love and pleasantness.

"That may be," he answered, dropping a sigh after each slowly uttered word; "Lisabee has never been gainsaid yet, and she won't be now—by me. But my house is my own, if my daughter is not, and you shall never enter it again, though I have to keep watch before the door like a dog."

Arthur controlled his vexation by a great effort, and tried an easy, conciliatory manner.

"I assure you on my word of honour, sir, that I am innocent of any wrong towards my wife. Do believe me. Let us be friends as of old."

For answer he received a menacing wave of the hand only, and a low muttered reiteration of former words. The two men then separated, both sick at heart, inflamed with strong passions, and recoiling from the bitter enmity that they felt was to come. William entered the cheery farm-house: Arthur turned into the cold silence of the winter night.

Lisabee was alone when her father opened the parlour door opposite to her. She sat by the fire, her head bent forward, her hands crossed on her knees, her whole attitude that of sad, introspective thought.

Sitting thus, with the firelight gleaming on her hair and eyes—eyes too lovely and too sad for the ordinary story of woman's life—Lisabee looked unlike the Lisabee we first knew. The brow was just as white and smooth, the lips as full and red, the cheeks as velvety—yet all seemed changed, and all seemed better so changed.

William Plumtree understood this in his childlike way. He knew why Lisabee despaired no longer, but talked of summer-time and the hay-harvest; he saw her ofttimes busied over delicate needlework; and he felt, without any deep reflection on the matter, that his daughter's face wore a new, more tender, and more beautiful expression.

No wonder that he would fain have hid himself from her that night. His cheeks yet burned, and his pulses yet beat with rage and indignation. How could he talk and smile and eat as if nothing had happened? How could he conceal his secret from Lisabee? They were alone in the old-fashioned parlour. The north wind bore the leafless walnut boughs low against the window panes; Lisabee thought of the leaves that had turned sere, and shuddered.

"I wish we had shutters, father," she said, pettishly, "the winter seems to come in-doors. Would shutters cost *very* much?"

Just then a bright blaze showed the strange expression of her father's face. Quick as thought—divining happy issue from every form and fashion of change—she was in his arms—kissing the too slow lips, and the eyes that told their story unwillingly—sobbing rather than saying all the rash hope, the unconsidered joyful conclusion, the self-promised reward of her constant heart.

"Father, you have seen him!—" she cried; "you have seen him. . . . he has come back to me! . . ."

William put her away with the kindly meant roughness that simple people mistake for dignity; and, wiping away a tear, said in a strained, unnatural voice:—

"I've seen him, true enough, Lisabee, and for the last time as I hope."

"You did not send him away unheard?"

The girl's intent eyes, and tremulous, passionate voice, forced William to make a great attempt at self-control. Trembling a little, but firm on the whole, he stood his ground.

"Lisabee," he cried, "Mr. Leebridge is welcome to hearings from those who like to give 'em—he'll have none from me—you're his wife, more's the pity, and can follow him to Novy Scoshy, villain that he is, with none to say you nay, but I'll have no more of him, and so I tell you."

Lisabee sprang to the door and touched the handle.

"It is not fair of you to treat Arthur so, papa," she cried, with flaming cheeks and sparkling eyes. "At least let him defend himself."

"Defend himself, Lisabee? Defend himself? He'll do that well enough, and make black look white to innocent girls like you! Keep here, where you're safe, and live all your life like a widow rather than run into worse misery."

"He is my husband," she interrupted. "You might have recollected that when you turned him away from the door, father.

You might have let me see him—and we have been parted so long!"

The old man received her rebuke humbly. Her agitation conquered him, and he took up his hat, saying—

"It isn't too late to call him back, and I don't mind bad weather, you know."

"No, father. Arthur would not come so. Could he, ought he to come till his name is cleared from the stain on it, and everyone's heart gives its best welcome? For me it is different; I am his wife, and my heart has only one kind of welcome for my husband. Whether he can prove himself to be blameless or not, I go to him. Perhaps all will be made clear and smooth to-morrow—if not, good-bye."

She fell sobbing on her father's heart.

"Forgive, forgive," she cried; "I have

said more than was fitting to you out of my love for him. I know all that I owe to you. God bless you, father!"

"Lisabee, Lisabee, I never meant you to go. I love you better than he—I never forsook you in foreign parts. Oh, stay, dear, stay!"

But she broke from him lightly, as a blossom from its parent bough, and the farmhouse parlour seemed darkened on a sudden.

CHAPTER II.

ARTHUR did not follow his first impulse of returning to the town. Recollecting what intimacy existed between Lyddy Maple and her young ladies, he determined to seek her cottage, and from thence write to Lisabee.

Chafing with bitterest disappointment and mortification, he entered the lane, so leafy and Gainsborough-like in summer, so bleak and silent in winter, where their first kiss, their first troth, had been given many and many a month ago. He walked slowly, thinking of that happy, careless, youthful time, so real then, so like romance now, and of the strange, cruel circumstances that had come later. William Plumtree's conduct appeared simply ridiculous. That he, Arthur, should be regarded as faithless and a scoundrel, seemed not only beyond belief but beyond conception. Because he felt himself utterly incapable of treachery, he blamed others for their suspicion of it, forgetting the immeasurable distance dividing our real selves from the ideas that strangers form of us. Arthur could not regard William Plumtree in any other light but that of his father-in-law. Had he for one instant recalled the old man's simple nature, his ignorance of the world and its ways, his long-suffered wrongs, the harsh words just heard would have lost their sting. By what right did the farmer suspect or malign him? By what right did he turn him, like a beggar, from his door?

A voice in the distance, sweet, clear, and tremulous as the first love-note of unseen nightingale, stops the current of his hard thoughts and sets his heart beating wildly.

He stands still to listen. It comes nearer, the pathetic loving voice: it is so near now that his heart seems to stay its beatings from excess of suspense. Another moment and it dies away on his breast.

He holds her in his arms, the love of his later better life, the wife of his man's ambition. What matters the long parting, the nights of pain, the days of anguish? Joy is the child of sorrow as day is the child of darkness. Sweetest of all violets are those that blossom upon graves.

Arthur forgot how much he had before burned with impatience to say; Lisabee forgot the need of questioning him. In the first exquisite satisfaction of being together, conscious that each was to the other as if no parting had happened, all lesser feelings became secondary and voiceless. Lisabee took refuge in speaking of past, far-off happiness rather than of the more than happiness present with her.

"Do you remember this place?" she said, "the little pond, and the broken tree trailing in it, and the shadows of the leaves that we watched together? Arthur, I believe that we leave half ourselves in the places we love best, and often, oh, how often, I have come here and felt almost as if you were with me!"

Arthur outlived phases of life as other

men outlive the fashion of clothes, of custom, or of courtesy. He imagined that he grew wiser and more consequent every year, an hallucination that is hardly pleasing, since, in such cases, the world alters too slowly for us.

"My own," he replied, pointing his sentences with sweet kisses. "My own, we leave ourselves nowhere except in the hearts of those we love. I have been lonelier than a shipwrecked sailor on a deserted island. I should hardly have been so lonely had you died."

"And I too—except sometimes. Sometimes when I came here I felt as if you had already given me enough love to last the rest of my life, and lately . . . . lately. . . . ."

She locked her arms around his neck as

if ashamed to confess so much, laid her cheek on his, and whispered—

"God has been good and sent other consolations. Your loneliness has indeed been the worst."

"You never doubted me?" cried Arthur.

"Never, so help me God, Arthur, never."

Arthur put her from his arms and wrapped his warm travelling coat around her carefully; whilst he was thus occupied, she felt a large warm tear-drop fall on her forehead.

"Arthur, you are crying!" she said. "There is nothing worse to come? You will take me with you!"

"Crying, dearest? That is one of my little one's fancies. The hoar drops from the trees, and she thinks her husband is either a fool or a martyr. Oh! of course, Lisabee, I shall not take you with me. Who ever thought of such a thing?"

"Shall we go back to Vienna?" asked Lisabee, half fearfully.

