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BY

ANNIE THOMAS,
(MRS. PENDER CUDLIP)

AUTHOR OF

“‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID,”

“CALLED TO ACCOUNT,”

“NO ALTERNATIVE,”

“DENIS DONNE,”

ETC. ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

ABOUT US ALL.



HERE is no doubt about it! The soft sighing western wind that comes slowly along the valley, bending the flowers' heads, and freshening them into brighter beauty; the golden, gracious atmosphere of this gorgeous July day; the general air of satisfaction which hangs over indolent everything—each and all of these fail in producing a better effect upon me.

The verdict has been delivered to me to-day, and no criminal ever cringed lower than I did when I heard it. It issued forth from the lips of partial affection too, not from those of stern justice. "Tim is very unattractive—pitifully so," my large, handsome, moon-faced, ox-eyed Juno of an aunt was saying to my father when I came into the breakfast-room this morning. And though I tried to back and falter away, I seemed to be chained to the spot, and condemned to listen to the words of doom.

“Little Tim will do very well to stay at home and take care of me when the others are all gone,” my father said, pitying my abject state; and it did seem such a tame little fate to look forward to at the time. But now I have determined to accustom myself to the prospect. But it will be very dull for me in this big old house when all the other girls are gone.

It is luncheon time now, and I must go in and face them all with the feeling upon me that they all know that I have heard to-day how very unattractive I am, and that I have been crying my face into the semblance of mottled soap about it. My eyelids are tight and red, my nose and lips are swollen, my hair is horribly touzled—for I have been stretched out on the grass—I am sunburnt, and the cambric dress that was as fresh as my sisters’ in the morning has suffered considerably from contact with the affectionate paws of a brace of setters. Altogether I am at my very worst, and my worst must be something very deplorable, considering how unattractive I am at my best.

“Late and out of breath, as usual, Tim,” Aunt Helen says, as I come in through the open window and find them seated at luncheon—Aunt Helen at the head of the table, feeding away steadily in that calm, unhungry way of hers, papa opposite to her, my two pretty sisters facing the window, and Claire, my beautiful sister, with her back to me, by the side of a stranger.

I take in the group at a glance, and am ashamed of myself. They are all cool and unruffled; they are all eating *mayonnaise*, and sipping iced claret cup (I feel as if a pint of the latter would not assuage the raging thirst which is born of crying and exposure to the hot sun); they all present such an appalling contrast to touzled, overheated, miserable me, that I turn and incontinently flee away through the window again. I hear a light peal of amused laughter, and I positively bound along in my eagerness to get beyond earshot of it. As I reach a side door and pause, meaning to turn in through it, a fleetier foot than mine presses the gravel at my side, and

I leap round startled, at bay, to find myself face to face with the stranger.

Humbled, enraged, mortified, furious, untidy as I am, this is the last straw, and it breaks me down.

“How dared you do it?” I cry; and then I gulp, and the blinding tears rush out in a torrent, and I know I must look more hideous than ever.

“Don’t!” he says, in accents of such entreaty that I forget myself for a moment. “It’s natural to run after anything that runs away; your sister thought you didn’t like finding me in your place, so I came to tell you I’d resign it to you.”

He speaks so seriously that I look up at him to see if he is in earnest or not.

“Claire would never try to make you believe I was such a fool,” I say with emphasis. For Claire is the one of my sisters who always comes between me and misunderstanding and mortification. Odd as appears to every one, Aunt Helen included, Claire likes me.

“Miss Vincent rather gave me the impression of thinking me a fool for being in your way for a moment. Do come back, that I may make my peace.”

The plea is of avail. I think of Claire, and reflect that it must be an awful thing for any man to be at odds with her. So I walk slowly back by my late pursuer’s side, and arrive to find that they have all finished luncheon; that they are getting themselves out of the room, and preparing to leave me to the dismal glories of a solitary meal.

I am young, healthy, hungry, but I am also heartsore, and so, when I take my seat in a limp and flurried way, a certain wistfulness creeps into my face, as I watch the others sailing out serene and satisfied. And Claire catches this expression, I suppose, for she comes back and sits beside me, and helps me carefully, and seems to be interested in what may please my appetite—much more interested than I am myself.

In gratitude to her—and in obedience to the laws of nature—I eat heartily, and feel less dejected; she

moving about me the whole time, caring for me so palpably that I forget that I am mottled-faced from crying, and rough-headed, and generally unattractive and unworthy of attention.

"Who is he?" I ask, when I have finished, rising and taking my place by Claire, who, from the vantage post of a high window-sill, is watching the family taking its air elegantly on the lawn.

Claire turns her gleaming, winsome face to me, and an expression of utter surprise reigns on it.

"Didn't Aunt Helen tell you he was coming this morning?" she asks. "Why, Tim, he's her nephew, Theo Bligh!"

"I'm glad he isn't like her," I say heartily.

Aunt Helen is the widow of a cousin to whom my father was greatly attached. But we young ones all wish that the sentiment had been buried in Arthur Vincent's grave, instead of being carried on and expended upon his widow. For Aunt Helen has entirely failed to secure our suffrages, and she is omnipotent with papa.

"For ways that are dark, and for tricks that are mean,' commend me to Aunt Helen," Claire goes on discontentedly. "She throws you off your guard too, by being big and fair and placid; but I feel sure that she has been scheming for this boy to come here, and all the time papa is thinking that he is entertaining an angel unawares, and that it's pure accident which brought him into his esteemed aunt's neighbourhood."

"He must be a schemer too," I say sagaciously, and I remember how he scuttled after me in the garden, and hate him.

Claire laughs tolerantly. "One couldn't be very hard on him, even if he had taken a turning or two away from the straight road to come here—we Vincents are worth knowing, Tim, dear; even Aunt Helen's poor powers of description must have taught him that."

I look at her as she speaks, and from the bottom of the heart that loves her so I feel that Claire is worth knowing, that any man may be forgiven for having taken

any number of tortuous turnings in getting to her, and that she is a great deal too precious to be thrown away on any one appertaining to Aunt Helen.

Every bit of her short oval face, every lock of her wavy golden hair, every expression of her clear violet eyes, every curve of the freely smiling mouth, are well known and desperately dear to me. But I cannot describe her, I cannot catalogue her charms, I cannot attempt to put her before you on paper as she seemed to me this morning when she soothed me so, as only Claire can.

We walk out presently and join the others on the lawn, her brilliant blue cambric crisply fluttering in the wind, mine hanging limp and dull,—her strong, supple, slender figure carrying itself unfalteringly under the fire of the battery of the five pairs of eyes that are levelled at us; my slimmer and less well-balanced frame tottering under the conviction that I shall stumble presently, and bring still more obloquy upon my unhappy and most unattractive person. So we advance into the midst of the family group, and so Theo Bligh sees us together for the first time.

I have called my other sisters pretty, and I am quite ready and able to set forth their claims to the title. They are twins; they have nice, well-opened, soft grey eyes, and masses of flaxen hair, which looks like tow when they wash it, before they anoint it with brilliantine; they have pleasant, womanly, comfortable figures and faces and manners; they are devoted to one another, and deadly uninteresting to me.

Unquestionably, though, they are household successes, these two fair, pleasant sisters of mine. Far-sighted papas and mammas who have noted them well, have spoken words of promise concerning their sons when the twins have been to the fore. More than one son of some neighbouring house, indeed, has sought to lop them from the family tree; but, as they truly say, they "are in no hurry to separate," and the law of the land will not admit of their both marrying the same man.

They were always much easier to manage in their childhood, Aunt Helen avers, than either Claire or myself; and now, in their good-looking, graceful young womanhood, they are much more comfortable companions than are we, the Beauty and the Beast of the establishment. Aunt Helen is a woman who believes in every axiom that has ever been uttered by every wise man and every fool, from the beginning of time until the present day. She was wont to hurl that special one, as to the advisability of our letting our first years be passed in "books or work or healthful play," at our young heads from the moment she reigned over us. The advice rebounded from Claire's head lightly and easily, as did every other evil thing. It fell with a dull, depressing weight on mine, keeping me down, as did the majority of Aunt Helen's good gifts. But the twins always bent gracefully before the instructive blast, and upreared themselves after it as if nothing had happened—and had their reward in her perfect appreciation of them, let it be hoped!

They are sitting here now, on a rug at her feet, tatting. there is nothing wrong in tatting in the abstract, but how evil it makes me feel, when I am altogether awry with the world, to see our twins tatting at Aunt Helen. We all know that every round and square abomination which their hooks and ingenuity shape will be sent off to the Bligh family, for the furtherance of their bodily comfort. Aunt Helen is always making affectionate mention of some cousin to us unknown, who is in sore need of a sofa rug, or a counterpane, or a cloud. And forthwith the twins tat, and knit, and net in her service, until Berlin wool, and everything else that can be turned to account with a hook and needles, has become an abomination in my eyes.

Aunt Helen is always sleepy after luncheon. If I dare to yawn or look bored, if I venture to be flushed or pale, if I lounge about and steep myself in golden silence, she declares that my digestion must be seriously impaired, and offers me a pill, or a long walk to some goal which I

have not the slightest desire to gain. But she is very lenient to herself in the matter of after-luncheon lassitude. "Her system is so perfect," she assures us, "that it must not be disturbed by either annoyance or exercise." Even to-day, though her nephew Theo has but just appeared before her for the first time for seven or eight years, her eyes are closed, and her head is jerking gracefully forwards on to her broad matronly bosom.

For one wild moment I hope that I shall escape observation and reprimand, and I try to slip round behind the large cushioned chair which lives on the lawn for her sole use during the summer—a fat, sleepy hollow of a chair, that has somehow or other a ridiculous family likeness to its occupant; but she opens her light blue eyes and lows at me.

"Tim," she says, "if you sit down on the grass in the open air in your present heated condition, I will not answer for the consequences; a friend of mine did so once, and repented it to the day of her death, for it was the cause of a most unsightly eruption in her face."

"I can't keep on walking up and down, or round the circle like a wild beast, and I can't stand on one leg like a stork, Aunt Helen," I say peevishly; I must sit down."

And I sink down on the grass as I speak, crumpling my skirts carelessly, and hate Aunt Helen as I never hated her before, for having remarked on that boiling of the blood which is making my cheeks feel as if they were scorched, and causing my eyes to smart and ache and droop in sheer shame at their owner's unprepossessing appearance.

"Tim doesn't waste much time in sacrificing to the Graces," papa says, languidly removing his cigar from his lips.

Papa, be it known at starting, is most thoroughly satisfied with each one of his daughters. Claire amuses him, for she talks well and spiritedly, and treats him more as she would an indulgent elder brother than a father. Moreover, he is proud of her great beauty, and

"Tim," she says passionately, as I resignedly proceed to pick them up again, "you're not to touch pen and ink to-day. I come armed with authority; papa sent me after you ——"

"Of his own free will?" I question eagerly; and Claire hesitates a little as she answers—

"Well, he told you you needn't do it—now, didn't he?—and he seemed quite glad when Theo Bligh said he should come and help you in your task, for Aunt Helen instantly suggested that you should be let off for to-day."

"Claire," I say solemnly, pausing in my occupation of putting papa's copy in order for him the following morning, "why is all this? Am I so very ungainly that she fears I shall shock him with the whole family?"

"It isn't that," she says thoughtfully; "I think sometimes, Tim, that you, more than any of us, come between papa and Aunt Helen, and she knows it."

"She isn't our real aunt," I say in extenuation of my unconscious interposition.

"No," Claire says drily; "if she were, very likely she wouldn't mind about your little growing power so much. As it is ——"

She pauses, and I ask—

"As it is, what?"

"She is only papa's cousin's widow"—Claire laughs—"and there is no law, human or divine, to prevent her marrying him. How we have hated the name of Bligh all our lives, haven't we, Tim?"

"Ye-es," I say slowly, unwillingly almost, for I remember how one of that name has fetched a rug for me this very day, and shown me the first manly kindness and attention of which I have ever been the recipient.

Claire goes on without noticing my tone.

"And now we have another Bligh brought down upon us, as if one of the family were not enough. We won't get intimate with him, Tim, however long he stays, and Aunt Helen is planning festivities in his honour weeks ahead—we'll leave him to the twins, won't we?"

"Yes; we'll leave him to the twins," I echo heartily.

“But we won’t let papa get infatuated with him too, Claire: one Bligh in the establishment is quite enough. Papa’s mind shall be kept pure and undefiled on the subject of this interloper.”

We have sauntered out of papa’s study by this time, and are crossing the lawn, away from the group who still occupy the seats under the copper beech, and in the direction of a slip of wilderness which borders the garden and runs down to the glorious pasture lands from the rental of which a goodly portion of my father’s income comes. A turnstile admits us into the wild little wood, which is thickly carpeted with wild flowers and strawberries. Regardless of Aunt Helen’s unpleasant prophecies as to unsightly eruptions being the result of sitting on the crisp, dry grass in the dry, fresh air, Claire and I both cast ourselves down on the ground, and pick and eat the dainty little fruit at our idle leisure. I am soothed by her presence, by the murmuring breeze, by the hum of insects, into forgetfulness of the mortification and burden and heat of the morning; and presently, with my head resting on Claire’s lap, I fall fast asleep.

Mine is no dreamless sleep. In a vision I see Claire and myself travelling along a bright, happy road, enjoying everything together, helping each other to gather fruits and flowers, when suddenly the road narrows, darkens, and at the end of it we see a figure standing with outstretched arms. Am I to go into them, or is she? Do we either of us wish to go into them? All is confusion: after the beautiful manner of dreams, I cannot grasp a single fact or feeling. It gets darker; we grope about; and in the dim light, though I cannot see, I feel that Claire and I are separated, and I wake with a cry of sorrow and of pain.

My head is on my sister’s lap still; her pretty white fingers are turning about the long locks of my hair, which have fallen loose over my shoulders; her sweet, light, flexible voice is ringing in my ears.

“Tim could make any one she liked worship her, but she hates Aunt Helen,” I hear her say, and I raise my

head and find that she is saying it to Mr. Theo Bligh.

I am so relieved that it is all a dream about Claire and I being separated, that I sit up, fling myself into the conversation with fervour, and make the best of myself according to my lights. Now that I am freed from the observation of Aunt Helen and the twins, I am no longer crushed by the consciousness of the shortcomings of my unattractive person. Sleep has refreshed me, the sense of scorch has passed off my face, and it is pleasant to hold intercourse with one who brings fresh ideas and experiences into our circle sometimes. Before I know well what I am doing, I have taken this stranger into my confidence sufficiently to discuss the plot of papa's forthcoming novel with him. Before I remember that Claire and I have agreed to leave him entirely to the twins, I find myself thinking that I hope he won't let Aunt Helen set him against me. Before we go in to dinner on this first day of his arrival, I have almost forgotten that he is one of the obnoxious Blighs.





CHAPTER II.

OUR COMPACT!

IT is very pleasant having Theo here, although he is Aunt Helen's nephew. But he knows so little about the Blighs that he hardly appears like one of them. He is the only son of Aunt Helen's youngest brother—the "scamp of the family" she says he was, but she must have been fond of him, for I really believe her torpid blood warms with love at the sight of this Theo. As for Theo himself, he never saw either his father or mother. Aunt Helen took care of him until she married papa's cousin Arthur, for his parents both died when he was a baby.

He has been here a week now, and both Claire and I pity him greatly. Other people might think he was not at all a fit and proper object for pity, but Claire and I know better than other people: we know that nothing will ever do away in our eyes with the painful fact of his being Aunt Helen's nephew. We can't forgive that, and it is sad for him.

Fourteen years ago, when Aunt Helen first came to live with us, I was a little puny thing of four. But, puny as I was, I was papa's pet in those days, and she never liked me. She was a very, very handsome young woman then, and, baby as I was, I knew that she had two manners. One manner was for our friends and acquaintances, when she used to purr to them about the sacrifices

she made in order to carry out our dead mother's injunction, that she, Helen Vincent, and she only, should look after us poor little motherless ones. The other manner was shown to papa, and bore no manner of reference to our dead mother; and this manner Claire and I had detected (though we could not define it) from our earliest youth, and so we have never loved Aunt Helen.

Once when I was a restless child of ten, I prowled at an untimely hour, when I ought to have been in bed, into papa's study. He was sitting at his writing table, his arms were folded on the table and his head bent down on them, and by his side Aunt Helen knelt, crying bitterly. I don't know what possessed me, but I rushed across the room, and flung my arms round papa's neck and howled out—"She shan't, she shan't!" and he rose up quiet in a moment, and smiled at me and said—

"Little Tim, tell me exactly how long you have been listening, and what you have heard?" and I told him, truthfully enough, that I had heard nothing but Her sobs.

Then she got up from her knees and said all she had proposed was for our good, and he held his hand out to her and asked her to pardon him, and I asked if she had wanted him to send me to school; and she said, "Yes, yes; that was all." And so the scene ended, but she has hated me ever since.

I have been thinking about this half-forgotten sensational mystery of my early life a good deal this morning, for Theo Bligh's presence here seems to throw a new light upon Aunt Helen. How well she loves him evidently, and how strange it is that, loving him as she does, she should have spoken so little about him to us, and never have told us he was coming. She has not even taken the twins into her confidence. Is it possible that his advent was as great a surprise to her as it was to us?

I am sitting in papa's study copying for him this morning, but my thoughts go wandering here and there—back to that scene which I interrupted here so long ago,

on to picnics and other parties which are coming in the immediate future. Even as I am thinking of him rather tolerantly as the cause of these pleasant effects, he comes into the room.

"Oh, you mustn't come here!" I exclaim hurriedly, for papa's study is not open to invasion; and he irritates me by answering—

"Aunt Helen gave me leave."