"My dear, let us not talk of Vienna, or anything that is of Vienna. Let us go to Lyddy Maple's, never dreaming but that a new happy existence is to begin and end for us there. If such happy heart-prophecy prove false, what matter? Love is love and life is life all the world over. 'Twill be hard if we cannot find some Mamre in which to pitch our tents."

"And you will first make it up with papa?"

"There is nothing for me to make up, love. As soon as he sees fit to open his doors, I enter; none gladder to do so."

"Arthur, dear, do not be stern and proud with him; he is my father, and has been so good and kind to me through all this trouble. Remember how fond he used to be of you before——"

Arthur laughed bitterly.

"He might have proved me a blackguard first—then treated me as one——"

"Oh! Arthur, think of his simple, inexperienced life, and the strangeness of your absence——"

"Never mind," he interrupted. "To-night we are guests of Lyddy Maple, and inheritors of a kingdom few people dream of. Oh! love, love, let no one, not even your father, enter it but ourselves. The world is nothing, and Time is nothing, and vexation is nothing to us two till we have fully realized the joy of being again together.

Kiss me, and kiss me again, that I may feel assured you are here!"

"You have been ill, Arthur; just answer that one question, and I will ask no more," pleaded the little wife, withholding the kiss for payment.

"I have said, and shall I not be obeyed?" replied Arthur, playfully. "No question and no answer for awhile."

"And no kiss, then?"

Arthur revoked his decree—of course.

CHAPTER III.

THERE is a winter fair in Suffolk, which all well-to-do farmers attend. The so-called *afternoon* farmers, that is to say, the out-at-elbow, penny-wise-and-pound-foolish, stay away because they have no money to spend on bullocks or sheep; but those who make any pretence at farming high, take blank cheques and talk of their bargains for months afterwards.

William Plumtree had farmed high of late; and finding his wheat-stacks so plump and numerous, and his root-crops so plentiful, he determined to go to Winter Wyke Fair. Since Michaelmas, the very thought had made his cheek to shine and his old heart to beat quickly; since Midsummer, the expressed intention had furnished ample subject of discussion on every market. At last, Winter Wyke Fair was come, and with it pleasures and privileges inexpressible.

Could anything on earth have soothed the farmer's ruffled mood, this fair-going and stock-purchasing must have done it. He was about to establish himself as a great buyer in the eyes of all Suffolk. To what higher pinnacle of dignity might ambition reach?

But even so much prospective praise of the world—than which there is no sweeter praise—failed to smooth the angry tide of his feelings. He hardly knew whether to accuse himself or not. He certainly judged Arthur far less severely now—therein lay the kernel and pith of bitterness. Had he felt convinced of Arthur's villany, he would have been at peace with his conscience; and so long as we are at peace with our consciences, we never grieve extravagantly about the consciences of others.

Arthur's proved desertion of Lisabee could stand in no comparison with so minor a trouble as Arthur's contempt, yet the farmer found himself arraying fact after fact against his son-in-law. It is not for one moment possible that he deliberately wished for the proof of Arthur's guilt; nothing so humanly impossible, that he should wish for the proof of his own injustice and wrong-headedness.

The twenty miles' drive across country,—the wandering for hours amid superb bullocks and promising young sheep—the meeting friend, and kinsman, and dealer—lastly, the market dinner with its adjuncts of pipes and punch—drowned in some measure William's tormenting thoughts. But the bargaining, the talk, and the dinner must alike come to an end, and a long drive on a bleak afternoon is apt to clear one's mind. He drove home slowly, dreading to encounter Arthur, dreading to encounter Lisabee,—most of all dreading to find both absent. What he hoped for, pictured, and played with, was a natural and unexpected reconciliation. He longed to find Arthur and Lisabee sitting at the tea-table, to shake hands with them as if nothing had happened, to fall into old relations with no explanations or emotions whatever.

It was about five o'clock when he drove through the orchard-gate, half-fearful, half-hoping. There was no light in the keeping-room window, and he took it as a sign that Arthur and Lisabee had come, that tea awaited him in the best parlour, that very little if any apology or ceremony would ensue; finally, that all things were set straight. Having alighted at the gig-house door, he walked bravely towards the house, gave a friendly nod to the milkers as they passed him, and clattered along the passage in his heavy boots to let the girls know of his early return.

To his surprise, the best parlour, as well as the keeping-room, was cold and dark and empty. He dashed into the kitchen with a scared look and a voice of intense expectation.

"Where are the young ladies?" he asked of Betty, the dairymaid.

Betty was one of those independent, free-and-easy young women, of ponderous exterior, who are considered treasures in the corn-country, never shirking work, paddling cheerily through wet litter to the neat-house on raw winter mornings; able to make and eat Suffolk cheese; able to keep in awe the back-kitchen boy, and the pig-keeping boy, and the odd boy.

She turned a half-shut, sleepy eye on her master, and jerked out—

"The young ladies? To the best o' moy knowledge they cut owt about as good as an hour ago, and neither futher nor bone on 'em ha' I set oyes on since. Gone hinway, 'haps."

"Hinway" means "hinder;" hinder

means the opposite to yonder; and the yonder of Sycamore Farm lay towards the town, the hinder towards Lyddy Maple's. William understood her at once.

"Did the young ladies say when they should be home?" he asked.

"Not as I heerd on; but they says afore starting: 'Pa won't be home afore seven, and mind and keeps the water biling, Betty.' 'All right,' says I, and they set off jist arter it snew huddest."

The farmer's heart sank within him. True that his daughters had no reason to expect him home sooner; true that there was not the slightest shadow of undutifulness or rebellion in their visit to Arthur and his wife; he felt himself nevertheless tacitly reproved. How could Greta and her sister approve of the part he had taken, when taking a directly opposite one themselves? How could Arthur receive their welcome without condemning his rebuff?

Betty busied herself with the half-extinguished fire and the preparations for tea, talking garrulously; but he took no notice either of her movements or of her monologue, and sat down, thinking deeply. After some minutes a decision took possession of his mind. He seized his umbrella, leaned on it as on a staff, and walked briskly in the direction implied by Betty's "hinder."

The night was dark, except for the reflection of the snow. A red spark gleamed far off like a beacon-light across a dead sea, and William knew from whence it came. His fancy drew upon that meagre source, till every chamber of his heart became garlanded with wreaths and banners—till every change and circumstance of his life was endued with dignity and sweetness. He saw himself seated between Arthur and Lisabee, listening to the strange adventures of the one, to the loving interruptions of the other, alternately questioning and smiling, made much of, an authority on all subjects, at peace with the memory of yesterday. He saw further also. He imagined the delightfulness of setting Arthur again on his high pedestal in the eyes of the world, the triumph of recalling an old painful story for the sake of its good ending, the interminable honours and praises of future prosperity.

He walked slowly, as old men do; his umbrella marking time on the rugged road, his shoulders bent, his eyes looking down.

When the cottage was reached—how near yet how far it had seemed that night!—a vague timidity thrilled the farmer's heart. Whilst longing for a reconciliation with his son-in-law, he yet dreaded lest he should humiliate himself by proffering it. He hoped, with childish eagerness and childish reliance upon chance, that the events and passion of yesterday would appear utterly forgotten, and that consequently no reconciliation might be needed.

Moving with as much noiselessness as was possible to him, he leaned his face close against the fire-lit window. The picture before his eyes matched very nearly with the picture just formed in his mind; yet he drew back and breathed hard before gazing a second time.

Arthur looked like the Arthur of first

acquaintance. His cheeks were pale and his whole frame wasted by illness; but the happy confidence of returning robustness and the satisfaction of having Lisabee closer than ever to his heart, made amends for lost strength. He wore his half-grave, half-playful smile; he frowned, as was his wont, at such propositions as had more of womanliness than of likelihood in them, scolded, praised, twitted his wife and sisters alternately, talked little, but suggesting much.

Lisabee's face was bright with the best though not first brightness of womanhood. Arthur was no longer her lover merely, but her husband, her unborn darling's father, her protector and life-hero. All his rights and wrongs, all his losses and perplexities, were doubly and trebly her own; and she felt ready to embrace any kind of life that he should find profitable and pleasant. The three girls, grave Greta, golden-haired Cissy, and dark, dove-eyed Mabel, listened, laughed, and wept with new lively enthusiasm. Never had Arthur been so entirely their hero as now; never had he seemed so unlike every one else or so admirable in that unlikeness.

William watched and waited.

He marked the sparkling animation of Arthur's pale face; the absorbed, happy looks that hung on his words. He marked also the wine-glasses and foreign confectionary with which the table was laden, showing how Arthur cared to treat the women dearest to him as children, never to be too much petted. All this the old man saw wistfully, longing for the light and warmth and sweetmeats, the smiles, the talk, the confidence. Once, twice, he raised his finger to the latch; but a dread of intruding, of breaking up the pleasantness, of causing silence and stiffness, restrained him With his finger on the latch, he listened.

Arthur was speaking in a gay, smooth, full-flowing voice, a voice that reminded you of an abounding river dashing towards rich ports.

"Put the elements of my story together," he said, "and what a strange, weïrd, inconceivable picture! The squalid, windowless room, the superstitious, smooth-faced, evil-tongued woman, Bäbele; the sleek, bird-like, black Jew-doctor; the lovely, large-eyed child——"

"What child?" asked Lisabee.

"No matter now. A beautiful but gipsy-like little woman, with wonderful eyes and wild hair. Then their patient, myself. Picture me lying on a sick-bed, looking lifeless, or rather animated with a life more awful than the absence of it, raging, fiendish, mad, in fact; and conscious, though apparently conscious of nothing, that no one was near whose presence had wholesomeness for me——"

"My poor boy!" cried Lisabee after a long, shuddering breath. "If father could only hear this, how sorry he would be!"

Arthur's voice became stern in a moment.

"He would not believe it," he said, quickly and coldly.

William dropped the latch lightly and stole down the garden path. He could not walk quickly at the best of times; but, what with the business and fatigue of the day, his pace was a mere shuffle now. When he had left the cottage some few hundred yards behind him, he stopped and wiped his eyes slowly on his coat-sleeve. Then he trudged home wearily through the snow, not blaming Arthur for his sternness, not blaming his children for their adherence to him; blaming his own hasty and ill-judged conduct only.

His heart sickened with disappointment and misgiving. He imagined that Lisabee, like Arthur, would grow cold and unforgiving; that one of his children, the youngest, the fairest, the dearest, was lost to him for ever.

He could not bear the thought of encountering Lisabee's sisters: they must naturally, even if silently, culpate him; they must, however gently, show their disapprobation of his conduct. And Arthur's dislike, distrust, contempt—all seemed inevitable now.

Never was a sadder, fuller heart than William Plumtree's, as he walked back to his empty home on the night of Winter Wyke Fair.

CHAPTER IV.

IT was arranged at Lyddy Maple's that Arthur, accompanied by his wife and her two younger sisters, should go to London next day. Arthur said jestingly, though with underlying earnestness, how necessary it was to send Carl straightway to Vienna, to discover the best and the worst sides of the story, to know really whether Lisabee's wedding-ring and his own breast-pin must go to the Jews or not. He added—

"Mabel shall go in order to see Carl, of course, and Cissy to see London. Greta, who voluntarily stays at home, shall receive, as children say, a Silver New-nothing to hang by her side."

The untravelled country girls blushed and brightened with pleasure. Greta tried to exact a promise that Arthur should bring her no gifts. Lisabee wanted to know if all her belongings must be packed. Arthur negatived the idea of any but the smallest viaticum; saying that they should return to Sycamore Farm, rather to Nettlested, in two days.

"Why not to Sycamore Farm, as you first said?" Lisabee asked, persistently. "Of course, you and father must be friends again, Arthur. He is old and you are young—it is your place to hold out your hand first——"

Arthur frowned, and she stopped suddenly, with heightened colour.

"Dearest," she said, "you will do this for my sake, will you not? Out of love for me, your Lisabee, you will do it?"

He softened, but made no promise.

To-morrow, the next day, a week hence would be time enough to think of that, he said. Let this second and sweeter honeymoon have no vexations of such kind: she must remember that he had numerous other vexations, not so easy to be put in the distance.

Lisabee, like a true woman, never forgot to be partizan of her family, however closely she became her husband's. Clinging to him, with alternate coaxings of tears and kisses, she repeated alike her entreaty and her opinion.

"You do not see, Arthur," she added, "how much discomfort even so small a difference may create at home. Think of poor Greta and the countless excuses she will have to make——"

"Let her tell the truth," said Arthur, bluntly.

"But poor papa did not mean what he said; or, if he did, imagined that he had the best of reasons for saying so. Oh, Arthur! you are so different to father. You are experienced in the world, and self-possessed always; he is shy, simple, and timorous. For you it would be the easiest thing possible to say a word setting all right; but for him how difficult! You will say this word, Arthur?"

"Lisabee," Arthur answered, with the air of one forced into sternness against his will, "a man can but act up to his own idea of right in small things as well as in great. I endeavour so to do always, and out of my love, rather than in spite of my love for you, I refuse to burden you with my conscience——"

"But, darling, if papa should die before any reconciliation is made?"

"I should at least have done him no injury," Arthur said, with bitter point, and the subject was dropped. Cissy and Mabel slept at the cottage to be in readiness for the early departure, and Arthur accompanied Greta home, leaving her outside the door.

Greta, finding that her father had already gone to bed, retired also, sleeping as people always sleep who rejoice vicariously. Over-joy on our own account keeps us more wakeful than sorrow.

She awoke next morning to a strange experience.

Everyone knows how hard and unreal the first loss of some daily habitude seems to us: the habitude may have been trivial, hardly of an enjoyable nature, perhaps in no sense to be regretted. Yet we regret it. But when the habitude is a characteristic of some loved one, how doubly hard, how doubly unreal, the loss of it becomes! We feel to have suddenly new-made graves around us; to be dwellers in unknown, unwelcome homes; to rest ill-content, finding pleasantness nowhere.

Greta from babyhood had known no other *réveille* than that of her father's voice calling the hens to peck. Coop-a-coop, a-coop-a-coop-a-coop—coop—for upwards of twenty years, this cry, commencing in a stentorian bass of command, ending in a gentle pianissimo of entreaty, had awakened her to summer balminess and to winter snows.

And missing for the first time in her life the familiar sound to-day, Greta rose nervous and trembling. She dressed quickly by the dusky light, pausing every now and then to listen for her father's step and voice below. But the house was quiet, save for the clattering of Betty's pattens on the dairy bricks, and the sharp, loud click of the kitchen clock. Greta trembled as she found herself on the threshold of her father's bedroom. Should she see the dear white head laid low by illness, the rosy cheeks blanched, the bent but lusty form prone and helpless?

Greta turned pale when she beheld her father lying rigid as an old tree struck down by sudden storm, and the word "paralysis" escaped her lips; but it was no wholly new terror that possessed her. She felt sure from the first that some dire mischance alone had prevented him from calling the hens to feed; and what mischance can be called dire, but disease and bodily miseries of those we love?

She acted wisely and promptly; sent for the family doctor, and Lyddy, the family nurse, wrote to Lisabee and Arthur, arranged the daily house affairs; then shut herself up with her father. Lyddy alone must be allowed to share the privilege of nursing.

The privilege of nursing! Some may think there is scant privilege in broken rest, in breathing the atmosphere of physic and pain, in being led by weak, faint hands to the very threshold of the dark, silent Unknown; in quitting (perhaps never to return the same again) the bright, flower-grown, happy places of life. But for such pain and sacrifice, what holy and unspeakable guerdon is won! If we have climbed the Calvary, we have also caught glimpses of the Glory. If we have lost some youth, some freshness of feeling, and some capability of common happiness, we have gained a hundred, nay, a thousand-fold, in the strength that is begotten of sorrow, in the capability of happiness heaven-born, not earthly; in the attainment of a peace, never again to be too painfully disturbed.