I forget his relationship to her, I forget common politeness, I forget that excellent axiom as to the inadvisability of crying family jars aloud, and I blurt out—

"She has no more business here than you have—she can't give you leave."

"You little tempest," he says coolly, coming up and lounging close to me on the end of the table, "don't flame and rage in that way about nothing. I only want you to tell me just as you would tell Claire why it is you hate Aunt Helen?"

"Just as I would tell Claire!" I repeat after him in stupid wonderment.

"Yes," he replies frankly; "treat me as a friend, Tim. There's some screw loose in all the arrangements here, and ——"

"I don't think you were sent to tighten it," I interrupt insolently; but he won't be offended, and he won't be thrown out of his course.

"Aunt Helen has given up all her own people for you four girls," he says decidedly, "and the two nicest of you can hardly stand her, that is evident. Why is it so?"

"Because we are the two nicest of us, I suppose," I say, and his face falls a little, and I wish, oh, how I wish that I had not spoken disparaging words to him of the woman who is nearer to him than she is to us.

"My father was her favourite brother," he says presently; "she was very true and good to him, and she has never wavered in her kindness to me. Do you know," he adds confidentially, "that she is the only one of my father's family who has ever done anything for me? She paid for my nurse, she paid for my education, and up to

the present day she makes me an allowance. Let me like her, Tim."

He says it almost beseechingly, as if he rather wishes me to believe that I have some influence over him. In my indignation at his thinking that I am capable of believing any folly of the sort, I answer roughly (and I would so much rather answer softly)—

"As if it mattered a bit to us—to Claire and me—whether you like her or not! Why, you belong to her; we look upon you as part of her: you wouldn't be here but for her! Like her as much as you like—it doesn't matter to us."

All the time I am speaking, I am putting papa's loose MS. sheets in order and away, with nervous, shaking hands. They slip and slide out of place, after the manner of loose sheets, and some of them flutter to the floor at his feet.

"You poor little flustered, bungling woman!" he says, laughing in a superior way; "here, give them to me." And he picks them out of my hand and up from the floor before I can protest against his unwarrantable interference.

I look at him more in sorrow than in anger, as he places the pages aright, and puts them on the table, under the protection of a weight. He is tall, handsome, undeniably fine. His face is cut like a cameo, and is brilliant in expression. There is a musical ring in his voice that seems to me to be the very sound a lover's voice would have in Paradise! What a melancholy reflection it is, that he, though possessed of all these natural advantages, should be cut out for ever from the regard of Claire and myself, through his being Aunt Helen's nephew.

He has been whistling an old English melody while engaged upon the task he has wrested from me, and, now that he has finished his task, he breaks into the words of the ballad.

"There was a youth,
And a well-beloved youth."

he sings out, and then he pulls up to ask,—

"Look here! do you play by ear? If you do, you may come and accompany me, and I'll teach you the words of one of the most fetching English ballads that was ever written. Do you know 'The Bailiff's Daughter of Islington'?"

"I can't play by ear, and I don't want to hear the song," I say rather savagely, and then he sings it right through, just as though I had not spoken.

"There, you see," he says, when he has howled his last bar, "the moral is, don't be coy and mock-modest in the wrong place; 'she was coy and would not wed' when he wanted her to do it, so he charged off to town, and left her to spend seven years of rather a dull time down at Islington."

"And at the end of it she went after him like a fool," I blurt out.

"Like a woman," he cries cheerily. "Now, look here, in the very short course of this over true history, she's presented to us as a perfect-type of her sex. She won't have him when she might, she runs after him when he has got himself clear of her, and she tells him a lie directly she meets him—trades on his old tenderness, and tells him she's dead, when she's all alive and kicking the whole time in 'mean attire' by the road-side. Oh, it's a jolly little drama of life." And he sings it over again in his satisfaction with its moral and his clear appreciation of it.

"If you worked hard, and had good lessons, and didn't go spoiling your voice by screeching, you might sing by-and-by," I say magnanimously.

"Do you really think so? It's very good of you to give your mind to a subject you know nothing at all about," he answers blithely, and then he offers me his arm and leads me out on the lawn, and again informs me in an uncultivated tenor that—

"There was a youth,
And a well-beloved youth,
And he was a squire's son."

"Papa won't be at all pleased at your having inter-

rupted me and spoilt my morning's work," I say seriously; and he only looks down at me with his laughing, green hazel eyes, and says,—

"Pooh! nonsense! Work?"

"It may seem nonsense to you, Mr. Bligh," I begin arguing in a happy tone, "but it's important to papa whether it's copied or not, and it's genuine work to me."

"All right," he answers carelessly. "I'll make up for my misdemeanour in the afternoon ——"

"If you mean that you'll take my work on your own shoulders, you're very much mistaken," I strike in hurriedly; "I would rather not have your help."

"I hadn't the least intention of offering it," he replies coolly. "I meant that I would put the whole team on—give your three sisters their share of it. Why should their time be passed in books and work and healthful play, while you're corroding your nails away with ink?"

"Never mind my nails," I say pettishly, for I am conscience-stricken. My fingers are inky, and do what I will, I can't double up the first joints and conceal the shady fact.

"Oh, I don't mind them much. Do you remember that old song—

"There was ink on her thumb when I kissed her hand,
And she whispered, 'When you die
I'll write you an epitaph gloomy and grand.'
'There's time enough for that,' said I."?

"I hate your old songs!" I cry out. "And as for your 'putting the whole team on,' Claire wouldn't write a line if you were the one to ask her to do it; and the twins ——!"

I make a pause expressive of the most utter contempt of and disbelief in the twins' ability to do anything useful.

"You mean that the spirit of the twins would be willing, but the flesh would be weak?" he questions. "Well, it would be a pity for them to ink those nice white hands of theirs; I'll not put them into the team;

but Claire—why do you think Claire wouldn't do it if I asked her?"

He asks it with a little air of earnestness, that becomes him wonderfully. "In sooth he is a goodly youth," the words of the song he has been singing, describe him well. Why can't Claire and I like him a little?

Even while I am thinking this, I say stiffly, "My sister" (I will not call her "Claire" to him) "has a perfect horror of impertinent interference from strangers."

"I'll forgive the apparent rudeness of your speech before you ask me to do it," he laughs out joyously. "By Jove! you're the funniest little thing I ever saw in my life."

I am on the brink of a burst of tears, as I remember how very unattractive my aspect has been from the first in the eyes of this young natural enemy of mine, who is as brilliant and beautiful as a fresh sculptured ideal of the young Antinous; but I make one strenuous effort to be dignified.

"Your circle may be a very wide one, Mr. Bligh, but its training is bad, for it has taught you to make unanswerable speeches. When the point of having the last word is won by rudeness, surely a man can't be proud of having gained it from a woman."

"You're seriously savage?" he asks earnestly.

"No, not savage in the least degree," I say with dreadfully overdone indifference, and he actually pauses to take aim with his straw hat at one of the twins' pet doves before he answers me.

Then he says, "Yes, you are savage, and I don't want you to be savage with me, or to get upon stilts with me: I want to get your friendship, Tim, your's and Claire's, and I want to know what has set you against me so at starting."

He has cast off his irritatingly teasing, vivacious manner, and is speaking quite soberly to me. For the moment I forget Aunt Helen and every cause of annoyance that I have fancied I have had with him, and say—

"I'm not set against you; I wish I was."

He laughs merrily at my vehemence.

"All right, Tim," he says. "You have tried to hate me and can't; now, I want to know why you tried. Tell me?"

I shake my head in negative.

"I'll give three guesses, then, and I shall see in that rum little face of yours when I guess right. You have lived in this peaceful seclusion so long that you have got to think that, like the Lady of Shalot, a curse will come upon you if you look up at any one passing by?"

"I haven't been such an idiot."

"Then you're afraid that I am going to have the presumption to fall in love with your sister, Claire, and the massacre of the twins would be a lesser sin than that?"

It is the wildest folly that he is talking, and I know it; but, nevertheless, my heart almost dies within me as he speaks of the possibility of loving Claire, of the possibility of his being even suspected of daring to love Claire—Claire, our queen, our beauty!

"No, no," I say with reassuring earnestness, "I never did think you such a fool as that."

"How indebted I am to you for your high opinion!" he says, and out of his wonderful green hazel eyes there gleams a sudden perception of something of which I have not even the remotest knowledge, which angers and perplexes me.

"I have one guess more," he says presently: "you dislike me with a childish dislike, because I am Aunt Helen's nephew."

"Yes, that's it, that's it," I cry eagerly, and I know all the time that it isn't it, and that I don't dislike him at all.

For a moment or two after my confession of dislike and the cause of the same, I dare not venture to look at him. When I do steal a glance he is perfectly impassive, instead of being steeped in the miserable mortification I had dreaded to witness.

"Do you believe in a real, thorough friendship between

a man and a girl?" he staggers me by asking. "I do. I feel it for you. There's not a particle of sentiment about it, so you needn't be afraid; but I do like you heartily, Tim: you're about the most sensible girl I ever imagined, much less met with. I am going to tell you something, to treat you as I would a—a ——"

"Friend," I suggest quietly.

"Yes—a friend. Well, Aunt Helen meant me to marry one of the twins when she got me here."

I feel the blood ebbing away from my heart, and my voice sounds like a far-off buzz, as I ask,—

"And do you mean to do it?"

"You'd give your consent to that—the twins are so much less precious than Claire? Even I, despicable as I am, am good enough for one of the twins?"

Is he in earnest, or is he mocking me? I do not know, I cannot discern, for he has his normal manner of bewildering vivacity on again. Happily, before I am compelled to answer him, we meet Claire, radiant, beautiful, with no vexed question on her mind.

"I couldn't think what you two people had to say to each other, you have been patrolling the lawn such a long time," she says instantly, with candid interest (Claire from her babyhood has been in the habit of stating most openly whatever she wishes, or wants, or thinks). "As for you, Tim," she goes on, passing to my side and tucking my arm through hers, "you look like a bit of fog let in to a sunny landscape. What is it?"

I do not answer her, I am too uncertain myself of what it is; but in the midst of my pain of doubt I take notice of the pleasure that lights up his truth-telling eyes as he watches her.

"Talk to me," Claire says presently, subsiding into a saunter, with her arms folded behind her back, her face uplifted, and her hat cocked forward over her black-lashed violet eyes and little, straight, stick-out nose. "Talk to me; tell me what you have been talking about: you're both clever, and I like to be amused."

In my admiration for her, in my love and pride for this

beautiful sister, I am ready to kneel in my unattractive ugliness at her feet, and tell her that I have no words to utter worthy of her hearing. Fortunately I do not make such an exhibition of myself. I only say discontentedly—

“Our ‘talk!’—you do well to call it that; it doesn’t deserve the name of conversation—isn’t worth repeating.”

“We have made a compact though,” Theo says, with an air of triumph. And Claire pulls up in her progress to ask, with a heightened colour—

“Yes?—what is it?”





CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOW OF A CHANGE.

HE is, without any exception, the coolest young man it has ever been my unlucky fate to meet with. Mr. Theo Bligh, whom Claire and I regard almost as one of a hostile clan, who came uninvited, and remains on though he is unwanted; who is an interloper, and who must feel, if he has any feeling at all, that we consider him such, now quietly offers Claire an explanation about "our compact," as he persists in calling it.

"Miss Tim (what is your proper name, by the way?) and I have agreed to strike up a friendship on the sound and reasonable basis of perfect confidence and honest liking, with every particle of sentiment eliminated from it. It will do her good, for I shall be the soul of candour in my dealings with her, and tell her that she talks nonsense whenever she does talk nonsense; and in various ways I shall knock to pieces those rickety little edifices of prejudice that you and she are so fond of building up."

He says all this in his light, half-mocking, half-serious way. Appeal and a slightly patronising air are so strangely blended in his manner, that I am dubious as to whether I shall resent the freedom or fall into the fun of it. Before I have decided what line to take, Claire answers him, and staggers me.

"A very good thing for Tim, indeed, Mr. Bligh. We both want our rough edges worn off a little, it must be admitted." (Claire's manner is soft and harmonious as a piece of delicately tinted grey velvet.) "Won't you take the trouble to demolish some of my foolish prejudices too?"

"I should be adopting them, I suspect," he says in a low voice; and Claire seems not to hear him, for she has turned her head in the opposite direction, apparently much struck with some novel effect in the familiar landscape. When she does speak, it is to say—

"Tim's real name is Emma, but she has been Tim from the cradle."

"Have the twins any name?" he asks laughingly; "every one addresses them as 'you'."

"Yes—the twins are Mabel and Magdalen; they always speak together and think alike, I suppose you have observed. Tim and I wonder sometimes what will happen, for they are sure to fall in love with the same man."

"Awful catastrophe! Will he have to marry them both? I shouldn't mind it if they were like ——"

He breaks off abruptly, takes his hat off and runs his fingers through the little silky rings of dark brown hair that are lying on his forehead, and I see that the blood has rushed up to his face, and I hope that at length he is conscious of being a little too free and easy in his manner and remarks. With all his wild vivacity, with all his almost boyish boisterousness at times, sensitiveness enters largely into his organisation. You may read his feelings as clearly in his large greenish hazel eyes, as if they were lighted by the soul of a woman. Yes, undoubtedly, though he is a Bligh, he is the possessor of qualities and qualifications that are dazzling, and very likely to destroy one's judgment and sap one's reason. If he were only as handsome as a star it would not signify at all. But he is brilliant, and has all the highest intellectual faculties. The shape of his beautiful, proud-looking head, and the way in which it is poised on a

throat that is as slender and as delicately refined away at the back as a woman's, proves this. Taking all these facts into due consideration, and observing the signs of contrition (as I imagine) in his flushed face, I say reassuringly—

“I am sure I hope you'll have a better wife than either or both of the twins would be ; don't you, Claire ?”

“Perhaps he may have a wife already, who knows ? we know nothing about him,” Claire says, answering me, but looking with that wonderful long smiling look of hers at him. And he answers her with just such a look as her own, and says—

“No, there isn't that difficulty in my path to contend with, at any rate. Look here ; sit on this bench, won't you ?”

We sit down, and I am half conscious that the arrangement is made for the purpose of detaching himself from my side, and going nearer to Claire. As soon as we are seated he flings himself on the grass in front of her, and resumes—

“You're right in saying you know very little about me. If any one asked you, ‘Who and what is that fellow ?’ what would you say ?”

“Ask Tim,” Claire says ; “she's cleverer at description than I am.”

“No, no ; what would you say of me ?”

Claire's eyes flash out one look at him—is it of anger at his pertinacity ? While I am debating this question she solves it for me.

“I should say you were a friend of mine. Should I be right, Mr. Bligh ?”

He leaps up, and goes to windward of the trunk of a tree, where he employs the ensuing minute in lighting a cigar. He is certainly a queer mixture of carelessness and impetuosity. If he cared so much to hear what Claire would say were she questioned concerning him, he might take the trouble to make some comment when she condescends to tell him the sweet thing she would say of him.

But Claire does not seem annoyed at his inattention. She has her face turned towards him, but her lashes are drooping over her eyes, as if she would let him read her countenance if it so pleases him, but is careless as to the expression of his. I would rather that she showed slight anger against him, poor fellow ! than treat him with such profound indifference. Careless as he seems, such a course of conduct from Claire must hurt him.

He begins presently sauntering up and down in front of us, puffing rings of smoke out in jerks, and occasionally calling upon us to admire the skill with which he does it. I am divided between admiration for his versatility, and chagrin at his boyishness. If he were not so gracefully idle I should take my stand upon the friendship which he chooses to imagine exists between us, and reprove him for the way he is wasting his own time, and causing me to waste mine.

As he appears to be more intent upon the formation of his perfect rings of smoke than upon any effort to make himself agreeable to us, I try to talk to Claire as if we were alone, a thing no human being has ever succeeded in doing yet before a third person.

"I wish we were not going to this affair this afternoon," I say in a grumbling tone of voice. "Can't we get out of it?"

"We are told off to go, Tim, and, my dear, you'll like it much better than being at home when you get there," Claire says beamingly; "you know you always get on well where Sydney Dale is."

It is the first time that Claire has ever mentioned our old friend, playfellow, almost brother, Syd Dale, in connection with me, or any enjoyment I may possibly extract from any party at which he happens to be present. I am perplexed, and in my perplexity I grow embarrassed. Fancy me, Tim Vincent, being embarrassed about Sydney Dale ! I am vexed with myself, and almost for the first time in my life I am annoyed with Claire. By way of increasing my pleasurable sensations, Mr. Theo Bligh bursts into a fit of laughter, and says something about

my "having kept my horse dark," and Claire glances smilingly up at him, and seems to think there is wit in his slangy chaff.

For once I see Aunt Helen sailing along towards us without wishing her at some far distant corner of the earth from whence she may never return. Yet she approaches evidently in no very balmy mood. Displeasure is expressed in her heavy determined tread, and in her heavy determined chin. I shudder under the conviction that she is going to low reproof at me, and so she does.

"Tim," she begins, "if you had told your father, or told me, that you didn't intend to do that work for him this morning, I should have asked one of your sisters to do it, and spared him much inconvenience."

How is it that this woman can cover me at any given moment with the mantle of mortification that is the portion of a scolded child? In her presence I invariably forget my nineteen years, I lose my powers of judgment, I let go my self-possession. I stand now before her, cast down and abashed, as I used to stand in the old days, when phials of wrath were poured out over my head on account of torn pinafores and dirty hands.

Claire comes to my rescue instantly—

"This one of her sisters wouldn't have touched the copying, Aunt Helen; and papa wouldn't have thanked you if you had let the twins do it; he doesn't like his copy going to the printer's in their inane handwriting."

"It's very ungrateful of you all," Aunt Helen goes on ponderously. "You are not above benefiting by the results of your father's talents, but you're too idle to try and help him at all."

The words are addressed to me. Aunt Helen never openly attacks Claire, for Claire is very fearless in the matter of retort. However, now, I being still dumb, Claire chooses to treat the last remark as if it were addressed to her.

"I don't know about our benefiting so greatly by the prices papa gets for his novels," she says with a careless laugh; "by the time he had got your sables, and your

brougham, and your Roman cameos, there was very little left for us out of the results of the talent he had expended on his last three books."

Aunt Helen's head wags in wrath, which she probably deems it wise not to word, and we all go in to luncheon presently, with the humbled discontented feeling upon us that we have been in ignominious action, and that none of us have gained a victory, however insignificant. A cloud appears to have fallen upon the ordinarily irrepressible Mr. Theo Bligh. He has lost his appetite, his powers of speech, and his light, laughing, vivacious expression. His eyes have darkened, and a line or two has come across his forehead, which look as if they were drawn by that artist whose lightest touch is so unmistakable—temper!

I happen to go back into the dining-room after we have all dispersed after luncheon, in search of a book, and as I pass through the door I hear Theo Bligh say—

"I made her cut that copying this morning, so I shall stay at home and do it myself. How you try to bully that girl, Aunt Helen!"

He is standing just outside the open window, leaning against the side of the sash; she is inside with her back to the door. Happily I escape without my presence and the fact of my having overheard his speech being suspected by either of them. I forget my book, and rush up to our room, where Claire is dressing for the garden-party.

"He's the best-natured, dearest fellow in the world," I say impulsively; and then I tell Claire what he has said, and add, "He shall not think that I want to shirk it; I shall stay at home and work with him."

Claire is arranging the festoons of a delicate rose-coloured polonaise over the flouncings and puffings of a silver-grey skirt. Her hat is a combination in felt and silk and satin of the same colours. The counterparts of the costume and the hat are lying on the bed, ready for me to induct myself into them, and I feel almost heroic as I resolve to renounce them all, and stay at home scribbling for dear Duty's sake.

There is a little pause, during which my heart beats quickly at the recollection of his good-nature, of the ringing clear manliness of the tones in which he has expressed it—and at the prospect of that sympathetic companionship which I shall have with him this afternoon. Then Claire turns round, and I forget him, myself, everything; for Claire is paler than I ever saw her before, and it seems to me that it is the pallor of pain. She stands here an exquisite model of herself, but with all the bewitching piquancy of her beauty tamed and dulled.

“What is it?” I cry out, as she stands quite still, looking at me. And she gasps out a little short sigh, and sends one of her best smiles sparkling out from her eyes and mouth, and answers—

“Nothing; only how do I look? It seems to me that I want something stronger than pinks and greys.”

“It seems to me that you’re not well enough to go, Claire,” I say anxiously. “Stay at home with us.”

What have I said, that she winces so? Can it be possible that she has some special interest in going to this garden-party at the Brothertons’ of which I am ignorant?

“No, thank you, Tim,” she says, turning sharply round to face the glass again, and elaborating the arrangement of her veil; “nothing—no power on earth would induce me to stay at home this afternoon, so don’t go through the form of proposing it.”

She catches up her gloves and parasol, she gives me a hasty kiss, and runs out of the room. And when I follow her, feeling bewildered, I find her standing with papa and Aunt Helen in the hall, just going to get into the brougham.

As I appear on the scene in my morning dress, Aunt Helen surges towards me in amazement. “Why are you not dressed?” she begins; “how long do you mean to keep us waiting? Mr. Vincent, look at this!”

I stutter out an explanation of the cause of my determination to stay at home, and papa receives it with resignation. But Aunt Helen protests against it volubly, and for once Claire does not say a word for me. She is

already seated in the brougham looking out through the window that is farthest from the hall-door, perfectly uninterested in the discussion, apparently perfectly indifferent as to whether I go or stay at home. In the bitterness of my spirit at this novel neglect from her, I grow more obstinate! My beautiful sister evidently thinks that home is the proper place for unattractive Tim. All the humiliating "ugly princess" sensations beset me, and I turn away and run to the study and bury my head in a sofa-cushion, where I remain crying for the next quarter of an hour, in utter forgetfulness of the work I have stayed at home to do, of the one who is going to help me, of the pretty pink and grey costume, and the pleasure I might have experienced in wearing it if none of these things had happened—of everything, in short, save Claire, and the change in her.

I recall everything to my recollection with a jerk as a firm light step strikes upon my ear, and I raise a mottled, steaming, tear-furrowed face from the pillow just as Theo Bligh comes in through the window. He is singing and whistling, and smoking all at the same time, but he ceases from song and his cigar abruptly as he catches sight of me.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asks, and there is not a particle of pleasure at the sight of me in his tone.

"I heard what you said to Aunt Helen," I gurgle out, "quite by accident, and I couldn't let you think me lazy, so I wouldn't go to the Brothertons', I stayed to work with you."

"What a beastly bore!" he says, with most uncomplimentary emphasis, shying his hat at a bust of Sir Walter Scott. "You have gone and upset everything, Tim. I wanted you to go and enjoy yourself with your Sydney Dale, and to do away with the possibility of Aunt Helen finding fault with you; and your staying at home will spoil it all."

He speaks in a seriously vexed and disappointed tone.

"Aunt Helen can bear the idea of my losing any pleasure very calmly," I say bitterly. I did not expect raptures from him, but I did expect something like a cordial recognition from him of my evident desire to show gratitude to him and to make him think well of me.

"Well! you are a goose," he says, with a sigh. "Here, you've done it now, so we may as well make the best of it. Poor Tim! you're always in for it in some way or other; they will both be awfully annoyed with you for staying at home."

"Aunt Helen is always annoyed with me, whatever I do," I say with vigour; "and as for Sydney Dale! I don't know what Claire could have meant; I ——"

"I wasn't thinking of Sydney Dale," he interrupts quietly. "Never mind; I'm glad you have stayed at home, any way, though it was my bounden duty to reprove you for it at first. Now, look here: let us clear off this business as soon as we can, and then go out for a prowl."

I joyfully fall into his present mood, and pleasant proposition. For an hour we scratch away incessantly without speaking. Then, as I finish my portion of the task, I say—

"I have done."

"And I shall have done in five minutes. Go and get your hat," he says in a most fraternal tone of despotism, and I go away as promptly as if it were his place to command, my duty to obey.

It must be purity of conscience, and a sense of duty done, which makes my spirit seem so light now. Not even the sight of the pink and grey costume causes me a pang of regret for possible pleasure missed—not even the recollection of the mystery that came into Claire's manner just before her departure has power to cast a gloom over me. For once in my grown-up life I am supremely, excitedly happy! For once I see, with a delighted joy for the expression of which words are weak, I am looking well!

All sign of the storm which has raged within me has

passed away. My eyes are no longer heavy, red-lidded, dull, and hopeless. My complexion, now that the tear-stains are effaced, is white in the summer heat, warm with rosy reflections. And the coils of hair that I am winding round my head in thick soft rolls, it is unjust of any one to call it red, when everybody calls the same shade "beautiful" when they see it on the heads of the women in the paintings of the old Venetian masters.

Though my heart is beating, though my hands are trembling with impatience to be down and setting out on this prowl which he has proposed, the instinct of making myself look as well as I can is thoroughly roused within me, and I steadily pursue it. The passion for being pretty, which lives in every woman's heart, has been dormant hitherto in me. But it is awakened now, and I cherish it into strength, greet it gladly as a friend who has been unfairly swept away from me. I open our common wardrobe and take a hasty survey of the dresses that are hanging therein. Aunt Helen has always insisted on keeping me in pallid hues, "to tone down the vulgar warmth of my hair," she says. I have been condemned to indisposed greens and blues. To-day I will have none of them! Fraught with a sudden resolve to make the best of myself, and to find out if, after all, that best is so unattractive, I snatch down a bronzed-gold semi-transparent dress of Claire's that appears to be made of idealised silk, and array myself in it.

It is one of those partially loose French bodices which adapt themselves to any figure if properly made, and it adapts itself to mine marvellously. My experiment has succeeded! As I finish myself off at the neck and wrists with some ruffles of old point lace, and put a black velvet hat with a metallic looking feather in it, that turns to flame-colour in the sun, on my head, I curtsy to myself in gratitude for all I have done for myself.

I am a different being as I go down-stairs. No fairy godmother ever effected a greater change than has been effected in me by this sudden fancy of mine. And I

know, though I have great pleasure in Claire's dress and hat, that the change comes from within more than from without.

At any rate, the change is such, that when I go in, trying to look unconscious, and say, "I am ready," he looks at me with such a look as mortal man has never bestowed upon me before—with such a look as Claire is in the habit of receiving from the great majority—and says—

"It was a happy thought of yours to stay at home this afternoon, Tim. I shouldn't have known what to do without you."

The others being out, and the twins not counting as anything in the family calculations, I have the delicious feeling upon me of being as free as air, and I take the responsibility of disposing of myself upon myself with a vivacious ardour that amuses him.

"We'll go to the otter-pool," I propose. "It's only two miles from here, and if we take Heartless and Music with us we may have some fun. We may do what we like until it's time to come home to the eight o'clock dinner."

"I'll take your father's pole," he says, and then we go round to the kennel, and take the two old otter-hounds, who have been in many an otter fray, and start on an expedition that Aunt Helen would countermand with a bellow, if she were only conscious of it.





CHAPTER IV.

“MUSIC” AND “HEARTLESS.”

IT is half-past four by the time we get fairly under weigh, and start for the otter-pool. The air is sultry. There is a hush in nature's usual noises; and a cloudy splendour in the atmosphere, that is langour-inducing, but very delightful, as we have nothing to do but enjoy it. We saunter very slowly over the lawn, through the wilderness, down into the meadows, through which the river twists and turns in a thousand involutions. We are rather proud of our river in these parts. It takes its rise in the bosom of some hills that tower in the heart of a broad expanse of moorland, whose shadow we can just see in the far horizon, from our lawn. And it has many of the wild and free characteristics of its birth-place, at some portions of its career. But here, in the meadow-lands under our house, the Raven glides along gaily and brightly, under over-arching trees, between flower-laden banks, like a river in a pastoral poem.

The meadow-sweet in tempting profusion is perfuming the air; the great golden king-cups are rearing their heads tantalisingly near to the bank; the water ripples, ripples along, with a dreary murmur; there is no breeze abroad, but some aspens shiver according to their wont, and make light whisperings to which I feel induced to

pause and listen. It is all familiar, and yet it is all strange to me to-day. I must have been steeped in this atmosphere, have seen these flowers bloom, have listened to these sounds, hundreds of times in the course of the nineteen summers of my life. Yet I realise them all for the first time to-day; and I realise them with an intensity of enjoyment that has a dash of pain in it.

We stroll along the bank, and I get my arms filled with meadow-sweet, and king-cups, and spoil one sleeve of Claire's almost new dress with the wet stem and foliage of a water-lily. Never mind! I am having my day—hardly that, but my hour. The future must take care of itself.

When we reach the otter-pool, our keenness for the sport has considerably diminished. The hounds sniff about a cavernous looking hole in the bank for a few minutes, and then lie down and pant, as if they were almost relieved to find that the old dog-otter, who has given them so many tough days' work, is absent. I sit and make ridiculous wreaths, which I twine about my hat, and round the necks of Music and Heartless; and Mr. Theo Bligh performs feats of skill with the pole, balancing it on the top of his head, on the palms of his hands; finally, he is so appallingly boyish, he tries to do it on his nose, and papa's favourite pole splashes into the river and glides away down-stream.

He shies stones and sticks at it to accelerate its progress, and does not make the slightest effort to recover it, until I tell him that the loss of papa's pet pole would cause cark and care at Ravensbourne. Then he splashes into the river as carelessly as he suffered the pole to fall in, and presently comes out with his salvage, wet up to his waist.

He pooh-poohs all my representations as to the certainty of his catching cold. He disregards all my entreaties that he will run back to the house for dry clothing and hot brandy-and-water. He laughs at me for being such a goose as to be wistfully, genuinely anxious about him. He has "been wet through

hundreds of times in his life," he tells me, as he sits down by my side—"wet through for days and nights together, and no one ever cared before whether he died of damp or dry-rot."

A sudden irrepressible desire to know more about him, to know something of his past, of his prospects, of his age, of his hopes and wishes, seizes me, and I blurt out awkwardly in my earnestness—

"Are not you and your family very fond of one another? or have you been separated from them a good deal?"

"I was in the proud and happy position before I came down here of 'caring for nobody—no not I, and nobody caring for me,'" he rejoins lightly. "Yes, by the way, I was rather fond of Aunt Helen before I came here—very fond of her, I may say," he adds thoughtfully.

"And don't you feel quite as fond of her now?" I strive to say it as one who is strictly impartial and unprejudiced. But a glow of pride and something sweeter shoots through my being, and makes me falter from the new warmth it puts into me. He is chivalrously displeased on my account with his Aunt Helen! Well, if her hate wins me his liking, I am satisfied. I listen eagerly for his next words. They come.

"How magnificently Claire stands up at her and pays back shot for shot," he says admiringly. "By the way, Miss Tim, why don't you fight your own battles? all the fighting Claire does is on your account, I observe."

"Claire always has been able to speak and to fight, and to do everything better than I can," I say truthfully. And then he leans his head on his elbow quite close to me, and says, in that tenderly confidential way of his which becomes him as well as any other of his many manners,—

"Look here: you and I get on so well, that we ought to know more about each other than we do. I want you to take an interest in me, Tim. Am I not a selfish fellow to ask it?"

Selfish! If ever I think the curled darling at my side "selfish" for desiring me to be interested in him, what a cold and hardened woman I shall have become! Why, his mere presence to-day has had the effect upon me that the gracious sun has upon a half-opened flower that has been nipped by a cutting wind! Like a woman, I am ready instantly to render him far fuller service than he requires at my hands. Like a fool, I make manifest this readiness.

"I wish I could do more good to you than 'take an interest in you,'" I say: "that's no good from me, but I do it already. Neither Claire nor I can help liking you, though we made up our minds to leave you to the twins when you came here first; and after your kindness to me to-day, of course we shall like you better. How I wish we could do more for you!"

"Claire and you hunt in couples, don't you?" he asks—"at least, you always speak of 'us' and 'we.' I suppose you're entirely in each other's confidence."

"Entirely," I say, with energy.

"You're the dearest little thing in the world, Tim," he says, tearing my fading flowers from my hand, and taking that member into his own safe keeping. "Let me see! What was I going to say? Oh yes, I want to tell you what I have been about all my life, and what I wish to do now."

He tells the tale of a bereft childhood, of a neglected and heart-hungry boyhood, of a manhood marked by failure, of passionate yearnings for love that has never been yielded to him, of misused opportunities, of a naturally careless nature growing gradually more and more reckless until it has been arrested in its downward course by ——

"By what?" I question eagerly, as he pauses abruptly in his narrative, and sends a flat pebble skimming along the surface of the water; and when all the "ducks and drakes" it leaves in its track have widened away, he answers,—

"By coming in contact with you."

He does not say more than this, and I sit in silence, stultified almost by a feeling of overweening happiness, letting the sweet truth sink into my heart. I am in Paradise! I, the ugly duck of the family, have unwittingly established such an influence over this erring Apollo that he has selected me as his guide, philosopher, and friend. Woe for me if it turns out to be but a fool's paradise after all.

Presently into the midst of our meditations the twins come, homeward bound from a walk and a visit to the rectory. They are warm and fluttered. They are cooing as they approach about some visitors who have just arrived at the Polands', and who appear to have created a lively interest in their virgin breasts—too great an interest, happily for me, for them to do more than manifest a fleeting surprise at the scene upon which they have chanced, and the situation of the actors in it.

"The Polands are going to walk up after dinner and bring their friends with them, Tim; won't it be nice?" Mabel says.

"And we'll all play croquet," Magdalen says; "and we ought to go home now and dress for dinner. We're going to wear our blues. Claire will be in pink, you know; and hadn't you better put on— Why! good gracious, Tim! you've got on Claire's dress."

In a spasm of mortification at this ruthless exposure of my weak attempt to deck my ugliness in his eyes by means of borrowed plumes, I exclaim, angrily,—

"Don't be so foolish, Magdalen."

"Have Claire and you swopped, then?" Mabel asks, and I rise up reluctantly, for I see Theo Bligh is laughing, and beg my sisters not to talk of matters which they do not understand, and suggest that we had better all go home without delay.

My hour is over, and no mistake. It was such a golden one, and now in a moment it is tarnished. Theo Bligh roars with most unsympathetic laughter, when Mabel (who always experiences a difficulty in detaching what mind she has from anything to which she has fastened it)

babbles on that she "really thought it was Claire, until she caught sight of my red hair." He has cast away every atom of the manly seriousness that he had exhibited while we were alone, and all the way home he amuses us with impromptu comic operettas. He dances a breakdown at a cow, until that outraged animal bellows and stamps its foot savagely, on which the twins scream, and appropriate him as their protector, clinging to his arms, and altogether demoralising me by making ghastly boobies of themselves. And lastly, he places the last straw on my overweighted spirit, by singing, "Look down below, lady! look down below," and holding out his arms in an impassioned way to a lady who is standing on a hill not far off—an austere conventional woman of whom papa thinks very highly, because she reads all his books, and makes a point of praising them to his face. All this buffoonery would have amused me very much a day or two ago. But to-day, after the insight he has given me into his higher nature, it mortifies and irritates me to see what a boy he becomes on the shortest notice, with or without sufficient cause.