And what inestimable treasures of love and memory remain to us! We have seen the receding tide of a precious life, with childish wonder that sunset should be so radiant. The tide goes out slowly. By and by, the skies are grey and cold, the sands are bare, and were we monarchs twice as potent as the great King of the Purple East, or the God-crowned Christ-named Solomon, we could not call a wave back again. Well for us to have gained a waif or stray of tide so wistfully watched! Woe for us to have missed such watching! There are no balms, no more happy heart-prophecies, no more youth, for those whose beloved ones have died far off and beyond reach of love. The day breaks, but without Auroras. Winter goes; the Spring comes never. Only high and unutterable consolations reach such heart-solitudes.

Towards evening William returned to partial consciousness; tried to rise and dress himself; asked if the clock had stopped, if the dairymaids were up, if any one had fed the hens.

"Why are you up so early, Greta?" he asked. "It is not light yet. You had better go back to bed, my dear."

"It is night, not morning, papa. You are ill, and have not been up to-day. You forget."

"I went to the fair the day before yesterday——"

"Yesterday, father."

"No; the day before yesterday, you know; because yesterday I was ill. I am better now, and, if it were not for the strange feeling in my left side, I could get up and feed the pigs. Do call up the maids, Greta, then you can go back to bed till it grows light; but if they are behind milking time, it is so bad for the cows. Will the doctor come to-day?"

"No; to-morrow, I think, papa."

"Why not to-day? Send for him, Greta; don't let me go a whole day without medicine. And I want some eye-water, too; my left eye won't open properly, never has opened properly since the day before yesterday. Look at it when it grows light; you can't see now. And when little Lisabee and the others have had their breakfast, send them to me."

Greta dwelt no more upon his misconception of time; but sat quietly, a little removed from him, hoping, praying for sleep. None came. William grew more and more restless as night wore on; flitting, bird-like, from subject to subject, he tortured Greta's ingenuity by such exclamations as these—

"Do go and wake the maids, Greta. I'll pay off every one of 'em, for taking such advantage of my illness. And just see if the pigs are let out. Why doesn't Lisabee get up?"

At last he said, in a collected tone—

"Greta, dear, don't tell Arthur that I asked him to come; but he may see me if he likes."

"Yes, papa."

"He's quite a gentleman, my dear, isn't he?" he added, after a little pause; "and very fond of Lisabee, don't you think?"

"Indeed I do, father dear."

Another pause; this time mixed with painfulness.

"Arthur will never like me again, I don't suppose, do you? Go and tell him he may come; he must have finished breakfast by this time. Did you give him new milk, my dear? He is so fond of it. But go and call him."

"Arthur is gone to London," Greta said, simply; "he will return most likely to-morrow; and Lisabee, Cissy, and Mabel are gone with him."

A low, unsatisfactory moan.

"Did they go knowing I was ill?"

"Oh no, papa."

"But Arthur should have come to see me first, anyhow. It wasn't right of him to leave Nettlested so, Greta."

Greta, who was a very determined little person, seeing the practical right and wrong of most things clearly enough, said,—

"It was not right, father, and Arthur should have known better."

"Never mind, never mind!" replied the old man, suddenly becoming Arthur's champion; "he's quite a gentleman, and so fond of poor little Lisabee, my dear; what matters it how he behaves to *me?*"

"It matters a great deal, papa, and——"

William pretended to grow angry, though inwardly pleased.

"Well, I'll see him when he likes to come, Greta; and do go and wake the maids."

CHAPTER V.

IN these white-heat ultra-inquiry days, when one must perforce dream with a Renan or reason with a Colenso—when every freedom-loving mind is as an arrow-shaft driven into the rhinoceros-hide of superstition, it would be worth while to consider the Bible simply and solely as a civilization. Take, for example, such a life as that of William Plumtree. For him, Rome with its world-sounding clarion-voiced triumphs of war, Athens, with its glistening marble Academe streaming with the silvery voice of Pantheistic philosophy, were as nothing. For him, Shakespeare was but a name; Haroun-al-Raschid, Raphael, and Goethe not even so much; yet the simple mind of the Suffolk farmer had garnered some grand imaginations, not a few sublimities, even divers echoes from the unseen land of poetry.

Whence came thoughts and images so above and apart from his coarse, common life? On what shore had he picked up a shell so full of sweet marvellous murmur?

He had read the Bible.

Devoted to unsparing bodily labour; influenced by a boorish society; surrounded by dull, clayey, beclodded souls, his life was yet occasionally irradiated and made sublime, and that without any teachings of art, or science, or literature. How could it be otherwise?

The miraculous Ark reigning supreme over a cataclysmal world, the clang and crash and million-voiced shriek of Pharaoh's drowning host; the silver trumpet that proclaimed Jehovah's victories; the Tabernacle curtained with twined linen, blue and purple and scarlet; the altar of carved shittim-wood, and the priestly robe with broidered hem, golden bell, and pomegranate; the gorgeous ceremonies and triumphs in the wilderness; the tears that dropped from Ruth's sweet eyes on the feet of her kinsman; the splendid sinful life of David; the grand thunders of Isaiah; the lonely, sorrowful pastoral of Nazareth; the Apocalyptic vision of a New Jerusalem with jewelled light and jasper walls, with gates of pearl and golden pavements—all these were as a second life—a new, a brighter, and an unknown world to William Plumtree. He possessed the reverential faculty strongly—the faculty of appreciating beauty in no small degree;

witness his admiring love of a beautiful wife and her children. No wonder that he clung to what other and outlying Beautiful lay within reach. No wonder that he turned to his Bible less for such moral guidance as the clergyman taught him to seek, than for such intellectual enjoyment and elevation as his own nature taught him to need. He was stricken now, and stricken, as he felt, to death. The doctor, a polished, atheistical, learned man of the world, told him to talk no nonsense, and swallow his draughts like a good fellow. Greta begged him to be calm and try remedies for her sake and that of her sisters. He heeded neither; excited himself by long quotations from the Apocalypse or Prophecies, and grew more and more wrapt in the miraculous history so familiar to him from childhood.

And it was astonishing how much simple

dignity this culture threw over the old man's sickness. Without it, nothing could have been more common, more barrenly human, more devoid of any elevating influence, than the homely patient, the homely illness, and the homely surroundings. Always excepting his Bible and his daughters, William Plumtree's life had as much as was possible of common clay in it—the two purer elements sublimated all.

He was possessed with a strange certainty of his approaching death. No matter the doctor's declarations, almost oaths, to the contrary, he remained steadfast. Like Hezekiah, he was sick unto death, and unlike Hezekiah, his disorder could not be removed and his life lengthened by a prayer and a plaister of boiled figs.

"Greta," he said, on the afternoon that

Arthur and Lisabee were expected home, "why won't you let them bid me good-bye? I tell you I'm dying; I've told you so a dozen times, and you pay no heed. Do send for Arthur and my poor little Lisabee, Greta. And Mabel, too, won't come near me."

Poor Greta longed for evening that her excuses and devices might end. She felt easy on the score of her father's state, trusting on good grounds to the doctor's judgment rather than his own, but she did feel lonely, anxious, and too much burdened with responsibility whilst her younger sisters were taking pleasure.

Evening came. Greta's heart beat as she heard the distant rumble of gig-wheels, and by and by the sound of mingled voices. She durst not notice either fact to the sick man—durst not descend even, but sat trembling with alternate hope and misgiving.

Steps sounded on the stairs—but light woman's steps: not the firm, resounding tread of a man who claimed the ground as Arthur always seemed to do. Greta felt sure that he had not come.

Lisabee was the first to enter, Cissy and Mabel peeping over her shoulder with wet, wondering eyes. Greta put her finger on her lip to deprecate all show of emotion, and the elder girls fell back.

Lisabee stole to the bedside, and laid her fresh, wild-rose cheek against the old man's flushed one. She did not speak, but murmured incoherently and lovingly over him, like a cooing dove.

"Is it my little Lisabee?" asked the farmer.

"You should have come back before, dear; I'm dying, you know, and you can see London at any time. Where's Arthur?"

"Arthur was obliged to stay," began Lisabee; "he desired his love to you, and he will be home in three or four days——"

A childlike sob interrupted her.

"A few days! Oh! Lisabee, you don't know what you're saying! A few days to a dying man! I thought he would come! I almost heard his voice, and now we shall never, never meet again in this world!"

His white head sunk upon the pillow. He fumbled helplessly for his handkerchief.

"Dear papa," said Lisabee, caressingly, "you will indeed see Arthur again! But he could not come to-day because of an appointment that he has heard of—such a good appointment, father; and he is one of eleven picked candidates from whom will be selected by vote——"

"How much does it cost to come from Vienna?" asked William, wanderingly.

"He is not in Vienna, but in London, father."

"Then he stayed away because I angered him. Oh! my dear, I didn't mean all that I said, and I want so to tell him! What did you say it costs to come from Vienna?"

"About ten pounds, papa; but Arthur——"

"Lisabee, listen you here. I don't want Arthur to spend his money about coming to see me. I shouldn't like him to do it, though he's well off, and never grudges money. But I must see him afore I die, and my time is short, dear."

He drew a small canvas bag from under his pillow, and opened it with trembling fingers.

"I've got a five-pound note here that I came by unexpected like, Lisabee, and I want you to send it to Arthur. You remember the great storm we had last spring, don't you? Well, the landlord gave me the timber that fell down, and it 'mounted to five pounds. The note is a green-backed one, signed Amos Dawson. Give me my spectacles."

The spectacles were found, and the identical note also. He smoothed it out gingerly, looked at it with almost a wild smile of self-congratulation, finally, folded Lisabee's fingers over it.

"There," he said, "now go to breakfast, and as soon as ever you've done, walk to the post and send off your letter. Let Cissy and Mabel come now."

Greta followed Lisabee into the passage.

"Oh, darling?" she cried, "Arthur should have come. Papa will never rest till he sees him."

"But, Greta," the young wife pleaded, "you do not yet know what great interests Arthur has at stake. A chief engineer is about to be elected for a new line of railway; the salary will be high, and the post a most desirable one. It was only natural that Arthur should enter his name on the list of candidates and await the election, especially as papa is not considered to be in danger.

"When will the nomination take place?"

"A week from to-day. Oh, Greta, what is a week!—and as papa fancies that Arthur is in Vienna, we can easily excuse his delay. Dear Greta, do look cheerful; papa will get better; Arthur and I shall not be beggars after all; and everything promises fair for us."

Greta did not succeed in her endeavours at looking cheerful. For Lisabee the task was easier. Not that she loved her father one iota less than her elder sister, but she had a husband to be proud of, a baby coming by and by, new and bright prospects rising upon her horizon on every side.

Greta, like most older unmarried sisters, felt the whole weight of the old home cares upon her own shoulders. Mabel had Carl, Cissy a bright face to win Carls yet unknown: for herself, there were vicarious joys and sorrows only. She knew nothing of Social Science Meetings, of Female Medical Societies, or, as an American lady writes, of "throwing her soul into the arms of the Infinite." She simply sighed after some love and sympathy, and submitted to the need of them.

CHAPTER VI.

WILLIAM PLUMTREE was dying on the day of Arthur's expected nomination. Despite the doctor's dictum, the sick man had proved to be a true prophet, and drew nearer and nearer to the land from whence we have no message-bearing birds of passage. The week had passed without any increase of hope or forebodings of evil. The sisters had grown daily more reconciled to the prospect of a long-continued fretting illness. Lisabee had written cheerfully to Arthur, begging him not to overwork himself in preparing for the election, begging him to get elected, returning in every way to her old playful manner. He was to come home a director of the X—— railway, to bring her a silk dress, papa a dozen of crusted port, Lyddy a smart new cap. On the evening of the sixth day, a sudden change came; on the morning of the seventh, the farmer lay dying.

Nothing could be more characteristic than the old man's manner of meeting his end. He respected Death as he respected Church and State, the Holy Sacrament, and all revered institutions. He prepared to pay his last debt as he would have prepared to pay his rent or tithe, not grudgingly, but with a certain homely solemnity, and a certain meek egotism. He no more feared to die than he had before feared darkness or thunder or disease. To him it was sad, but not hard, that life and its daily round of labours and joys was so soon to end. Death came to him as unwelcome sleep to an obedient child, who would fain sit up a while and pretends not to be weary. The thought of his place in life being filled by another; his beloved fields blooming into fruitfulness at another's will; his old pony learning to know a new master; his day-labourers bearing his tired frame to its resting-place by Elgitha's side—all these reflections seemed natural and without dread.

And as his strength waned, he talked less wistfully of the old haunts and old habits.

"I should like to have seen the beet clamped up and the wheat ripe in the home-fields once more," he would say, "and the bullocks will soon be looking beautiful after all that oil-cake; but some one else will have the selling of 'em, I shan't,—and it's a long time till the fair."

But except such speeches as these, and an occasional longing glance at the stack-yard and turnip field visible from his window, Arthur's absence, and Biblical magnificence, formed the central subjects of his thoughts and conversation.

"I knew I was dying, but you wouldn't believe me," he wailed, querulously, "and Arthur was too angry to come. Oh! Arthur, Arthur, what did an old man's rebuke matter to a gentleman like you? I did not mean it, dear Arthur, indeed I did not; but I'm dying, and if you don't come now it will be too late."

His mind would ramble from idea to idea, always fastening upon this uppermost one—he was dying, and Arthur was away of his own will.

Lisabee prepared a hasty telegram for her husband. "Father is dying—come without delay," was all that she needed to write, but the writing had to be done over and over again on account of her blotting tears. At last a fair copy lay before her, and she sought Lyddy's son Ebenezer for her messenger.

But no telegram was needed. Hardly had Ebby saddled his master's old pony and donned his Sunday velveteen, when a carriage drove quickly towards the orchard gate, and Arthur alighted. Lisabee stood at the window watching for the departure of Ebby. On seeing her husband she forgot that other reasons than her father's illness might have brought Arthur back; she forgot the nomination and all that depended on it, and rushed to his arms, sobbing out her sad story. She never noticed Arthur's worn look or weary listlessness of voice. She only thought of the dying bed he had come to cheer.

"You will come to him at once?" she said, eagerly. "Oh! if you only knew how he has hungered and thirsted for the sight of you. Be very gentle, Arthur dear, for he is dying."

Arthur caught up her words with a bitterness unusual to him.

"My dearest, am I so unmannerly generally that you should caution me thus? Never think, Lisabee, that I shall forget my own share of wrong."

And the young husband and wife entered the sick-room together, but yet in some sense apart. Lisabee felt aggrieved at Arthur's unjust harshness, Arthur chafed at Lisabee's want of faith in him.

She motioned him to fall back and crept to the old man's side. Leaning over him, with one hand fondly caressing his white head, she whispered—"Father, dear, Arthur has come to see you."

William started up in his bed with superhuman strength. His cheeks flushed, his blue eyes lit, his waning, wandering soul seemed to gather its light suddenly to a focus and illumine his wasted body, as a wax-light placed in a slender alabaster vase. Glancing half doubtingly, half wildly to the right and left, he repeated Lisabee's words in the old, strong, sonorous voice that had called the hens to bed—

"Arthur has come—Arthur has come!

Why isn't he upstairs? I am dying, you know, dear; he mustn't wait."

Arthur came forward. Lisabee slipped from the room,. weeping bitterly. The old man and his son-in-law were left alone.

Calm, almost cold, as he had been a moment before, Arthur's composure forsook him utterly now. He was a man of strong nerves, able to look on many things unflinchingly that are dreaded by most. Capital punishment, a field of battle, noisome diseases, duels, and hospital experiments—all these had come within the range of his experience. But never before could he have owned to the weakness of a woman in her weakest moments. Tears were in his chest, his throat, his eyes. He tried to speak, but found no utterance.

William did not see this, and mistook

his silence for pride. He clasped the white, slender hand held out to him in both his brown ones, and said, eagerly—

"I thought Lisabee's letter had not been directed right, and that you would not get here in time. Did it come safely?"

Arthur bowed his head in affirmation. The old man paused for a moment expectantly. He hoped for some acknowledgment of the five pounds, some small thanks for so regal a gift. None came, and he added, blushing—

"I hope you weren't offended at my wishing to pay half your journey, Arthur. Travelling from foreign parts is so expensive, and I didn't like you to be out of pocket on my account."