We reach home, and find that papa, Aunt Helen, and Claire have not returned yet, and that it is half-past seven o'clock. There is plenty of time to dress. The twins, still babbling about the Polands and the Polands' friends (the creatures who are coming to play croquet), melt away into their own room, discoursing to each other as to what flower they shall wear with their blues. Theo remains outside on the terrace, clinging to the last ashes of one of his pet cigars, and I get myself into my own room, and try to decide as to the best way of telling Claire "all about it" at once when she comes in. And the mere thinking of it makes me cavil at the phrase "all about it." What is it? What have I to tell? Nothing, absolutely nothing, save that I have been ridiculously happy, and ridiculously cast down.

I sit down on the sofa at the foot of the bed, and lazily proceed to take off the old point lace which I had put on some hours before with ecstatic haste. I go on,

after my usual habit, to empty my pocket, and I find a letter there—a letter which I leisurely open and begin reading: “I have nothing to offer you but love ——” and I pause, and dash the letter back into my pocket, shot through the heart by the sudden remembrance that it is not my property, but Claire’s.

I shiver at finding myself on the brink of a discovery concerning Claire which she, my confidante, my sister, my idol, has sedulously concealed from me. Curiosity claims me for his own. Who has been loving Claire lately? I haven’t seen anything symptomatic of such a state of things in any one who has been about the house for the last few weeks. Perhaps (my heart leaps lightly at the thought) it is our old friend, Sydney Dale. But why hasn’t she told me?

She comes into the room as I am bewildering myself about it, and I see at a glance that she is the Claire I have known all my life, and not the chilled and altered being who left me in uncertainty early in the afternoon. She has enjoyed herself very much, and Sydney Dale has come home with them, she tells me. And then I disburden my mind, and tell her how I have worn her dress, and spent my afternoon and spoilt her sleeve, and nearly read her letter!

She listens with keen, but not displeased attention. When I finish, she says, with her sudden smile that is like a sun-burst, “I’m glad you didn’t read the folly;” and she takes the letter out of the pocket, tears it into a dozen pieces, and as she throws it away, says with an air of relief, “That’s done with, any way. Come, darling Tim! let me help you to dress; I’m ready arrayed, you know. Who are these friends of the Polands’?”

“I don’t know,” I answer curtly, for I want to get back to the subject of Theo. Bligh, and what he has said, and how he has said it, and how I really wish her to like him, for that there is a great deal more in him than she imagines. And she just wafts aside all these remarks of mine in her airiest manner.

“You dear Tim!” she says, when I become very

pertinacious and try to insist on her saying that she will take an interest in him, and will not suffer herself to be blindly prejudiced against him any longer. “You dear Tim! you’re satisfied with him, and surely that is enough for all purposes—for his and for yours; what more do you want?”

“That you should do him justice,” I cry earnestly.

“I do him full justice; I estimate him very thoroughly, I assure you, dear Tim. I never saw you look so jolly as you do to-night; but I’m perplexed about something for your hair: you must wear my jet comb;” and she drags her comb out of her own lovely, cloudy hair, and fastens my ruddy coils up with it.

“And what will you wear?” I ask.

“Nothing. Did you never feel too tired to care to look well, Tim? I am feeling so to-night. What use has the face and figure you all call so pretty been to me? It has never brought me happiness yet, and it never will—I feel sure of that. I’m sick of everything.” She winds up with startling vehemence, and then she puts her arms round my neck, and says, “Tim, don’t you make any mistake, dear. Enjoy this pleasant, selfish young wretch’s society, but don’t get to care more about him than you would for one of the beasts that perish. I shall come to curse him if he casts a cloud over you.”

She is not like herself. She is metamorphosed from my pretty *debonnaire* Claire into a Vengeance for this moment. As the second dinner-bell is ringing, I have only time to say—

“I wish you would take the trouble to know him a little better. You wouldn’t misjudge him after one such conversation as he and I have had together this afternoon.” And she answers, as we fly down-stairs—

“I’ll take your word for it. You’re looking your best, Tim—that’s the chief consideration with me to-night.”

We have a comfortable dinner on the whole. Very often the occupants of a country house in the summer season come to the stage of hating each other all round by dinner time, in consequence of having had each other

to entertain all day long. But this day we have been separated by the grace of the Brothertons, and so are fully equal to the task of tackling one another at the dinner-table. Moreover, a fresh element is introduced—Sydney Dale dines with us.

How shall I describe Sydney Dale! Dear old fellow, he lives in my memory as one of the dearest, and best, and best-looking of God's creatures! But, somehow or other, I invariably forget all about him directly he is gone. But papa always says he "might be a model for a Hercules, he is such a splendidly grown, and proportioned fellow." Be kind enough to imagine Hercules in the broad-cloth of to-day, and you will save me an immense deal of descriptive trouble.

Papa is in one of his best moods to-night, and his best moods are delightful. I am sitting next to him, and he makes me recount to him the story of the afternoon. He is pleased to find that his copy is ready for the printer, he is amused at the impromptu otter-hunt which ended in nothing, he is pleased to observe that I am looking very much better than he ever saw me look before. By his manner he makes me of importance in my own eyes, and in the eyes of the others; and just as the spirit of elation is causing me to forget everything that is outside this temporary proud position, he says—

"I shall be glad when I hear that young fellow is thinking of going, Tim. Aunt Helen doesn't say anything about it, but I can see that she is annoyed at his prolonging his visit; she feels that she was the cause of his coming here—innocent as she was of it."

"Why, she asked him here!" I say indignantly. "She wished him to marry the twins, and she's only savage now because she sees ——"

I stop in confusion, and papa asks incisively—

"What does she see?"

"That he doesn't want to marry them, I suppose," I answer in a crestfallen way.

"Whether he wants to marry the twins or not is of very little consequence," papa says quietly. "You're clever

enough, Tim, to know that he's no match for one of my daughters. If you think Claire is likely to make a fool of herself, tell me."

"Claire make a fool of herself—with him, do you mean? Oh, papa, how blind you are!" I say; and he laughs and calls me his "ingenuous Tim."





CHAPTER V.

IN LOVE AND DOUBT.

“When first I met thee young and warm,
There hung such truth about thee.”



WHY do I feel like a pariah and an outcast this night? I have done nothing wrong, nothing deserving of censure, and yet here I am stranded on the lone, lorn shore of my own self during that depressing half hour after dinner which we ladies enjoy by ourselves. Claire is tenderly loving to me when she does speak, but she does seem to dislike speaking so very much to-night. She has “talked herself out at the garden-party,” she says. “Will I mind letting her rest and be thankful for the fact that she need not exert herself any more to-night?” As for the twins, they are swamped in their expectations of pleasure consequent upon the arrival of the Polands and the Polands’ friends. And as for Aunt Helen!—I recoil from her. I have never liked her, but to-night I hate her as if she were an ugly Fate. She has only spoken one sentence to me, but in that one sentence there are worlds of venom.

“If I were in your place, Tim, I wouldn’t make myself so cheap as you are doing. Nothing will come of it but mortification; and for your father’s sake I would avert that.”

She is so large, fair, and placid—she is so palpably

“right,” that original sin prompts me to rise up and beat her, and I have hard work to withstand the promptings of original sin. I have not self-possession enough nor hypocrisy enough to pretend to misunderstand her. I know that she means me to feel that I have been indiscreet, unmaidenly, in wandering away through the heavy, luscious, heat-oppressed air, to rippling streams and quiet meadows with Theo Bligh. But though I smart under the dull lash of her disapprobation, how I enjoy the remembrance of my indiscretion! how I long for him to come in that I may read in his eyes—in those wonderful eyes that reflect every emotion, and flash and cloud like a summer storm—how I long to read in them that he remembers it too, and likes the memory!

I pant for sympathy! it is no use. Claire is tired and not inclined to be talkative; but at least she can listen. I plant myself on a footstool at her feet, I loll my head back on her lap, I take her tiny darling hands in mine (I am at fever heat to-night, but her hands burn mine), and I say—

“We had such a delicious ramble along by the otter-pool, Claire: I never saw the place look so lovely as it did to-day.”

“Why on earth can’t you use idiomatic English, and say you had a ‘pleasant walk,’” Claire answers testily: “people never ‘ramble’ in real life; it’s confined to those abominable little children’s books where all the exemplary characters behave unnaturally.”

“You have no idea how sensibly Theo Bligh can talk when he gets alone with one,” I say confidentially, though I feel rather crushed by the way in which Claire seems disposed to treat my conversational advances.

“I should recommend your getting alone with him very often, then, for he certainly very rarely talks sensible when there is more than one present.”

“I know that he wishes you to like him, Claire,” I plead earnestly, for I cannot bear to think that Claire’s hand is against us too. It is quite trying enough to have papa and Aunt Helen drawn up in battle array against the

furtherance of this sudden friendship between Theo and myself, which seems to me in its dawning to be the sweetest thing the world can ever hold for me.

"How very good of him to give a thought to me in the matter!" Claire says languidly. "I am not the rose, but I am near it. Dear Tim," she cries, rousing up into sudden animation, "take care! Sydney Dale is worth a dozen of this fickle, feather-headed young fellow, who will gather women just as he did my tea-roses last night, that their sweetness may please him for a moment before he throws them away."

"I am sure you misunderstand him," I say in a low voice, for Aunt Helen has surged up to within ear-shot; and before I can get Claire all to myself again, the Polands and their friends come in, and Theo Bligh and Sydney Dale saunter up to the open window with their cigars in their mouths.

The twins unquestionably are lacking in the great womanly gifts of tact and discernment. These two men who accompany Mr. and Mrs. Poland are as unlikely to indulge in gay fooling among the croquet hoops with my expectant sisters as they are to play leap-frog or balance otter-poles on their noses, after the manner of Theo Bligh.

The elder of the two, Mr. Murray, is a man with a name in literature, and a reputation that ought to have filtered through their ears to the minds of the twins, for they must have heard frequent mention of him. Papa quotes him often as the most classical of living English writers, as a purist in style, as a man who ought to do a great deal more than he—ever has done, or ever will do. Papa knows him already, it appears; but the rest of us see him for the first time to-night, and this is how he looks, and what he seems to me to be.

He is of middle age, rather stout, and very pale, with a singularly sweet smile, and singularly sympathetic brilliant eyes. He is devoid of those attributes of commanding height and deportment which often cause a man to be called distinguished looking, but he is so by the mere

force of a most perfectly organised and most thoroughly refined intellect. Without being skilled in physiognomy I can tell at once that the man sitting so quietly by me is an ardent-natured, keen-minded man—a gentleman, a humorist, a scholar—and a failure.

There is a buzz at the other end of the room, where every one is holding forth at once, it appears to me. But here by the couch, from which Claire has just risen and walked away, there is twilight silence. I am still on the footstool, leaning my head back against the sofa cushion, and Mr. Murray has taken a seat close to me, and I am watching him with interest, for his plain mobile face has won my liking already.

“Your father is a fortunate fellow to have you all grown up about him,” he begins. “When I go out of my study it is into rooms that are dull and devoid of every trace of a feminine presence, excepting that of the housemaid’s—which is not an attractive one.”

I cast about in my mind for a suitable answer, and can find none. Is he bachelor, widower, or childless married man with a dull wife who has no taste? I develop a decided distaste to the unconscious Mrs. Murray instantly, but I refrain from expressing it, and fall back upon my own family for conversational sustenance.

“Papa could spare the twins very well indeed,” I say with injudicious frankness: “they’re pretty enough to look at, but they bore him.”

“He couldn’t spare your other sister and you so well, then, you mean me to understand?” he says smiling.

“Well I’m not pretty to look at,” I say, rising up, “but I’m useful to papa; and Claire is—but you saw her?”

“A lovely creature!” he says in his soft, slow tone of perfect appreciation. “Is that your brother?” he asks, pointing to Theo, who is leaning half in at the window, talking in subdued tones to Claire. My heart gives a satisfied bound—Claire is not going to be unreasonably antagonistic to him.

“No, he is not a brother; he’s a great friend who is staying with us.”

"He's a nice looking lad," Mr. Murray says, composedly; and I have hard work to subdue my inclination to go away from our stranger guest, and leave him to meditate on his gross sin of commission. To speak of the handsomest living creature as "a nice looking lad!" Annoyance keeps me silent.

"They're a bonnie pair," my unconscious tormentor continues, and I can stand it no longer. The figures of Claire and Theo are receding in the dim distance on the lawn. I feel that I, too, must go out into the fresh air. Out of politeness, and not out of any desire for his society now I say—

"It's pleasanter out in the garden; will you come?"

He follows me, and we go out. Sydney Dale, Mr. Poland, and the twins are simply banging about the balls. Papa and the other stranger are having a political argument. Aunt Helen has fallen a prey to a long statement, which Mrs. Poland feels herself called upon to make, concerning the shortcomings of her domestics. Claire and Theo are out of sight; and Mr. Murray claims attention at my hands.

We have been taught our social duty well in this respect. Papa never suffers us to neglect a guest; so now, though I would rather stand aside and conjecture why and where my sister and my friend have gone, I am obliged to exert myself.

"You live in London, I suppose?" I say.

"Yes; in a barn of a house in Russell Square, where I am alone chiefly, but where I sometimes get two very distinct sets of visitors—the only ones who ever come to brighten and bless my solitude."

I don't like to ask him of whom he speaks, but I suppose I look as if I wished to know, for he goes on—

"Shall I tell you about them? The ones who come to brighten my solitude are a set of Bohemians, excellent good fellows, all of them, clever, and hard-working; and, by Jove! nearly as unsuccessful as I am myself—fellows whose plays are damned, and who are always out of the way when Fame blows her trumpet and Fortune

distributes her gifts, but right good fellows for all that, who manage to say much better things than ever get into print."

"And the others?" I question eagerly, for again he has caught my interest, and won my sympathy.

"The others are the visions of a very brief bit of by-gone happiness, Miss Vincent. I lost my poor wife about a year ago. I never cared to look back—the present and the future were enough for me while one of the most beautiful and the best of God's creatures lived for me, and loved me; her beauty and her goodness kept me straight, and made me work; but she died just when I wanted her most, and now I've only myself to take care of myself for, so the inducement to be careful isn't strong."

In my vast pity for his sorrow and his solitariness, in my longing to be able to comfort him ever so little, I take up my injudicious parable, and say—

"But who can tell what may happen, Mr. Murray? You're not old enough to give up everything and let yourself drift, though you have had such a great grief. I shall always be sorry when I hear of you now. I shall think of you writing in a gloomy study. Does it look into a garden?" I hastily pull up to ask.

"It looks out against a dead wall which is frequently decorated with chalk by the tradesmen's boys."

"Have you any flowers in your window?"

"Not a leaf, not a flower, and I never see a bit of blue in the sky half the size of Helen's eyes!" he adds tenderly—"God in Heaven, to think that they should have closed in their last sleep before mine!"

For a minute or two there is silence between us. A heavy cloud of sorrow is over his face, and I dare not try to lift it by any frivolous utterance—and any utterance of mine would be frivolous after that last most solemn one of his. At the end of the minute a servant stumps out with a tray, and some slender-necked bottles. He rouses himself to say—

"There is a time for everything, though, and this seems

to be the time for some Rudesheimer. May I give you some?"

I shake my head. I hate the interruption. Had it not been for this he would have gone on talking about himself, and his dead wife, and I am in a mood to sympathise thoroughly with the element of melancholy to-night. The spirits that had been so high down by the otter-pool are quenched now. Moreover, independent of my selfish desire to listen to tones that are congenial and that treat of a subject that does not demand animation or a show of anything but quiet interest—independent of all this, it appeals to the latent spirit of poetry within me to hear this man lamenting his lost wife. It sounds to me almost like a page from an antique romance. Her beauty, her beneficent influence over him, her early death, her unforgotten memory! I hate the Rudesheimer which has put an end to the pathos of the situation, and left me time for wondering vaguely again where Claire and Theo Bligh have gone.

Mrs. Poland has wound up her narrative of wrongs which she has suffered at the hands of a contumacious cook, and a carnal-minded housemaid who has been seen to smile upon a rising baker. Papa has brought his political argument to a close. The four croquet players have given up the effete attempt to play a game about which they even fail to feign an interest. The atmosphere is far clearer than it has been all day, and the moon is sailing high in the cloudless heavens. What is it that oppresses, nearly chokes me, that weighs me down and enervates me as the burden and heat of the day failed to do? Sydney Dale advances to my side just as papa walks up to join Mr. Murray.

"I have been envying you your daughters, Vincent," the latter says; and I return a short and decided negative to Sydney's proposition that I should go down on the lawn, for I want to hear how my new friend will talk to a man.

"They're not bad for a scratch team, are they?" papa says, laughing. "They all have their vocations, and they

fulfil them tolerably well. The twins have a faculty for decorating drawing-rooms, both with their presence and with wool-work : it's astonishing how useful girls are who know how to sit about judiciously, and listen to the right things."

"And what is your vocation?" Mr. Murray asks me in his soft slow tones.

"To understand what is meant, and to be able to read through the lines of what is said—which not one woman in a thousand can do," papa answers for me, putting his hand kindly on my shoulder. "Claire's is to send men to the devil."

"She has never done so yet," I put in.

"She's doing it fast enough now," papa mutters; and then I know that he has harked back to that absurd idea of his as to there being something between Claire and Theo.