Again Arthur moved his head. He would fain have been tender and soothing and kind, but knew not how. William went on a little disappointedly—

"I wanted to see you, Arthur, because I said what I hadn't the right to say that night you came back. I don't quite understand everything yet, my memory gets bad, but I know you're a true husband to my little Lisabee, and I ask your pardon."

Arthur tried to stop him, but in vain. With sparkling eyes and rosy cheeks he continued—

"I did mean to ask your pardon that night of the fair, Winter Wyke fair, ... - and I walked to Lyddy's cottage and wanted to go in and sit down with you and the little ladies. . . . but somehow I felt as if I wasn't wanted and stayed outside . . . . the cold seemed to strike me to the very bones, and the fire looked so warm and cheery-like . . . . wasn't I a fool, Arthur, to be afraid of you?" . . .

He looked up with a pitiful, wistful, loving smile, still unable to see Arthur's tears by reason of his own, and added—

"But you're come home, and it's all right, and I shall never wait about in the cold again. There is no night there, Arthur; no more sighing, no more tears."

Arthur did not feel ashamed of crying now. Pressing the old man's hand, he exclaimed, with a sudden burst of tenderness, the sweeter because so rare—

"Oh, sir, there would be less tears for us if *you* could stay a little longer; we need you so much, your little ones and I."

William's face beamed with an exquisite emotion. To him, Arthur's tears were bounties beyond royal smiles or the approbation of wise men. He could hardly realize the fact of being honoured and praised with the honour and praise dearest to his heart, and he felt that life had no more to yield him. Laying his wet, wasted cheeks on the young man's hand, he sobbed quietly till the excess of joy was past. Then he said in a feeble voice, though with deep underlying fervency—

"I am quite easy in my mind about my children, Arthur, especially Lisabee. You will be a good husband to her."

"I would only wish to prove as good a husband as you have proved a father; and by the help of Heaven so I will," said Arthur, earnestly.

"Are you going back to Vienna soon, dear Arthur?"

"Never that I know of, sir. I hope to live in England, near my sisters, to help them if I can."

"God bless you, dear! And now there's only one thing I have to say to you, and that won't take long in the saying. I should like to make you a little present, Arthur, and I've nothing to give you that I can think of, but the white silk pocket-handkerchief I bought when Lisabee was married. It's fit for a gentleman like you, being of the softest and beautifullest silk, all patterned with fuchsias and such like. Will you accept it, Arthur?"

Arthur gave confused thanks, and then Lisabee re-entered. They sat down silently side by side, and the sick man broke off from speaking to doze. When he awoke Lisabee rose, smoothed his pillows, administered a refreshing drink, performed a dozen trifling almost nameless services of devoted tenderness. Arthur tried to assist her, but overturned the medicine glass, caused the table to creak, and only succeeded in demonstrating his willingness.

By and by, Greta and her sisters relieved the watch.

Thus the day passed. After dinner Richard and Mercy came. Mercy, for the second or third time in her life, kissed her brother. Richard cried a good deal, looked round the farm, and promised his nieces a future stewardship. Both greeted Arthur shyly, hardly knowing how to meet him, half preparing to make, half expecting to receive, apologies. Arthur's quiet preoccupation set them both at their ease, and Mercy, who loved her brother William better than anyone or anything else in the world, felt drawn to his daughters, even to his son-in-law, for their unaffected sorrow. Each tear they shed was as a drop of balm to her heart. These proud girls, Elgitha's children, had really loved their father.

Arthur, proud and cold as he was, could grieve for him and not be ashamed. Mercy felt almost bewildered by the revulsion of feeling such facts brought with them—felt afraid of any unusual demonstration—felt all but guilty in having hitherto loved William's children so little.

They nevertheless hung upon her neck now, wept on her bosom, made a mother of her, having no better one. So Death came to Sycamore Farm, not as a skeleton with inverted scythe, but as an angel whose hands were outstretched to bless.

Towards evening the farmer aroused himself more frequently. Why had not Arthur come? Was the churning well over, and had the butter come right? How could Greta allow the maids to sleep so late?

"Why don't you get ready for church?" he said, last of all. "The bells are ringing for morning service. Let Arthur sit in my place and read out of my book. It is time to go."

Then he fell into a sleep. From such sleep what tongue can describe the awaking?

CHAPTER VII.

"I AM afraid, love," said Arthur to Lisabee, when her first outpouring of grief was over, "that this is but the beginning of our sorrows. Death, as the German poet said, is common, and your dear father had done his duty in life. For some who remain, death would indeed be a boon."

Lisabee's face turned pale with dismay.

"Oh! Arthur, husbands and wives who love each other can surely never wish to die, however great their misfortunes may be; and I—I even wished to live, having lost you, for my baby's sake."

Her touching simplicity seemed to reach

but not tomove his strange mood. He did not look at her, and continued speaking with eyes blank as those of a blind man.

"Even if you lose this appointment, Arthur, dear," she pleaded, lovingly, "there is plenty of room and opportunity for your talents elsewhere. What matters it if we are poor for a time? I am used to homeliness, and can cook for you, sew for you, wash for you, if the need arise. Such work would not be hard to me—would not be hard to any woman who loved her husband as I love you, Arthur."

She tried to encircle his neck with her arms, but he hindered her. His face was rigid as if cut out of marble. All the youthfulness and strength seemed gone from his figure.

With the exacting courage of fear and

love, Lisabee clung to him, upbraided—appealed. Why did he look so white and wild? What had happened, that she, his own wife, must not know it? Did she not trust him in everything? Was she not the mother of his unborn child? Could he, ought he, dare he, to deceive her? At last Arthur found words. In a hard, almost horrified voice, he answered her thus,—

"Lisabee, do you think I should have accosted you in the way that I did this morning unless I had been mad or besotted with drink? Could the loss of an appointment, however desirable, alter me from the Arthur of former times? I used to be gentle, reasonable, and kind, at least to *you*; but now I feel no longer master of myself. I misdoubt my own capability of reasonableness or kindness. I dread losing my senses altogether. Do you hear me, Lisabee? I may grow mad, perhaps."

The young wife heard with a dread that found no utterance. He went on,—

"I had brain-fever in Vienna, you know, and brain-fever often leaves some settled infirmity of the brain, that grows worse and worse, till—but I ought to have more pity on you, Lisabee. Don't ask me to tell you more. I have lost this appointment—all other appointments—unless perhaps a street commissionaireship or a postman's place, and why? Because my brain is no longer what it used to be—hardly brain, indeed; and the physicians consider it doubtful how long I may claim possession of it at all!"

He laughed bitterly, almost wildly.

"Philosophy is all very well, love, and women's talk is all very well; but there seems very little consolation for me. Life, after all—that is to say, a happy, an endurable life—is but the aggregate of infinitesimal tastes, duties, and aspirations. Lose all these and life becomes a living death! Could I endure existence, think you, as something less in the social scale than a disabled fireman or a crippled soldier? Would bread taste sweet to me if earned by other means than those I have been taught to regard as honourable? No, my wife, let me be candid to you and to myself. The physician tells me I must not occupy myself with former occupations. My profession—all other professions—are shut for ever from me. I may read novels—hardly a novel with murder in it—mind the children, run errands for you requiring no exercise of memory—this is all. Oh!

Lisabee! wife! love! better for you—for our child—for all, that I had died in Vienna!"

Tears of agony, tears of blood, rolled down his pale cheeks. He covered his face with his hands and wept, as men weep who feel themselves to be beaten in the battle of life.

Lisabee's love fought hard for victory. Tearful, yet calm, with the supreme courage of a woman devoted to one cause only, she forced herself to his arms, his heart, his lips. Clasping him, kissing him, resting her wet, lovely cheeks on his breast, she poured out in burning words all her love and gladsome, childlike faith in life, in God, in him.

"Oh! my darling! my darling!" she cried, as she rested thus upon his knees, "better by far that you should live and love me! God will send some way of content, if not of happiness, and—and—" her tears and voice mingled like summer's rain and fountain spray, "and—if you are forced to give up ambition in the world, you will always be my hero, dear!"

Her tremulous tenderness melted him. He opened his arms wide, let her rest next his heart, stroked her shining hair and cheeks as he had done in former days, smiling a sad, chiding, earnest smile.

"I know how you suffer in this, my heart," she went on, her face still half hidden on its resting place; "but an honoured, good, useful life, is not impossible for you even yet. You are forbidden to study, to make calculations, to undertake brain-work of any kind, for a time, at least—can you not find work of other sort? Oh, Arthur! often and often have you come home tired of business at Vienna, and have grown enthusiastic over dreams of quite another life! You wished to explore in Africa, to build a settler's hut in the backwoods, to search for hidden treasures of ancient art, to do a hundred things that you can do now. And then——"

She raised her pretty head and smiled at him through her tears.

"And then, how you envied dear father's simple country life at Nettlested! Do you remember standing at the gate with me, the first time you came to Sycamore Farm? Do you remember praising and admiring the lot of a farmer who should be patriarch in his parish? Arthur, why feel discontented that such hopes can be fulfilled?

Buy Sycamore Farm, and we will thank God that no worse lot has fallen to us."

"Buy Sycamore Farm!" said Arthur, as if in a dream. "Buy Sycamore Farm, my dear?"

"Yes," continued Lisabee, eagerly, "what is there for us to do in every way so happy, so fitting, and right? You could put your own money to all that papa possessed, and purchase the farm, every rood and foot of it. You could occupy yourself healthfully, independently, and usefully, yet not place yourself beyond reach of travel and books, and such things dear to you. Oh, love! this need not be the beginning of our sorrows after all, but the end!"

Arthur neither assented nor opposed; showing in no wise his real opinion, merely suggesting it by a half cynical, half caressing smile, he let his head droop till their lips touched, then he whispered wearily,—

"The beginning and the end of everything, excepting our love for each other, say, Lisabee; that, thank Heaven, is possible—even to a disabled fireman, or——"

"An owner of land in Nettlested," archly put in Lisabee.

And he did not contest the point.

CONCLUSION.

"Now strike your sails, ye jolly mariners,
For we be come unto a quiet rode!"

HOWEVER sweet or flattering may be the consolations of one's wife, one's conscience, and the world at large, to feel fairly beaten in the battle of life is a trial of the bitterest kind. Arthur Leebridge had more than once dreamed out pleasant romances of country-squiredom, unlimited travel, existence in wild countries after primeval pattern; but how few of us really wish for the fulfilment of our dreams? Unless such fulfilment is of our own working, we are sure to regard it as a visitation.

And Arthur, being strictly and for ever forbidden brain-work of some kind, began to despise those quiet lives that admitted, rather required, no brain-work whatever. Seeing himself forced into indolence, indolence seemed terrible to him. Being condemned to country-life, he craved for the excitement of towns.

Lisabee nursed his moods of discontent, hardly hoping yet for panaceas. She did not presume to preach to him except with the silent preaching of smiles, caresses, untiring observances. It never occurred to her that he could be wrong, ungrateful, less worthy of love than formerly. She loved him the better for his present need of love, rather than for his former appreciation of it. She never reminded him, even by looks, that he was changed from her Arthur of other times. And what was better still, she went on loving him in this way, never dreaming of reward.

"How can we expect Arthur to be the same," she would say to her sisters, "when we remember how much he has suffered? He loves us—is it his fault that he cannot love life? Oh! let us have patience and not exact too much from one we love; he has the worst to bear."

Surrounded by such gentle womanly influences, Arthur's sick spirit was soothed, if not healed; softened, if not subdued. He could not restrain, very few men can restrain, impatience at small crosses: but he obtained sympathy in all; and sympathy of the most loving kind. Had Lisabee demonstrated a shade of playful scorn, the sisters would have taken the cue. The little wife regarded her husband as a hero still, and would have others so regard him.

And panaceas came after awhile. First and foremost of these was the purchase of Sycamore Farm. No sooner had Arthur become master of all the land lying within two or three miles of his dwelling, than something like cheerfulness took possession of his mind. He became suddenly interested in such trifles as a new garden-walk, an asphalte flooring for the barn, the relative merits of coprolite and guano, the relative profits of beef and mutton. Feeling somewhat at a loss as to farming matters he turned to Uncle Richard, and to one or two of the Nettlested neighbours. Nothing engenders friendliness so soon as the asking of advice, when the advice asked is taken; and very shortly, Arthur found himself a popular man in his own parish. The rector, though he doubted Arthur's orthodoxy, was proud of his company to dinner; the farmers regarded him as something more than their squire; the labourers loved him for his lordly ways. Arthur's vanity was therefore pleasantly tickled, and who shall say that the tickling of one's vanity is of no moment?

May brought other things besides violets and cuckoo notes sounding across the fallow. First came Lisabee's baby—a large-eyed, lovely little girl, with her mother's sweet eyes and her father's grand brow; next came happy bridegroom Carl.

Carl brought with him a pleasant, sweet-smelling atmosphere of health and joyful anticipation. He was so bright that the dulness of other people melted before his brightness as mists before sunshine; he was so buoyant that gloom or even soberness of temper seemed an insult to his presence. Arthur, who prided himself upon his perfect freedom from affectation, could but affect a little gaiety to please his friend, and the effort did him good. Carl knew no higher philosophy than that of smoking away active cares and laughing away passive ones; Arthur had always lived up to a wrought-out philosophy of his own. And which proved the best of the two? Carl's, of course.

"My dear, kind brother-in-law," he would say, gravely, "I read Kant once, and though his theory never reached my brain, the air became so strongly infused with it that I believe my system imbibed more than you dream of. Do for once believe that I am wise, Arthur."

"Oh! it is no question of counsel and Old Richard-consolations and Solomon's Proverbs," Arthur said, somewhat scornfully. "What so easy as to be wise? What so hard as to be merry? No man, not even you, though an old friend and well-wisher—not even my wife, can understand my bitterness and disappointment. The case stands thus: I was once Arthur Leebridge—myself; I am now simply nobody, less than a nonentity. What wonder if I grow taciturn, irritable, incapable of cheerfulness? What wonder if I should some day grow mad?"

Carl made a very wry face.

"My dear, good Leebridge," he said, "you see things more obliquely than the man who squints. A land-proprietor, a country gentleman, a farmer—what position offers so much variety and so little work as yours? You can ride, hunt, shoot, are a little lord, in fact——"

"Pshaw! you forget that I am tied, fixed, chained—why, Zschokke's galley-slave had more liberty, for he did not lose his reason——"

"And that is better than never having had any!" Carl put in with serio-comic gravity; and such conversations would go on for hours unless Mabel's pretty face came in the way. But despite, or perhaps for reason, of Carl's make-believe flippancy, his society did more to restore Arthur's mental health than anything, excepting perhaps that of the Rev. Adolphus Raven. When the two men are compared—Arthur, so widely-travelled, so free-thinking, so utterly incapable of any superstition, however patented by the world; Mr. Raven, so utterly local in habits and tastes, so devoted to one aim, so incompetent to discover pith, or piety, or pastime in aught else—it would be difficult to imagine one having a healthful influence, or, indeed, any influence whatever over the other. Yet Mr. Raven, to use his own expression, did Arthur's soul good. For the good minister, having obtained some very distorted account of Arthur's condition, mental and physical, made a dead set at him with the best of intentions. The two fought hard; Mr. Raven for the privilege of being physician-in-ordinary to his young friend's soul; Arthur for the British-born right of being his own physician, if he chose. Mr. Raven loved Arthur's despondency, hugged it, blessed it, baptized it; seeing a way thereby to after-reconciliation, after-conversion, and after-grace. Arthur, finding Mr. Raven determined to make him a sad saint, resolved to become a merry sinner. At last the Reverend Adolphus thus unveiled himself to his wife—

"My dear, this time the Evil One will have his own. My heart clave to that young man; but he is fleshly, unregenerate, carnal."

"Cards and novels on a Sunday?" asked Mrs. Raven.

"Oh! Susan, would that Satan had only obtained victory so far! Then I might still have hoped. But now——"

"Play-going?" said Susan, with a relish for horrors.