"She isn't the only one of the family on whom that great gift has been bestowed," Mr. Murray says as placidly as if he were saying good-morning; and I glance quickly at him, to find those large soft brilliant eyes of his, that are as tender and true as a woman's, bent upon me admiringly. And my vanity is flattered. There is balm in Gilead still for me! At any rate, this clever brilliant man must recognise in me a certain intelligence which in his estimation compensates for the want of that personal attractiveness which I never strongly coveted until to-day.

"Why wouldn't you come to the Brothertons', Tim," Sydney is muttering on my other side. "I was in to play for the hunt eleven against the ——th eleven this afternoon, but I gave it up and sent my brother as my substitute, for I made sure you would be at the Brothertons'."

"How silly of you, Syd," I say in a superior tone, "to give up cricket when you were wanted to come to the Brothertons', where probably they could have done just as well without you. I always thought the dog such a fool for dropping the bone and snapping at the shadow."

He stands up before me, tall, strong, broad, florid.

and brotherly. The face that has, ever since he was a sturdy little boy and I a bony-elbowed little girl, been bent kindly upon me, is bending kindly down at me now. And I look up at him, and take keen note of the facts that, though there is plenty of strength in his youthful, vigorous frame, there is no grace, and that his mouth and chin have certain heavy lines about them, and that his eyes do not scintillate, and cloud, and lighten, and sparkle out a thousand tender possibilities, like—ah! like his who comes swinging suddenly into our midst at this juncture, and flings himself down on the grass by the side of my seat.

“Where is Claire?” I ask; and, half against my will, my head inclines towards him, and I feel that I am a very weak Clytie, and he a very powerful sun-god.

“Gone into the house with Aunt Helen, and a headache,” he answers. “I wish you would come and take a stroll, Tim. I haven’t half finished my cigar.”

I rise up obediently, and papa glances carelessly at us as we move off in the moonlight. I am not Claire! Papa is not in the least afraid. I throw off some of the unaccountable weight that has been oppressing me, by drawing one of those long breaths that are almost sighs; and he asks,—

“What are you panting about?”

“I am not panting,” I say indignantly; “only I have talked my throat dry, and I feel tired.”

“Who did you find to talk to—the fat old fellow who was sitting by you when I came up, or your rustic Hercules?”

Now, I am only a woman, and moreover I am only a woman who is weakened and shaken by the first approach of the passion which is the holiest, the most heartrending, the highest, and the most humiliating, love! But, above all things, I am loyal. I have the fidelity of a dog to the friends who are only wrong in being absent.

“There are some men one never ought to speak of in that way,” I say quickly. “Mr. Murray can charm anyone who has brains into forgetfulness of his personal

appearance altogether. And don't sneer about Syd Dale ; I've told you already he's as dear as a brother to us, and even you shall not say a word against him."

"Cease, rude Boreas!" he says coolly, patting my head. "Young ladies should not bluster forth the state of their affections. Well! I didn't get you down here to bother you either about the man of mind or the man of matter. I wanted to tell you that I'm going away to-morrow."

I stop suddenly as if I had been shot, and my face must be ghastly in the moonlight, for I can feel it tightening and quivering with the pain of keeping back the hot tears of disappointment, love, and agony, which have rushed into my eyes. I can't speak. I can only stand still and suffer.

"Don't take it like this, Tim;" and his face, which expresses every feeling and thought, is alive with pity, and radiant with a tenderness that seems to me so great a thing to have won from him, that I have a difficulty in restraining myself from going down on my knees and thanking him in my gratitude. Timely reflection saves me from making such a spectacle of myself, but still I cannot speak.

"Don't take it like this, Tim," he repeats; "the first time was bad enough, but this ——"

"It is the first time," I interrupt with a jerk; "that's what staggered me so; just as Claire and I are getting used to you, you go away."

"By order of Aunt Helen," he says savagely. "But you must write to me, Tim; I can't be cut off from you altogether."



CHAPTER VI.

“AFTER THAT PARTING ON THE LAWN.”



I am a girl who has not been brought up to consider that when a man has said “so much,” then by all the laws of chivalry he ought to say so much more. In other words, it has not been a part of our system of education to study the question of intentions. Nevertheless, woman, whether lovely or the reverse, is so uncommonly ready to stoop to folly, that I now allow myself to feel that I have been cheated in a measure—that Theo Bligh has said too much, and too little—that he has led me on to beggar myself, and does not care to be enriched by my offering! But I am taking a first sharp lesson in the absolute necessity of self-control, and I struggle to seem the same Tim I had been down by the otter-pool, and say,—

“Yes: I’ll write to you when I have anything to say.”

“Now, what do you mean by that?” he asks in his tone of bantering superiority. “You’re quite clever enough to write a very amusing letter, whether you have anything to say or not. You can always tell me how the wind is blowing here, you know, and how Claire and you run the gauntlet of the attentions of your friend Sydney Dale. Won’t you care, either, to hear how I am getting on, Tim?” he winds up with, coming to a full stop in front of me, taking both my hands, and bending his

handsome head to look at me something after the fashion of the Black Brunswicker.

The moonbeams stream down upon us, and he is clearly revealed to me as we stand in the middle of the lawn. His eyes look sad and deep; his face is robbed of all its light, laughing brilliancy! He does feel this fiat which decrees that he shall leave Ravensbourne to be a hard one! He does feel leaving me!

"I'll write to you, or,—or do anything else you ask me to do," I say with a rush. "It's cruel that you should have to go when you wish to stay; it's barbarous that she should have so much authority over you, even if she is your aunt, as to be able to turn you out from a friend's house ——"

"I daresay I shall manage to rub on some way or other," he puts in with a quick relapse into carelessness; "very likely I shall turn up again some day or other, and in the meantime you'll write to me?"

Once more I agree to his request, but faintly this time. It is so little after so much. I cannot feel any enthusiasm for a correspondence that will, my intuition tells me, be a one-sided one; for I am beginning to divine that Mr. Theo Bligh is of the order that absorbs rather than gives out glory. However, I agree to write to him, as I would agree to do anything else he asked me to do. But I am depressed by the poverty of this interview, which stands out in such marked contrast to the wealth of pleasure I had derived from the stroll to the river-side.

"Now I think we may as well go in, don't you?" he says. "Jolly well the room looks from here, doesn't it?"

I look in at the brightly lighted drawing-room, and this time I cannot acquiesce in what he has said. The room does not look well to me, for I have to return to it, and it is full of people, and when we go back all chance of my having one more word in private with him will be over. I am infatuated with him, but I do shiver at his callousness in forgetting this fact.

He irritates me as we saunter back towards the open window by breaking into song, in a jerky way, between the languid puffs he is giving at his cigar ; and my heart contracts with a spasm as the conviction darts into it that he does not ache as I do at the thought of this approaching parting. He had been nothing to me—to any of us a few days ago, and now the idea of indifference to us stings me into saying, just before we step into the room,—

“What a free and happy state of things it is when one doesn't care whether one goes or stays in a place !”

“Are you making roundabout allusions now to me, or to yourself?” he asks quite gaily. “If they are about yourself, they're very improper. Young ladies ought to care whether they go from or stay in their homes ; and if they're about me, you're mistaken, for I'd very much rather stay than go—you ought to know that very well, Tim.”

He is not a young man who deems it worth his while to drop his voice under any circumstances ; and his articulation is remarkably distinct. Claire, who is standing close to the window, must have heard his last words. I look straight into the long, sweet violet eyes that have all my life looked back into mine with love and sympathy. They turn from me without an answering glance, and rest on some one else—and what do they express ?

Reproach, pain, love ! I turn, I strive to follow that glance, but there is a medley behind me. The two young men, Sydney Dale and Theo Bligh, are outside, sitting on the window-sill, and Sydney is striving to catch a light from Theo's cigar. Can it be that our old friend—the boy who has been like our brother—has won a particle of regard from Claire which he has not reciprocated ? Reason seems to tell me that it is impossible. The man does not live, I tell myself hotly, who could withstand Claire, or do other than worship her for the smallest concession she might make. I feel indignant with Sydney, and rather shocked to think that Claire can like him in that way. Dear old friend as he is, it jars

upon me that he should have won from Claire such true, such hopeless interest as beamed from her eyes in that one glance which I intercepted. I get near to her, and whisper,—

"I shall be glad when all these people are gone, Claire; I have so much to say to you."

"So shall not I be glad," she answers, with a little effort; "these people are the only people I have met lately who are worth speaking to." And she rather hastily withdraws herself from me, and puts herself in an inaccessible place between the table and Mr. Murray.

I am convinced now! The "man of matter," as Theo somewhat rudely called him, has disappointed Claire, and she has turned to one who at least will satisfy her mentally. I bestow a gratified and approving glance upon the unconscious face. If I, with my head and heart full of Theo Bligh, could rest and be thankful while Mr. Murray chained my attention, what a perfect panacea he must prove to any regretful thoughts of Sydney Dale which Claire may mistakenly be disposed to indulge herself in.

Cut off from each one to whom I desire to talk, I deliver myself up to gloom and Mr. Poland, who drives me mad by declaring that he sees I am not well, and that he shall ask my father as a special favour to let me accompany Mrs. Poland to Brighton, whither she is going to-morrow. In vain I protest that I am quite well, and that papa cannot spare me. Mr. Poland is an old family friend, and knows better. "Aunt Helen has been telling him that I really need a change, and why should I not have it?" he asks. His wife is taking the opportunity of his having the companionship of Murray, to give herself a little holiday—a little change; and as papa will have Murray's companionship also, he will be able to spare me from Ravensbourne better than at any other time.

My heart sinks as I feel that I must bow myself to the inevitable and go, if Aunt Helen has decreed it. But it is hard, very, very, very hard, that I am to be deprived

of the solace of Claire's society and sympathy, of the crumbs of comfort that might fall to me from Mr. Murray's companionship, just when, in my great grief for the loss of Theo, I need these things most. All before me seems dark and dreary. But this one ray glorifies my gloom—at least, I shall have had all that there is to be had of Theo's companionship! I am going, but I shall not leave the man who has become the light of my life behind me.

I dread the departure of the Polands and their friends. It will be the signal, I know, for the matter of my going to Brighton to be mooted and discussed. If I could only get a quiet word with papa, I might save myself still! But though I watch for this opportunity as a cat watches for a mouse, circumstances balk me, and time slips by, and they are going!

Hungrily seeking for a crumb of comfort in any direction, I turn to Sydney Dale, and pour forth in one impassioned, badly punctuated sentence, the story of the sentence of banishment that is about to be pronounced upon me. And to my disgust, Sydney smiles all over his face, and says, "That's just what I have been hoping to hear, Tim; I am going to Brighton, too, in a day or two."

I fret, I fume, to my shame be it said, I scowl at him. How can he be so callous in his own happiness? Even if Claire is extraordinary enough to love him, he need not be so abominably fraternal in his feelings towards me, as to rejoice in being near me at Brighton, when the idea of going to Brighton at all is repugnant to me to the last degree.

"You have given me a brighter hour this evening than I've had for twelve months," a voice says in my left ear, and I look up and eagerly take in the full force of all the flattery there is in such a sentence from the lips of such a man as Mr. Murray. Does Theo Bligh see that this clever man considers me clever enough, and attractive enough, to suffer his gloom to be brightened by my efforts (slight as they have been) to amuse him? I steal

a glance at Theo, and he just looks away from me to Sydney Dale with a grin of gay sarcasm. He will not even see that it is to Mr. Murray I am listening. He will vex and underrate me by seeming to suppose that I am engrossed with Sydney Dale. How surprised he (Theo) will be when it comes to be known that our queen, our Claire, has surrendered her heart into the keeping of the man whom Theo dubs as "rustic Hercules."

"Good-night, my dear; I have just heard very pleasant news—most pleasant news indeed. We won't tell them what we do at Brighton, will we? or how we amuse ourselves. The gentlemen are going to enjoy themselves in their way during my absence, and we will enjoy ourselves, and show them that we can do without them."

Mrs. Poland is the speaker. Mrs. Poland is an "admirable woman," people say; and so doubtless she is, but she frets my nerves cruelly on all occasions. She is a woman who talks in sentences in an artificial tone of voice; and this not out of any desire to be other than she is, but really and truly because she wishes to say the right thing in the right way. She does a great deal of good in the place, and no man nor woman can say that she has ever neglected a single duty. Nevertheless, at this moment I hate her—and she has been kind to me all my life!

Surely Satan has entered in and taken possession of me? The thought of being condemned to her companionship after those hours by the Raven with Theo Bligh racks my brain, and tortures my heart. Yet I can count up those hours on the fingers of one hand, and the years and the instances of her kindness make up a roll that is as long as my life.

Huskily, ungratefully, awkwardly, I ask,—

"Is it settled, then, that I am to go?"

And she answers,—

"Yes, dear! your papa and I settled it in a moment. 'Let the child do as she likes,' he said; and I told him

‘I knew what you wanted: young people want a change.’”

“O papa! papa! papa!”

I don’t make an idiot of myself and utter these words aloud. They only say themselves in my heart; and while they are saying themselves, good, kind Mrs. Poland chirrup about me, and plans for to-morrow, and speaks in tones of festive hope about Brighton, until I have to remind myself that—

“Be the day weary or be the day long,
At length it cometh to evensong.”

Mr. Murray says a few more words to me in that rich, soft voice of his, which is like molten gold; and though the words are unimportant, they please and soothe me.

“Mrs. Poland never did an unkind thing in her life before,” he says; “and now she has shot at random and lodged an arrow in my selfishness. I was looking forward to having some pleasant hours with you, Miss Vincent, and now I hear you are to be swept away to Brighton, where, by the way, you will get a great deal more good than you would from listening to the prosings of a fellow like me.”

“All the same, I’d like to stay and listen to them,” I say heartily, and he gives me one more of those soft, kindly glances, that seem to me to be full of power and protection, and I hear him say to my father—“What an honest lass it is!” just as though I were a child, which view of myself taken by him does not hurt my dignity at all.

They are all gone, and I am free to utter my plaint and protest. Every one seems worn out and weary, but I have no pity upon their fatigue to-night. Papa is yawningly lighting his bed-room candle; Aunt Helen is trying to sweep us off to bed; Claire is bending with folded arms over a book which I am sure she is not reading; and Theo Bligh has flung himself on a sofa, and put his arms up over his head, and half closed his

eyes. I go close up to Claire, near to whom papa is standing, and I put my hands on her shoulders, and say,—

"Claire, do help me make papa understand that I don't want change of air, and that I'd much rather stay at home than go to Brighton to-morrow."

"My dear child, I thought I was going the way to please you by giving my consent," he says, a trifle impatiently; and Aunt Helen strikes in,—

"It's impossible to attend to all Tim's whims; Mrs. Poland will be disappointed, and will naturally think us all very rude if any change is made in the plans now."

"Go, my child, and don't humbug about it," papa says, kissing me; and Claire, who has not spoken before, rises up and makes an effort for me now.

"Let Tim stay at home, papa, and I'll be her substitute with Mrs. Poland," she says very earnestly, but she does not give my hand a responsive grasp, nor does she look at me.

"Claire!" I burst out, "I want to be with you—chiefly ——"

"Oh, settle it among yourselves," papa says, rather irritably. "Good night, my dears—all of you. Murray was envying me my four daughters to night!" and he goes away to bed, laughing at Murray's short-sightedness.

"What's the row about?" Theo asks lazily. "Doesn't Tim want to go to Brighton? Go, Tim; I would if I had the luck to be free; it's a jolly place."

As he ceases speaking, he gives me a long, soft look of most friendly sympathy. His eyes have the magic power of expressing most things without his having to trouble himself to utter a word. They seem now to say to me, "I am going to-morrow; why should you wish to stay?" In my awkward, honest, genuine belief in him, I am on the point of blurting out,—

"I'll go if you think it better I should; but my health is good enough, and I can't bear leaving Claire." However, I don't utter this sentence—I check myself, for a

strange expression, a hard, cold look of scorn, has crept over Claire's face, and I ask myself in agony for whom is she feeling it?

Crushed by a nameless, undefined dread, I suffer myself to drift along the current of Aunt Helen's will, and that will ordains that I am to go. I resign myself without a word, but when we get up to our own room I break forth, and make my lamentation to Claire.

"I hate going away from you," I say, "and she knows it, and that is why she is sending me."

"I am sorry you are going, as you hate it so much," Claire replies coolly. "I would have spared you the penance if I could. But he is going too; why should you hate it so much?"

"You'll be here still," I stammer out. "Though Theo Bligh is going, he isn't everything."

"I should have thought he was—to you, after that parting on the lawn," she says, looking me full in the face at last.





CHAPTER VII.

CLAIRE PUZZLES ME.

PLEASURE and pain mingle themselves together strangely with my confusion as Claire addresses me in this way. The pleasure is due to the fact that I am glad that she has seen Theo's demonstration of regard for me. Claire, at least, will be able to sympathise with my sorrow at parting with him, even though she does not love him well enough to sympathise with my love for him. But as she has witnessed that little scene, after the manner of the Huguenot, on the lawn, she will feel that he has given me some reason, even if I have no right, to care for him. This reflection gives me pleasure. That Claire should be such a weathercock as to let herself drift back to the exploded, unreasonable prejudice against him because he is a Bligh, gives me pain.

Being pleased, pained, and confused, I am more awkward than usual. Out comes the truth!

"You saw him looking down at me? I'm glad."

"Poor Tim," she says pitifully, "what morsels satisfy you, dear! Now I, in my exacting spirit (I shall be much more exacting for you than you are for yourself, Tim), fancied there was too much of the conquering cat over the overcome mouse in Theo's manner to you on the lawn. It betokened great intimacy, certainly; but, Tim, are you sure of your footing?"

There is a degree of eager vehemence in her manner of asking this last question that re-establishes me, as it were. While she is cold, concise, un-Claire-like, I cannot respond to her. The instant that she becomes herself I become myself, and proceed to tell the truth without fear.

"I'm not sure of anything, Claire; only I do like Theo Bligh, and I did feel glad when he stood looking down at me, and telling me I was to be sure and write to him. You wouldn't like to lose sight of him altogether, would you, Claire?"

She shakes her head, but it is not a negative shake. It is the sort of shake which seems to say, "I am outside the question, I am a fool; pray don't consider my bearing on the case at all."

"The sight of him has not brought us so much bliss that I must needs sigh for a continuation of it," she says moodily. Then she adds hastily, "But sufficient for the day is the evil thereof; leave the burden of to-morrow to itself; we have done with the past, we are enduring the present, do leave the future unmolested."

"How strangely she talks for Claire," I think piteously. Then, with my confidence crushed, my sympathy thrown back upon myself and my heart and mind in a state of chaos, I go back to bed and dream a jumble wherein Theo Bligh and Mr. Murray have a part.

I am impatient for the morning light. It streams in at last, floods the room with radiance, and gilds Claire in her unconscious beauty as she lies still in a deep sleep. I begin packing up my things, but my uninterested hands halt in their task, and I decide that I will leave it all to our maid. Aunt Helen is so desirous of getting rid of me, that she is sure to speed and supervise the packing, and to see that all things connected with it are done in order, and in time.

A foolish, irresistible spooney impulse seizes me to go out to the wilderness and gather a bunch of wild flowers, in memory of that first day of Theo's coming when I went to sleep with my head on Claire's lap. I obey the

impulse, I gather them from the very spot on which he lounged, I tie them up with some of my own glittering hair, which I tear from my head at the cost of much pain to myself, and when I have done this I look up at the sound of a light cheerful whistle, and he is standing before me.

He advances over the ground I have consecrated in my heart to the memory of his recumbent form with a careless free step. He catches hold of my bunch of wild flowers, not too gently, and bruises them. He examines them with an essentially critical and unromantic eye, and says finally—

“I didn’t know you botanised at all, Tim. I’ll get you some much better specimens than these. Let me hear how much you know about it.” And he proceeds laughingly to catechise me about petals and calyxes, of which I know next to nothing, until my cheeks burn under the fire of his mockery, and I say—

“I didn’t get them for specimens; I got them for ——”

“Sentiment,” he interposes with a blithe boyish roar of laughter. “By Jove! what a joke! Miss Tim out in the dewy morn, gathering weeds and wild flowers before she quits the place of her birth for the giddy whirl, and the seductive wiles of a week in Brighton with Mrs. Poland.”

The heartlessness of his humour is intolerable to me this morning. If he would only go back and be the better self of whom he gave me a brief vision yesterday by the Raven, I should be weak enough to love him still, and to bitterly lament our approaching separation. As it is, his conduct goads me into saying—

“I hate people who see fun in everything, even in other people’s sorrow,” I say sharply, turning to go home. He is by my side in a moment, saying—

“What a genuine little woman you are, Tim! what a sweet little friend! You’re harder to look at,” he says, with that bonnie laugh of his which peals out so readily, “but I really believe you’re softer and gentler at heart than Claire; you forgive more readily—don’t you now?”

I answer this question with another.

"What have you done to annoy Claire?"

"Nothing," he answers unconcernedly.

"Oh, but you must have done something," I urge, "because she distrusts you."

"That's her misfortune, not my fault," he replies.

"I should rather think it was your misfortune," I strike in. "She's the one person in the world whom I want to think well of you. Of course, I should like papa to like you, and he's sure to do that in time; but if Claire distrusts you ——"

"I may as well give up the game altogether, I suppose you mean!" he interrupts, and his laughing eyes enlarge and deepen with thoughtfulness, and his handsome face clouds over with what looks very much like anxiety.

What game? The game of winning my heart, does he mean? Why, he has done that already! It is too late for him to talk of giving up the game if Claire distrusts him now. I only think this, though. Aloud, I say—

"Even Claire will not be able to influence me against you."

He bends his head, and stoops his lithe tall figure down as he walks by my side, and looks me in the face with his laughing, affectionate, patronising glance. Were ever eyes seen before so full of power, so full of pathos, so full of passion, or so full of fun? Never, surely, I tell myself, as I look into their depths, and deny myself the supreme pleasure of smiling, for fear he should think I am not sincere in my down-heartedness about Claire's distrust of him, and my thorough conviction that it is rather a serious matter.

"Do you know what your address will be in Brighton?" he says, as we near the open drawing-room window.

I shake my head.

"No; I didn't even care to ask it," I say. "It's an awful thing to be sent off to enjoy yourself against your will, I can tell you."

We are close to the window now, my foot is on the

sill as I am preparing to spring in, when he arrests my progress by saying—

“The position of affairs is reversed. I shall be able to write to you and tell you how the wind is blowing, and how your sister Claire runs the gauntlet of the attentions of the rustic Hercules. My sentence of banishment is revoked! I am to stay here until further notice.”

He says all this with speed, in a monotone.

There is no time for me to answer him by word or glance. The fangs of the fatal truth—that he is to remain in the paradise from which I am exiled—are gnawing at my heart, but I have to go on. What a blessing it is, perhaps, sometimes, that the exigences of society and family life step in and compel us to “go on,” when otherwise we should falter and fall away.

There is a blight over the breakfast-table this morning, although roses, in slender specimen-glasses, are blooming all over it. Papa is engrossed, as usual, with his newspapers. The twins are sedately savage with us, their sisters, for having, as they imagine, engrossed the Polands' friends last night. Aunt Helen is watchful and wary of everybody in her slow, stout way—especially watchful and wary of me, it appears to me; and a broad sense of being treated with horrible injustice overwhelms me, and makes me seem guilty when, in reality, I am guileless. Her accusatory glances seem to say “You have been enjoying the unhallowed pleasure of free and happy intercourse with Theo Bligh this morning; you have been tasting forbidden fruit; you shall suffer the heaviest punishment I can inflict upon you. I will keep my eye upon you while you are here, and I will banish you as soon as possible.”

All this I read in her glances, and all this I could endure with calmness, not to say indifference, if that of which she is accusing me had been. But in my own sorrowful heart I know that my intercourse with Theo Bligh this morning has been anything but free and happy; that it has, on the contrary, been constrained, unsatisfactory, meaningless, miserable! In fact the conclusion

is forced home upon me by common sense that he has been playing bob-cherry with me, and has swung the fruit far out of my reach now.

Claire comes in as, with pain and mortification, I reach this stage in the journey of self-humiliation, which the great majority of my sex are compelled to make at some period or other of their lives—comes in with her hands full of letters, which she makes the excuse for only inclining her head to the circle by way of general salutation as she takes her seat next to me, and opposite to Theo Bligh.

He is apparently at his happiest ease, with such a good appetite, and such a light laugh, I think admiringly what a clear conscience he must have. Aunt Helen plies him with the strongest, creamiest coffee, with the most delicate cutlets, with the daintiest poached eggs, with marmalade, with everything that the table bears that may gratify the palate of man. She is not annoyed with him. Probably in the femininely just and generous recesses of her heart, she believes that I pursued him through the dewy meads this morning. Doubtless she regards him as an excellent edition of St. Kevin, and looks upon me as a reproduction of that forward puss, Kathleen! And I dare not tell her—or anybody else for that matter—that the extent of my froward folly is that I responded too quickly to the advances he made—that I basked with too ready a delight in the warm rays of “the light that ne’er shall shine again on life’s dull stream.”

He has behaved with magnificent impartiality conversationally, this morning. He has argued with papa, and opposed him with sweeping assertions, on a literary point on which papa is specially well informed, and about which there hangs the charm of perfect novelty for Theo. He has been gracious in a way I have never seen him be before to Aunt Helen. He has shown a readiness to enter into the twins’ sports and pastimes, proposing boating to them during the ensuing week, as a means of whiling away the glowing, gorgeous July weather—which I shall be spending at Brighton, with Mrs. Poland. Now, though

Claire is devoting herself to her letters, he turns his attention to her.

"You promised to go for a ride with me one day, Miss Vincent; will you go this morning?"

"I am not going out this morning," she says coldly.

But, coldly as she speaks, I see the warm colour creeping over her dear, sensitive face, and the letter flutters in her hand. She is actually angry still with this boy for seeming to trifle with me—far more angry with him than I can find it in my heart to be. I look across at him pitifully, to see how he bears it.

He bears it wonderfully—with gleams of smiles and easy satisfaction about his eyes and mouth. The former are fixed on Claire's face, but Claire will not lift her eyes to meet them.

Twice in the course of the morning, before I am driven down to Mrs. Poland's, I come in contact with Theo Bligh. The first time it is in the drawing room, where I have gone to pick up a few trifles, my blotting-book, my own paper-knife, my favourite pen, and—a flower he had flung aside last night! I find all these—with the exception of the flower—put together carefully, and Theo standing by them.

"I knew they were yours," he says, as I come in with my eyes dancing and my face brightening, in spite of myself, at sight of him. "I've noticed your affection for this fat smooth paper-knife. We're alike in that respect, Tim; I never like to cut a book with cold steel."

I take the articles from his hand one by one, and as the paper-knife is ceded up to me, his hand clasps mine and retains it.

"Tim, you're vexed with me," he says, bending his handsome head down, and looking pathetically into my eyes. "I saw it from the moment we came into the fond family circle this morning. You have been offended with, not to say unpleasant, to me. What's the matter?"

"Nothing! Yes! how can I be anything but uncomfortable and unpleasant when I am sent away from ——"

I stop, and I see that a smile is spreading over his face.

I had been about to say, "away from Claire and you," but that smile checks me, and causes me to check my sentence. I try to remember some sage axioms which had been uttered to me in my youth, relative to maidenly dignity demanding silence on the part of the woman, on the subject of her feelings, until she has been asked in plain English to expound them. But the remembrance of all the axioms in the world cannot subdue the irresistible impulse I have to look with deprecating tenderness at this chameleon-like idol of mine, who is, after all, so perfectly resigned to being left at Ravensbourne without me.

"I wish Mrs. Poland could have contented herself with the twins, and not have aspired to either Claire or you," he says, when I pause. "I could have got on very well here without them."

"And you'll get on very well without me?" I say questioningly;—that offer of his to ride with Claire this morning is still eating into my soul, though I try to persuade myself that I am glad that Claire should have every opportunity of learning to appreciate the sterling good qualities of this man whom she so hardly misjudges at present. Even while I am thinking this, I am trying furtively to pick up the flower he had thrown away on the previous night. It is lying half under a huge photographic album, and in my desire to avoid detection I become more awkward than usual. The paper knife slips to the ground, the other things begin to fall, but I grab at them violently and arrest them midway, jerking myself about most ungracefully in doing it. "Why can't I be easy, and pretty in my way of moving about like Claire is?" I ask myself, with burning cheeks, as I stand erect again, and see that the smile on his face has deepened into a broad grin.

"You remind me of a sportive young Newfoundland dog, leaping and gambolling with your playthings in that way. What are you making dashes at? *Another* flower! halloo!"

My hand trembles with conscious guilt, and fails to

grasp and conceal the flower before he can recognise it. He does recognise it! His ejaculation, together with a certain look of confusion which is very foreign to his face, proves to me that I am detected in my act of silly, sentimental worship of whatever appertains to him.

“Well, you are a rum little thing,” he says, recovering himself. “You go out in the early morning and get your feet wet in pursuit of a few rubbishing weeds, and you nearly smash your fat paper-knife in securing a stale flower. Perhaps it adorned Mr. Sydney Dale’s button-hole, though; if so, I will respect this pleasing weakness and hold my tongue about it.”

I have thrown the flower far from me as he speaks, and now wrathfully I turn from him, muttering something about the pony-carriage being ready to take me away. He follows me to the door, and his light mocking accents follow me as I fleetly run up-stairs, as he utters words of affected self-reproach for having been “an innocent witness of my efforts to make a collection of the decayed flowers of my native county.”

“I almost hate him!” I say angrily aloud to myself as I burst into my bed-room, and Claire is there and hears me.

“Do it quite, Tim, and we shall all be the happier,” she says rather eagerly; and then I feel that I quite hate myself for the unguarded expression.

My sister gets up and comes over and puts her hands on my shoulders, and looks me in the face.

“I would have gladly gone to Brighton for you, Tim, but you would not be the happier really for staying here now. Will you make me a promise?”

I tell her, “Yes, a thousand, anything she can ask me.”

“It’s a little thing, and it is for your good. Promise me not to write rashly to *any one* while you are away.”

“I won’t write rashly.”

She sighs and turns away, and we hear the pony-carriage drive up to the door, and know that the moment for me to go has come.

“John is going to drive you to the Polands’,” she says. “Good-bye, dear ; try to enjoy yourself.”

I am a little hurt that she does not drive me down herself, but the recollection that there is a little cloud between us qualifies my regret. I run down and kiss papa, who gives me a ten-pound note for pocket-money, take a hasty leave of the twins and Aunt Helen, and get out of the house without another sight of, or one word from, the one who has made home alternately a paradise and a purgatory to me during the last few days.

At the lodge gate he is standing, though ; and he runs a few yards by the side of the carriage, and contrives to put into my hand, unseen by John, a fresh glowing rose, and a scrap of paper. So we part in peace after all.





CHAPTER VIII.

CLOUDY AT BRIGHTON.

THERE is a good deal of fuss and bustle at the usually well-ordered rectory. Mrs. Poland makes as many arrangements, and provides for as many emergencies before going to Brighton for a few weeks as if she were going for a voyage round the world in an unseaworthy ship. Her servants have lived with her for years, and know the routine of the house thoroughly. Nevertheless, she now insists on unrolling the list of their daily duties before them in as diffuse and verbose a way as if they had never heard of, or been accustomed to perform them before.

The magnitude of her boxes, and the number of her little bags, appal me as I consider that we two ladies shall have to look after them at every station ourselves. But she regards them cheerfully herself, and counts them over several times with evident pleasure before they are put into the cart that conveys them to the station, and tells off several of them to my especial care. The bustle, and the fussy excitement about trifles, grate upon me this day, and give me a foretaste of the joys that I shall experience at Brighton in her society, in a depressing way. I can hardly exert myself even to respond to Mr. Murray's friendly salutation, and kindly regrets that I should be "going away" just as he was "beginning to

know me." He seems to me to-day, by contrast with Theo Bligh, to be heavy, old, uninteresting. When he says that he has been telling Mrs. Poland that very likely he "shall soon look us up in Brighton, as his work will recall him to town sooner than he had thought at first," I feel so impatient of the proffered attention, that I remain perfectly speechless.

It is too hard to think that both Sydney Dale and Mr. Murray are free to go there, while poor Theo is chained, by his aunt's spiteful tyrannical will, to Ravensbourne.

I am glad when we get off, glad when the final wrench comes, and I am speeding away to Brighton by express, with all chance of a reprieve over. I am not a very amusing companion to my kind old friend Mrs. Poland. She takes the lively and active interest in everything, however uninteresting in itself, which often distinguishes elderly ladies who rarely move from their own quiet homes.

I respond to all her remarks relative to the state of the country, the possibility of such a collection of dwelling-places and shops being such a town or such a village, the vitiated and depraved minds which those guards must have who bang the carriage doors and shatter our nerves, and the "strange kind of feeling it gives one to be going away from one's own home for several weeks," in monosyllables. My mind is ever travelling back to Theo, and to the possibilities which Theo had implied in his last words. I am retracing all my experiences with him, and hating myself for having been awkward here, and ungainly there; for not having learnt, too, the great lesson that there is great beauty in neatness. Memory becomes an avenging nuisance, and tells me that my hair has been unpicturesquely out of order during the majority of our interviews. I look at my hands!—they are small and well-shaped, it is true, but a vision of Claire's crosses my mind as I gaze at them, and I hate them for their bronzed backs! Why is it that the sun, and the biting, freezing March winds always get hold of me sooner than they do of other

people—of Claire, for instance? Why, why, why am I condemned by pitiless frost in winter, and by burning sun in summer, to a red nose and freckles? Why, when all these questions are vexing my mind, will Mrs. Poland persist in speaking to me ecstatically of the scenery that is being unwound for us as we roll along? She insists on calling my attention to “exquisite peeps” and “magnificent places,” and they invariably involve the wringing of my neck as I twist my head round at an impossible angle in order to look at them. Exquisite peeps and magnificent mansions have no charm for me to-day. I have been taken away from the human being who has in the course of the last few weeks caused me more pain, pleasure, perplexity, and mortification than I have experienced in the whole course of my previous life. Not only have I been taken away from him, but I am in saddening doubt as to whether or not I may ever see him again. The scenery blinds, bewilders, irritates me, as it is forced upon my observation at every turn. Yet even in the midst of my misery I am not ungenerous enough to blame Mrs. Poland, or to endeavour to persuade even myself that she is responsible for my unhappiness. I only am in error, and vaguely I understand in what my error consists; I believe both too little, and too much. I have faith in Theo’s merits being deserving of warmer, fonder recognition even than I am bestowing upon them. At the same time, I distrust the result of such recognition as I have given being a happy one for me.

It is a blissful break for me when we reach Brighton. I tell myself that I am miserable still, but there is a change in the monotony of my misery. The mere mental excitement of looking after Mrs. Poland’s innumerable parcels distracts my thoughts, and makes me resemble myself of the other day, more than the gloomy and self-absorbed young person into whom I have recently developed. By the time we have collected ourselves and our belongings, secured a fly, and surreptitiously feed a too seductive porter, I feel that smiles are widen-

ing my mouth, and making my eyes twinkle. When Claire smiles, her lips first curve themselves, and are set in dimples. My mouth in my moments of mirth "resembles an hilarious gash," Theo Bligh has told me. Nevertheless, though I remember that he has made this remark, I indulge in my merriment now, and tell myself that he would think it rather a pleasant thing to behold if he could see it. Love is so blind!