Mr. Raven still shook his head. Mrs. Raven's curiosity exploded.

"Adolphus, you ought not to try me thus. Remember my delicate condition," she cried, and at the same time commenced a low whimper.

"Susan," replied Mr. Raven, solemnly. "Susan, I did it but to spare your feelings. He says he is not afraid of the Devil!"

"Poor, poor Lisabee! What a husband to have, Adolphus! Thank God, mine is not like him!"

"Ay, thank God, indeed, that you are joined in holy wedlock to a believer, Susan; you might have married——"

"Might have married, indeed—might have married whom pray, Adolphus? I might have married my cousin Henry, and that was a match to be proud of—three servants kept, and a house of one's own. I might have married Mr. Lawson, the doctor, with five hundred a-year. It isn't for you to say whom I might have married, Adolphus; and you never, never will remember my delicate condition."

Both husband and wife talked very little of Arthur for some time.

Soon the marriage-bells rang out joyfully in the soft summer air, and all were too glad at the occasion of them to weep—excepting Cissy. She could not resist some tears of vexation for the seven nuts that had decided Mabel's fate in the wood. Perhaps the curate's blushing offering of flowers may mean wedding-bells and orange-blossoms for himself and Cissy one day.

Pleasant news came from Vienna. All were well, and Dr. Zillner's friends had of late been obligingly happy and prosperous, neither losing a relative, nor money, nor credit. The Frau Zillner sent her English daughter-in-law six pair of home-knit hose and a letter of much heartfelt welcome. Dr. Albin wrote kindly also; his life's loneliness running through the woof of his thoughts like a sober thread. Adelheid wrote oftenest of all; but always to Arthur. And why? Adelheid was one of those sentimental, unselfish, true-hearted women of whom men always make confidants. Arthur, in the extremity of his haste and perplexity, had confided Minchen to her care before quitting Vienna; leaving her means, full power, everything but counsel. Adelheid felt proud of the trust, and set about the fulfilling of it with amiable disinterestedness; placed the child in an admirable school, visited her constantly, tried to become her friend, her mother, her home, her all.

"But," she wrote to Arthur, "I confess to defeat; defeat palpable, hopeless, bitter. Minchen knows that I seek her love, and obstinately withholds it. Were she once to allow her better nature to have its way, I feel sure I should hold her to my heart. She never will do so. As I see more and more of the force and originality of her character, so the more and more do I dread and doubt it. Minchen cannot be happy, cannot love, cannot live after the ordinary way. What place is so happy for a wild, untutored child as a large school? She becomes member of a republic, is free, being bound to no laws made especially for herself; can choose her friends, her enemies, her pursuits at will. Minchen's will is to will nothing. She obeys the laws, but works against the privileges; can be persuaded to no tenderness, no friendships, no cliques, no holidays. What, then, dear friend, is to be done? Were my parents younger, I would say to them—'Let the child come to us.' I might say it now, and obtain consent, but at too dear a sacrifice for themselves. I await your counsel with anxiety."

Arthur read this letter with Lisabee's lesser self resting on his knees, and handed it to her mother, sighing deeply.

When she had read also, the husband and wife clasped hands across their sleeping child; each answering the other's thoughts without words. At last Arthur said, in a voice of pleading tenderness—

"You will let her come here, then, Lisabee?"

And Lisabee yielded, not with grace only, but with gratitude for her husband's trust in her.

A fortnight later Adelheid wrote—

"I received your letter joyfully, more joyfully than you could imagine, because only to myself was Minchen's character known, even in the least degree. I have not before mentioned to you that one subject, and one only, interested this strange child, among the many that came before her notice. If I bought her a new frock, it was sure to be received scornfully, or rejected altogether. If I gave her cakes and chocolate, saying—'Invite your little friends and be merry,' both cakes and chocolate were distributed promiscuously and with too much ungraciousness to win thanks. But when I have said—'For papa's sake do this or do that,' an extraordinary humour took possession of her. She would seem to doubt the truth of my statement: would look at me wildly, almost idiotically; would perhaps throw her arms about her head and weep with passion, or defy my right of so speaking.

"'Papa—papa—I don't want to hear about papa; my real papa is dead,' she has often said, afterwards resorting to stolid silence.

"The governess and pupils took offence at Minchen's implacable coldness—nay, antagonism. Ordinary people—and of ordinary people schools are generally composed—never make allowance for unique character, or make it with great unwillingness. They feel pained, utterly self-humiliated, by the discovery that they are not infallible.

So it was with Minchen's supervisors and companions. Hardly one among them but avoided, distrusted—nay, disliked her. Universal courtesy was maintained, however, and the child never missed one iota of the same care and interest manifested towards the others. But Minchen needed more than these.

"I received your letter joyfully, then, feeling that at last this sweet, strange nature was to become, if only for a moment, my own. My heart beat as I waited for admittance in the great courtyard. I wished to find Minchen in one of her gloomiest moods that her surprise and gladness might be the greater. Having always seen her either indifferently calm or angrily vehement, I longed to see her animated with a loveable animation.

"But this was not to be. Pardon me, my friend, if I tell you a sad story in the natural woman's way, with no little prelude—no wise deviations—with only womanly foolish impulse. Oh! my tears fall fast, though she did not love me! Minchen is dead!

"It seems too hard that I never saw her smile as a child should smile—that I never made her love *you!* But though I failed, I cannot think another would have succeeded.

"No sooner was I admitted to the presence of the lady-director, than I saw by her face what kind of news she had for me. Tremblingly she told, and tremblingly I heard, her story. It seemed that Minchen had endeavoured to get away from the school during the night; had injured herself violently in the attempt to climb the garden wall, and was discovered at daybreak lying insensible on the flagstones.

"I went upstairs and found myself alone with the sick child. At first she would fain have turned from me, but as if from some sudden impulse, a gentle, almost wistful look came to her eyes, and she held out one little hand.

"'What is this, my child?' I said, taking, or rather trying to take, her in my arms. 'Were you so unhappy here, my Minchen?'

"She smiled, a reckless, triumphant smile, and caught up my words.

"'Unhappy here! I don't know; but I hated the place and the people, and wanted to get to Bäbele. You would take me to her if you were kind.'

"'Why do you wish to go to Bäbele?' I asked; 'she was not so kind to you as these ladies have been; and then——'

"'Will you let me go?' she said, half pleadingly, half with command.

"I made answer by reading that part of your letter relating to herself. She listened apathetically.

"'Well, darling,' I said, kindly, 'is not that unexpected and welcome and good? and will you not kiss me for bearing you such news?'

"She let me touch her cheek with my lips, but remained quite passive.

"'Do you not love your papa, Minchen?' I asked; 'do you not wish to live with him in England and be near him always? Oh! Minchen, Minchen, I thought to have brought you happiness, but you refuse my gift!' and drawing myself from her, I wept bitterly.

"The child seemed still unable to comprehend either your mark of affection or my own disappointment. I was constrained to leave her, having won no word, no look, no token of love.

"But towards night a change came; Bäbele, for whom I had sent, much against my inclination, suddenly summoned the superintendent to the dying child.

"She lay on Bäbele's heart motionless, as one already dead. Suddenly she started up and threw her arms above her head—

"'The wheels are going over me; papa, papa, come back!' she cried—and that was all.

"We, that is, mamma and I, make a little garden of her grave in the blessed God's Acre. When will you visit it, dear friend? At least, send a flower from your English soil, that the love she missed in life may be present with her now.

"Will you reprove my German sentimentalism? I hope not. Oh! it seems the worst forgetfulness of all to forget the dead! The living are so little our own, so entirely the world's, so divided by a hundred loves, a hundred distractions; but the gentle, silent, beautiful Departed—what tongue can speak the one-ness, the sanctity, the heavenliness of their love for us, of our love for them? Can we leave their graves to the hands of the hired sexton, to the generous breath of the woods, to the bountiful requiems of the singing birds, who know not of whom they sing? Rather let us love the dead better than the living, since our sins against them are forgotten, and we can no more yield them sweet services of confidence and love."

THE END.

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