Lodgings have been already prudentially secured for us through the medium of an advertisement. In reliance on this authority, Mrs. Poland informs me two or three times in the course of our drive to them that they "are airy, and command a good view of the sea."

"These are two very important considerations—in lodgings," Mrs. Poland says seriously; and I find myself assenting aloud to her proposition, and conjecturing silently whether or not they are utterly unimportant considerations out of lodgings, as her last words seem to imply.

A slight display of ill-timed severity as regards the multifarious packages upsets that buoyant and winning manner of the cabman, which had beguiled us into selecting him from amidst a number of competing brethren. He infuses his ill-humour into the spirit of his horse, and we are slowly dragged the whole length of a couple of streets from the sea, and finally deposited at the door of a house that may command a view of the mighty element from its chimney-tops, but that certainly does not do so from any other part of it. Nevertheless, Mrs. Poland audibly sniffs the air as she emerges from the cab, and says how "refreshingly clear it is; she almost fancies she is the better for it already." I mendaciously echo her words, and wish, oh! how fervently, that I were back on the brink of the dear otter-pool with Music and Heartless and—Theo Bligh!

But my love-fever is intermittent. I have my lucid moments, and during one of them it dawns upon me that we have a long evening before us, and that the air is warmly, brightly, beautifully clear; and with that love of

change which makes young people so intolerable to elderly ones, I say,—

“When we have had dinner, we’ll go out—won’t we? I do long to see the sea and the Brighton shops.”

“When we have had a nice comfortable tea we will see about it,” Mrs. Poland says, composedly settling herself in a chair by the window, and taking out her knitting. “I think we shall find plenty of amusement in watching the passers-by this evening.”

I almost groan at the monotonous prospect, as I look out of the window. An evening alone with excellent Mrs. Poland even up at the picturesque flower-covered rectory is an honour that we all, even the twins, avoid as much as possible. But to be cooped up with her in the dull glaring sitting-room of a second-rate lodging-house, and to know that the sea is rolling in its waves of ever-changing beauty within a few hundred yards of us, is unendurable.

I fret under the feeling of restraint for a few moments, during which I watch the well-known glittering needles with feelings of almost personal animosity. Mrs. Poland is perfectly absorbed in her pattern. She counts her stitches carefully, anxiously almost, and never gives so much as a glance at the novel scene before her. Why couldn’t she have stayed at home and done her knitting, and suffered me to remain in the spot where at least I had the excitement of being rendered alternately wildly happy, and despairingly wretched, every hour of my life? Failing to answer this question with anything like satisfaction to myself, I say,—

“Well, it would be a shame to try and drag you out this evening if you’re tired; but you like your nap in the evening, don’t you? and while you’re having it I’ll go and explore a little.”

“My dear Tim,” she says beamingly, “when I take the charge of young people on myself I like to make them perfectly happy; I’m not going selfishly to indulge in my nap, and leave you to be dull by yourself: no, no! we’ll have a nice quiet little evening together, and just get

accustomed to our new rooms ; and to-morrow we'll see about going out."

"We'll see about going out!" I almost groan aloud as I repeat her words to myself. A fell conviction darts through my mind that I am to be treated with such kindness and consideration that I shall be virtually a prisoner. I flash a mental glance forward through a vista of unvarying days, and pity myself profoundly. I shall never be able to have myself to myself. Even an occasional uninterrupted indulgence in the miseries of memory will be denied to me. A vivid picture of Theo Bligh, as bright as before I was banished, paints itself for my benefit. In my helpless anger against fate I am blind to every possibility ; I can only feel that I am a caged, fettered, forcibly tamed fool ; and in my despair I go back to the hard horse-hair sofa that stands in a dusky alcove, and strive to stifle my sobs in a slippery sausage-like cushion.

For a minute or two Mrs. Poland goes on clicking her needles and counting her stitches happily oblivious of my condition. Then a gurgling sob apprises her of it, and she rises up and crosses the room, full of kindly but most untimely sympathy.

"My poor child, the journey has been too much, far too fatiguing, for you," she says. "Your Aunt Helen was quite right, you do want change most sadly. We'll have tea up at once : a nice hot cup of tea, and a fresh egg or little bit of chop or something, and a good night's rest, will set you up again."

"I'm not ill," I gasp, all my being in revolt against the impending tea and its accompaniments ; "I'm not ill a bit," I repeat more energetically, as I see her preparing an odious little composition of red lavender and sugar.

"Not ill, my dear ; I know that," she asserts aggravatingly—"just a little hysterical : the change and excitement ——"

This is more than I can stand. I am in a state of inanition from excessive mental fatigue, engendered by boredom, and she lays my state at the door of excitement

and change. "I am only horribly disappointed," I say with candid rudeness, "and horribly ashamed of myself for being so," I add penitently, as I see her dear kind old face fall at my brusque declaration.

"Disappointed?" she repeats after me; and I find myself offering a lame explanation to the effect that I am pining for the sight of the sea which is such a novelty to me.

"Do let me go down to it alone?" I plead passionately, for I am aching to institute the recognition of so much liberty of action. "If you go I shall feel unhappy—I shall know you're out for my sake alone; do let me go by myself."

She hesitates, and debates the subject with her experiences and the traditions by which she has always been guided, all the time we are at tea. But in the end, I carry my point, and I am permitted to go out, and "think" as freely and restlessly as I please, by the free and restless sea.

For the first four or five days I am buoyed up by the novelty of everything, and by the daily hope I have that each post may bring me some news from home. If it were not for this gnawing restlessness, my out-door life would have sufficient charms for me, for in my moments of gloom I can have solitude to my heart's content down by the plashing sea; and in my moments of healthy reaction from that gloom I can see such an amount of glitter and show, of fashion and wealth, of pretty things to wear, and prettier women to wear them, than has ever dawned upon my vision before. Indeed, if it were not for that still ungratified craving for news from home, I should be as happy as in my few sane moments I acknowledge that I ought to be.

But my indoor life is too insignificantly placid, too cooped up and little altogether, for me to be at ease in it, even if I had no back thoughts of Theo Bligh to render it still more trying. Decent feeling forbids that I should leave my kind companion-loving hostess too much to herself, and her method of daily life is a very worrying one

for a light-hearted young girl to witness. All our lives we have been accustomed to hear Aunt Helen and other people say, "How admirably Mrs. Poland manages everything!" and in the abstract I have always given in my adhesion to the statement. Hitherto, I have had something like a loving appreciation for the scrupulous daintiness of all her household arrangements. I can recall now the healthy appetite with which, as a child, I have devoured her wholesome cakes and comfortable family dinners. But now, when I see all the details of her organisation of different matters, I am profoundly tired of them. The way in which every morning she carefully enters into a little book (the sight of which I hate) every penny she has expended on the previous day, and in which at night she recapitulates all the successful little arrangements she has made during the last twelve hours, and throws herself with animation into the question of to-morrow's breakfast, dinner and tea, is all hideously and irritatingly narrowing and tedious. I feel like a young chained-up wild beast. I sit and writhe in the little room, which, with its carpet of white ground, covered with big bunches of scarlet roses, and its white blinds and curtains, seems to be the very home of glare—and dig my nails into the palms of my hands, as I picture the shady river banks at home, and the bright, young, beautiful versatile people who are strolling about those banks, free of Mrs. Poland, free of the necessity of seeming interested in the question as to whether the fish we had yesterday cost two shillings and twopence or two shillings and twopence half-penny, free even of me!

Still the post brings me no peace, much less any pleasure. I get, it is true, an uninteresting note from Mabel in answer to my letter to Claire, and the receipt of this note makes me ten times more restless and uncertain of myself and everybody else than I was before. "Claire," Mabel says, "is too poorly to write to you herself; she has seemed poorly, and cross, and tired ever since you left. Papa seems put out, too, about something; and the only person in the house who is in high spirits, and

doesn't mind whether other people are pleased or not, is Theo Bligh. Syd Dale was here yesterday to know if he could take anything for you, as he means to go to Brighton in a few days. You happy girl! to be there enjoying yourself while we are all so dull at home. Even Mr. Murray is gone."

Claire ill and unhappy, papa put out, and Theo Bligh in his normal condition of gleeful unconcern! What can it all mean? Why am I exiled instead of being permitted to return and read the signs of the times?

I nearly shed tears at first over the intelligence that Syd Dale will be in our midst so soon. Alternately refreshing and enervating myself, as I do, by perpetually nursing reminiscences concerning Theo Bligh in the past, and hopes connected with him in the future, the thought of this other one whom Fate will substitute for Theo comes as a jarring interruption. However, common sense and the instinct of a gentlewoman tell me that before this old playfellow and friend I shall be compelled to banish the memory even of my brilliant absent love, unless I would appear a maudlin, love-sick, sentimental, limp-minded noodle in Syd's eyes. How oppressive he will be in his health, and strength, and happiness, and heartless vigour! How intolerable his rough, ready, honest, Newfoundland dog-like attentions will seem! How dreadful it will be to have to sit and smile and suffer when he blurts out fragmentary pieces of news about those I have left with my heart at home! how viciously I shall scrunch the sand under my feet as I saunter by his side along the border of the sad sea waves, striving unsuccessfully to stultify the craving desire all the time that Theo Bligh could be in his (Syd's) place.



CHAPTER IX.

THE REAL AND THE IDEAL.

ANOTHER postman passes the door after having made my heart throb by halting on the opposite side of the street, gazing intelligently at our number, and elastically prancing over to within a foot or two of our steps. I watch his proceedings from my bed-room window, from which I have rudely displaced my toilet table for this sole purpose, and feel that now indeed will breakfast be a hollow mockery, and smiling toleration of Mrs. Poland's tediousness an impossibility. I am positively hungering for some news from those I have left behind me. Mabel's vapid epistle has had the effect of sherry and bitters in whetting my appetite for some definite statement as to what all those who are dearest to me are about. I can't finish dressing myself properly. What is the use of dressing yourself properly when the only eyes you care about in the world can't behold you? My hands tremble, and the hair-pins fall out, and the hair which ought to be my glory is my shame, as I descend presently with some of it creeping down my neck already in untidy, careless waves, that are eminently unbecoming to my very questionable personal charms. "If I were a beauty like Claire," I tell myself, "I would make the most of myself always, out of a strong sense of duty to that priceless possession of loveliness with which nature has munificently endowed her; being only myself.

an unattractive person at the best of times, it is not worth while trying to make myself look merely tolerably passable, after all, for the satisfaction of myself only."

I feel a little bit ashamed of my theory, as well as of my practice, when Mrs. Poland says to me,—

"Tim, my dear, you don't look at all as if Brighton were agreeing with you; or is it the way you have done your hair? We were saying at home the other day, how much better you were looking—your new way of dressing your hair up high improved you so much; perhaps it's only that you've let it straggle about again, but you don't look half so well as when you came."

She says it all with such real motherly anxiety about me that I am more ashamed of myself than ever. I know that I am looking more than usually unprepossessing, and I know that it is more than half my own fault, still I utter my protest,—

"It's not fair to call me to account for being such a plain little wretch that a hair out of place makes me look ill, and uglier than usual," I say. "I'm not like some girls—the twins, for instance. I can't stand for an hour before a glass studying whether a bulge out here, or a bow there, makes me look a trifle better; besides, what *does* it matter how I look?"

I speak in piteous spasms of self-abasement, wounded vanity, and love; and Mrs. Poland is so good that she does not detect the genuine ring of the metal in my accents.

"My dear, you want a tonic," she says gravely; "the air isn't enough for you—too strong for you, indeed, I'm afraid. I've known many people who couldn't stand a bracing sea-air—it tires them; now, you look tired this morning."

"So I am," I sob passionately.

She lifts her hands up in sympathising amazement.

"Tired! at this hour in the morning!" she ejaculates. "I wish I hadn't left my recipe book at home; one never ought to move without it; if I'd had it here, I should have known what to give you at once."

So she maunders on half through breakfast, maddening me, and doing it so unintentionally—so well meaningly, in fact, that in her presence I absolutely turn with relief to Syd's anticipated advent. At least he's a man, and he will not talk to me of recipe-books, and the necessity that exists for carefully entering a dozen times over every farthing of my daily expenditure. Remembering all his blushing, boyish adoration for us (Claire and myself) also, I reflect with pleasure, that I can be sulky, silent, unpleasant to a degree in his society, without any fear of his ever venturing to ask the reason why I am these things. Yes, Syd, lightly as I value him, will be preferable to solitude and Mrs. Poland.

But before the morning passes away, inoffensive as Syd is in himself, he is made a cause of offence to me by Mrs. Poland. She will speculate as to why he is coming to Brighton. Having known us all from our respective babyhoods, she feels aggrieved at the possibility of any relation or intimate friend of Sydney's existing in Brighton of whom she has not heard.

"He must be coming to see some one," she says, "and I can't imagine who it can be—can you, 'Tim?"

"I haven't thought about it," I say mendaciously—for I have thought about it, and feared lest Sydney, in the absence of Claire, may not be coming to make vicarious love to me.

"It can't be for his health," Mrs. Poland goes on speculating; "and as for its being mere love of change! oh dear, no! I'd never believe it was that for a moment. Sydney isn't the young man to pine for change for mere love of it; he has too much to do, and he does it all with too hearty a good will for one to suspect him of that. No, no, my dear; take my word for it, he's coming to see somebody."

I am unfeignedly indifferent to the possibility, still I lazily try to picture the state of mind of the expectant "somebody," whom Sydney Dale may be coming to see. Dear, frank, honest, straightforward, uninteresting fellow! No woman will ever have a pang of doubt or jealousy on

his account. "Not like him, not like *my* Lancelot," about whom prophetic instinct warns me, doubt and jealousy will be rampant for ever. No! the girl selected by Sydney Dale to be his queen will be blessed with the eminently safe feeling that no other woman will ever tempt him to stray from her. The tribute of attempted rivalry will never be paid to her taste, and her heart will be at peace at the expense of her vanity.

Fraught with these sentiments, I try to make some of them manifest to Mrs. Poland in an abstract way.

"Were you ever jealous of Mr. Poland?" I question abruptly. Not that I think it likely that she can have violated all probability in such a glaring way, even in the days of her youthful infatuation.

She shakes her head, while a warm little smile, illustrative of a confidence in her absent lord that has never been shaken, crosses her face.

"I was engaged to Mr. Poland very soon after I met him first, my dear, so I had no time to be jealous," she says simply; and I feel a pang of conviction shoot through my mind to the effect that, if I had been engaged to Theo Bligh the minute after I had met him first, I should have been just as jealous as I am now.

"I suppose, on the whole, one's happier for not being jealous," I go on. "But you can't feel anything like pride in a man unless you feel that other people grudge him to you, can you?"

"I felt pride in knowing that he never wavered from me," she says.

"Ah! yes; that's all very well and very nice to feel that he won't waver from you; but I should think more of him if I saw other people trying to make him waver while he stood steady as a rock; I'd like to see him resist temptation."

My cheeks glow, and my eyes flame, as I say this; a lovely vision of Theo resisting the wiles of a Venus, for my sake, flashes itself before me.

"My dear, it's safer when men have no temptation,"

she says. "I should pray for one I loved to be kept from it, if I were young again."

"And I should like to see the one I loved withstand it for my sake, I answer vain-gloriously, as I recall some of Theo's flattering subdued tones and looks, and banish the memory of his careless, heartless indifference.

Mrs. Poland looks at me scrutinisingly.

"Tim, my dear," she says warningly, "you're not letting yourself think of Mr. Murray and his pretty speeches, are you? My husband says he's a very clever, brilliant man, and a great scholar, and so he may be; but don't you be carried away by that, for he has faults that would make you very wretched if you came to care for him; all his scholarship and brilliancy wouldn't make up to you for what he is when he has taken too much wine, and it's right you should know that he does that very often, before you give him your heart."

I have been dumb with amazement and annoyance during her speech. That I, who am in the early glow of a feeling that is absorbing my very being for Theo Bligh, should be suspected of cherishing tender sentiments towards a man whom I describe to myself as old and fat! What have I done to merit such an indignity being offered to my taste? In my wrath I am about to tell the truth, but a timely reflection to the effect that Theo has not besought me to banish my maidenly reserve on the point yet, saves me. Consequently I content myself with saying,—

"It would be more suitable for Aunt Helen to fall in love with Mr. Murray than for one of us to do it. He belongs to papa's generation, and ought to have given up thinking of making anyone think of him in that way. I should be ashamed if he tried any nonsense of the kind with me."

I speak vehemently, for I feel it to be such an insult to Theo that any one short of an opposition Apollo should presume to act in a way that can create the suspicion that he is trying to win me with anything like reasonable hopes of success.

"It would be a happy day for you all if Mr. Murray did take a fancy to your Aunt Helen, if she would have him," Mrs. Poland says thoughtfully. As she says this, a feeling of annoyance that I know to be an infinitely small thing, but that I cannot check, shoots through my mind, and makes me smart. It is a little hard, it is more than a little mortifying, that the pleasure and the triumph I had felt in being able to win Mr. Murray from his sad thoughts for one evening should be dashed in this way. Why did he tell me that I had "bloomed like a wild-rose, and gleamed like a sunbeam in his path," if he could bring himself to give other people the impression that he could possibly "take a fancy to Aunt Helen?" I had been in joke when I spoke of the suitability of Aunt Helen falling in love with him. But Mrs. Poland is in earnest when she speaks of the advisability of his falling in love with Aunt Helen, and it hurts me.

"He thinks too much of his dead Helen ever to think of another living one," I say poutingly. "He talked to me a great deal about her that night you brought him to Ravensbourne: he told me he had never opened his heart so entirely to any one about it before."

"My dear, he opened his heart to all the world when she died," Mrs. Poland says, smiling—"he wrote most prettily in several of the magazines about her, but I think that there are other things in the world that he cares more for than that pretty dead wife of his."

As Mrs. Poland winds up her speech with a sad shake of the head, I feel my heart swell with wrath and indignation against any and every one who can dare to doubt the genuineness of Mr. Murray's affectionate grief for his lost wife, or of his confidence in my being an exceptional thing. I look at Mrs. Poland as she prosaically pours out the tea, and I feel it to be absurd on her part that she can delude herself for an instant with the idea that he has ever sought for that sympathy from her, which he told me he was taking from me. No, no! old and fat he may be, but not too old and fat to be able to discriminate between Mrs. Poland and me. Or is it the case that I am

so utterly unattractive that men simply notice me occasionally out of half-contemptuous pity? Papa, whose fears had been awakened so unfoundedly about Claire and Theo Bligh, has never given a thought to the possibility of Theo caring for me, and papa thinks a good deal of me too! Now Mrs. Poland speaks of Aunt Helen as quite as likely to win regard from Mr. Murray as I can be! There must be some good and reasonable ground for their belief in my inability to win from any man that which all women sigh for—Love! As I try to accept this bitter truth patiently, I feel that I am looking hopelessly depressed, spiritless and plain, and wild thoughts of changing the form of my faith and going into a nunnery assail me. Claire can never know this pain, Claire can never understand it. Her only difficulty in life will be to destroy the false hopes she has unintentionally raised. My only difficulty will be to avoid being openly destroyed by the false hopes that will be unintentionally raised in me. This is natural, just exactly what I have been trained all my life to expect. Nevertheless, it is hard.

Some of the bitterness has passed away, happily, by the time Sydney Dale arrives. He comes straight to our lodgings from the railway station, and I contrast his heated, dusty appearance with that which Theo Bligh would have made had Fate allowed him to come. Syd's eagerness to see us does not flatter me in the least. He would have looked so much better, so much less like a "rustic Hercules," if he had gone to his hotel first, and rid himself of the grime and dust of travel. Hearty, hot, and healthy, he strikes me as being much too strong for the situation of temporary substitute for Theo Bligh, or even for Mr. Murray.

He has no tact, and no conversational wiles, I tell myself crossly, as he responds briskly to Mrs. Poland's invitation that he shall stay and dine with us. He must feel that he is too big for the room, and terribly in the servant's way, as she lays the cloth. Yet there he sits, large and radiant in the glare of the afternoon sun, never

saying a single thing that can distract my attention for a moment from the fact that he *is* awkward and in the way. He explains fully all the arrangements he has made with a maiden aunt whom he has left in charge, for keeping things "going straight" in his household during his absence. He carefully draws an uninteresting ground plan of a new wing which he contemplates adding to his house, and submits it to us, and joyfully asks for my opinion of it, and begs me to make suggestions of further improvement. He speaks of this coming to Brighton as if it were some tremendous feat of travel and adventure, and irritates me horribly by remarking that "we (he and I) shall have plenty to tell them all when we go home." What has come to me that I blush for my old country friend's almost boyish enthusiasm, and wish with all my heart that he had never left that home and those friends which are running so perpetually in his honest stupid head?

As the evening draws on, anger and resentment against him take the place of simple impatience. He has not said one word yet about Theo Bligh, though he has skated over the Ravensbourne subject several times. I am panting with anxiety to hear if Theo is still there, and if he is, what he is doing, and how he is getting on with them all. But a feeling of consciousness restrains me from asking a question, and Sydney has not the tact to answer it, unasked!

At length, just as I have given up all hope, he stumbles upon the subject inadvertently.

"Claire seems to have taken to riding a good deal lately; I've met her several times on that cob of your father's; but he isn't a nice mount for a lady."

"Alone?" I stammer out. Sydney has caught my interest at last.

"No; that young fellow, young What's-his-name, was with her."

I tingle down to the tips of my fingers under the influence of divers sensations. A faint hope that Claire is cultivating Theo for my sake only flickers up for a

her sake

moment, and is then beaten back by the stronger fear that she may be cultivating him for her own. Mingling with these opposition pangs, is one of annoyance that Sydney should presume to speak of Theo as "young What's-his-name."

"Oh! is Mr. Bligh there still?" Mrs. Poland asks indifferently. "Dear me, what a long stay he is making at Ravensbourne!"

"Yes, and while Claire, for want of metal more attractive, smiles on him, he'll stick on," Sydney says blithely, as if Claire's conduct were of no consequence to him nor Theo Bligh's to me.





CHAPTER X.

“HAVE I PLAYED FAIR?”

A series of awkward circumstances culminate about eight o'clock in my going out to walk alone with Sydney Dale. It has been in vain that I have pleaded fatigue, polite unwillingness to leave Mrs. Poland alone, or to rob her of Sydney's society. She obtusely insists upon it that she “knows young people are happier for the absence of their elders sometimes,” and he supinely accepts her dictum, though he must see that I am girding against it.

I put on my hat and prepare to accompany him unwillingly enough. At the same time delusive hope whispers to me that after all it may be for the best—it will be establishing a precedent, and if Theo comes to Brighton I shall quote it against Mrs. Poland if she should feel inclined to demur at the proposal he is sure to make to give me a foretaste of Paradise by going out with him alone.

Meanwhile Sydney has to be walked with, and endured.

I take him down to the pier, where he insists on inhaling the sea air demonstratively in a way that makes me nervous. He expands his chest, and throws his shoulders back, and, young Hercules as he is, looks uncommonly ridiculous in my eyes. I see two or three people looking at him with undisguised amusement as he

illustrates his sense of enjoyment ; and a savage longing to crush him for his being here instead of Theo seizes me.

“ You’re delighted at being here, aren’t you ? ” I begin ; and as he promptly responds—

“ Yes, Tim, I should be delighted at being anywhere with you,” I harden myself and add—

“ And I would give anything, everything to be back at home ! ”

“ Now, if Claire could come here you’d be as happy as the day’s long, wouldn’t you ? I never saw two girls fonder of each other than you are.”

“ I love Claire dearly, dearly, dearly ; you know that I do, Syd,” I reply eagerly ; “ but *her* being here wouldn’t make me one bit happier.”

“ Yet you want to be back with her at Ravensbourne ? ” he questions gravely.

“ Not with her,” I say, with candour that is almost cruel to myself, for it will alter Sydney’s opinion of me so entirely—“ not with her ; Syd, don’t you see—don’t you see ? ”

I lift my eyes tremblingly, bashfully, to his face as I say these words, and I read in it that he *does* see in an instant.

“ It’s that young fellow, is it, Tim ? ” he asks, in dry low tones that are utterly unlike his ordinary full, rich, manly, ringing ones.

“ I like him,” I say abruptly ; “ and when I think that he’s there, and I am here, I hate being here.”

“ Poor child, poor dear little Tim ! ” he says in a very sober voice ; and I half sob as I reply—

“ Don’t pity me, or laugh at me yet, Syd. He’s fond of me, but there’s Aunt Helen in the way ——”

“ My dear little sister,” (and I feel so glad that his affection for me is so paternal,) he interrupts sadly, “ don’t deceive yourself ; I haven’t thought about it at all before, you see, because I wasn’t interested ; but now I feel that it’s Claire who is in the way ——”

“ Claire ? ” I stutter.

“ Yes, Tim, Claire in yours, and you in hers, and all

for *such* a fellow." He says it is so bitterly, is he jealous? —is he jealous of Claire?

I feel so grateful to him for his sympathy on behalf of poor little disappointed, humiliated me, that I would like to set his mind at rest about Claire if I could.

"She doesn't care for him *much*, Syd," I say earnestly; "and he doesn't care for her a bit, I know that; so we can never be in each other's way about him."

He looks at me kindly, awkwardly, sorrowfully.

"Poor Tim, I'd like to dare to try to help you out of your mistake," he mutters; and I tell myself how desperately fond he must be of Claire since he can be so tolerant to her sister's foibles.

"It isn't a mistake." I make my statement doggedly. for my dawning feminine vanity is hurt at the idea of any man's thinking that I must of necessity be an offering which Theo does not care to accept.

"Has he been hound enough to try and make you believe that he loves you, Tim, while he's playing that game on down there still?"

My lips tighten, quiver, but I will ask the question.

"What game is he carrying on?"

"The game of winning Claire. I never thought till now that it meant anything—I never thought him worth a conjecture, but now that I find *you* sad ——"

"I'm not sad," I say, while the tears pour down my face.

"Well, at any rate, you're anxious and expectant, and I don't like to know that you're that about any fellow of whom I feel so little sure as I do of Bligh."

"Now, if it had been Claire who had been silly enough to lose her head as I've done I should understand your being interested," I remark meditatively; "but as it's only me, I wonder that you take the trouble to think about it."

"I'd take more trouble than that for a friend any day," he says quietly; and a soothing sense of satisfaction steals over me as I reflect that he is speaking the truth, and that whatever pain may be the portion dealt out to

me from another quarter, Sydney Dale will invariably be just, generous, and kind to any friend in need.

We parade in silence for a little time after this, for I am absorbed in the contemplation of the doubt which he has worded, and which, now that he has worded it, I am obliged to acknowledge has been vaguely oppressing me ever since the evening of that happy day on which Theo had, as I fondly believed, nearly disclosed his affection to me by the otter-pool. My sorrow inclines me to speechlessness, and my selfishness inclines me to indulge my sorrow. Actually a distorted sort of gratitude to Sydney for being too amiably unimportant for it to be necessary for me to exert myself on his account takes possession of me, and I begin to wish that Claire was not so much too good for him, as to render it impossible for me ever to give my consent to the match. Presently a happy thought strikes me! Perhaps he may be trained to turn his affections in the direction of the twins! Who can tell what happiness may not result to one of my blameless though little-prized sisters, and this worthy young man, if I assume the office of guide, philosopher, and friend towards him? Imbued with this feeling, enlivened by this hope, I brighten up considerably, and as we seat ourselves at the end of the pier, and gaze out over the free expanse of blue water, I say to him quite cheerfully,—

“I can’t tell you how glad I am that you have happened to come while Mrs. Poland and I are here, Syd. I didn’t seem to care about it much when you were first announced, but now I think that it may be very much for your happiness that we meet here.”

“You’re always kind and sweet, Tim,” he answers. But his face does not brighten sympathetically, and nothing in his manner leads me to suppose that he shares my hopeful feeling. “He must be pitifully fond of Claire,” I think compassionately, and I begin to think there has been some blunder made in our bringing up. We should never have been permitted to have been on such fraternally intimate terms with a boy who, in the

order of things, would grow into a man, and want to marry one of us. However, though the errors of the past cannot be rectified now, their evil consequences may in a measure be averted, if I can teach Sydney to regard me as a distant woman, instead of a wild girl, and get him to listen to my advice.

"Don't I seem much more grown-up here than I do at home, Sydney?" I ask, in pursuance of my self-appointed task; and at last he looks me steadily in the face, with an anxious, searching look, that makes me feel surer than ever that he dreads my dashing his hopes about Claire to the ground utterly.

"Yes, you do seem older," he says; and there is a certain hoarseness in his voice which I attribute to the evening air. "You look as if you had begun to think there may be trouble in the world, though it has not touched you yet, Tim," he goes on; and as he says it, the shadow of the greatest trouble that I can picture befalling myself looms over me—I may lose Theo! "Lose him! Why, I have not won him yet!" I remind myself sharply.

"I don't wish to talk of myself," I say quickly. "I only want to feel sure that you *do* see that I have grown older and wiser lately, before I presume to offer you some advice."

My old friend and playfellow smiles at me very kindly, and I feel a certain sense of pride in being relied upon, and looked up to by such a splendid young Hercules as he is. Out here on the pier, where there is plenty of room for him, he presents quite a different appearance to that which he made in our narrow, cramped lodging. I shall like him dearly for a real brother, as he will be when he has found that his real earthly paradise will be in a marriage with one of the twins.

"Do you remember when we were all children together, Sydney, how much less trouble Magdalen and Mabel gave you in our games than Claire and I did?"

"I don't remember having many games with the

twins," he replies carelessly; "they were always afraid of spoiling their clothes."

"Yes, and they're just as careful and nice now," I say, trying to infuse an accent of intense admiration for my sisters into my passing tribute to them.

"Claire and you were always pretty equal at flat races on foot," he goes on; "but when it came to riding the bare-backed ponies, and jumping the brooks, Claire was nowhere."

"Yes, she was in the brooks very often," I laugh out heartily. "Claire wouldn't like to be reminded that she ever did such a thing, even in her short frock days ——"

"And you wouldn't mind even doing it now, would you, Tim? You're just as jolly, just as natural, as you were in the dear old days, when you always took my part, and bore many a scolding from Aunt Helen rather than deliver me up to justice, as the one who had led you into mischief."

I make no immediate response to this, for I feel that we are ebbing away from the subject of the twins in a very foolish manner. Moreover, I am not at all sure that I am brave enough to ride bare-backed ponies, or do anything else now that would justify Theo Bligh in laughing at me, and thinking me ridiculous. When I do speak, I approach my subject with a jerk.

"Claire was always quite the royal princess, wasn't she? It will be a blow to everybody's sense of right, if she doesn't make a splendid marriage."

"I trust she will, with all my heart," he says quite cheerfully. "Like the rest of you, I can only think of Claire in a high position, and as she certainly would grace the highest, I don't like to see her wasting her time on that frivolous young fellow, Bligh."

Did ever love speak so tolerantly and tamely! I'm nearly staggered out of my belief in his being in love with Claire at all. Yet, if he is not, to what am I to ascribe those mystical allusions which he made some few minutes ago?

All my life-long habit of confidence in him comes to

my aid now, and teaches me to be very frank, warns me not to attempt to diplomatisise or “manage” this man whom I regard with the warm affection I could feel for a brother. “Sydney, dear,” I say in my most persuasive accents, and they all say at home that my accents are as soft and low as ever fell from any woman’s lips—“Sydney, dear, I thought you were fond of Claire, and now I don’t know what to think. If it’s any other trouble, *would* you mind telling me?”

He laughs with a little under-current of feeling shadowing his mirth, that I have never observed in Sydney before, as he tells me,—

“Fond of Claire! Why, yes, I am fond of them all at Ravensbourne, excepting Aunt Helen; but my fondness for Claire can never give me a pang, Tim.”

“Oh!” I ejaculate in unfeigned surprise and agony, as a light is half revealed to me; but he says nothing further. He only rises up, and after staring straight at nothing particular for a few moments, he turns round to me with his old smile on his kind jolly face, and the old hearty roundness in his voice, and says,—

“Come, Tim; it’s time we went back to Mrs. Poland; you haven’t been well, she tells me, and if I let you stay out here and catch cold, I shall wish I had never brought my carelessness and myself to Brighton.”

“Papa never drives me in of an evening, for I amuse him,” I pout; “besides, I have so much to say to you.”

“Brothers are sometimes more careful than fathers,” he says quietly, “and you’ve said quite enough, little woman,” he goes on with most uncalled-for energy; “your consideration for me to-night has taught me that I haven’t been mistaken about you in one way, though I have in another. You’re worth the best love any fellow can give you; and though I’ve given you mine, dear, and it has been found wanting, no other man shall give you a poorer offering, or be less in earnest about your acceptance of it.”

I am dumb with amazement as he speaks. It is startling to be resigned in this flattering manner, before I

knew I had been asked for, even before I knew I had been wanted. Gradually entering into, and presently over-coming my amazement, there creeps a haunting fear that I may have been behaving badly—meanly—to this man, and that my conduct, though he may be noble enough to forgive it, may cost me the best part of his friendship, namely, that perfect faith which he had in my honour when we played together as children.

“Oh, Syd!” I say with a moan, as the memory of all those old, childish days rushes upon and overpowers me, “have I played fair?”

“I would never forgive any one else who asked me such a question about you, Tim,” he says, bending his dear, kind face towards me protectingly.

And I walk in silence home, by the side of the man whom I wish with all my heart was my brother in reality.

A slight hum as of two people conversing drowsily together falls upon our ears as we pass Mrs. Poland's open sitting-room window, and when we go in I see coming gladly, eagerly, to meet me, the form of a man who has been very little in my thoughts lately. Notwithstanding, now that I see him again, I remember vividly that he is clever, that he has a name in the world of letters, which I have been trained to believe to be the brightest sphere, and that he has told me that I shone like a star above him, and bloomed like a rose in his path. Remembering these things, what wonder that I respond gladly to the greeting which is given to me in the twilight by Mr. Murray!



CHAPTER XI.

ON THAT SUMMER SEA.

I AM a woman ; therefore, to be wooed ! I am a woman ; therefore, to be won ! I am a thorough woman, for I remind myself gladly and proudly that these privileges of my sex are mine rather largely just at present. Sydney Dale has told me in unmistakable language that it is me he has been wooing all along, and not Claire, and that it is only out of consideration for my caring for somebody else that he abstains now from seeking to win me. In almost equally unmistakable language Mr. Murray gives me to understand that I am the motive-power which has drawn him from his daily labour, and London life, and brought him down to further his suit with me by the sad sea waves, at Brighton. Unaltered, unalterable as are my feelings concerning Theo Bligh, I am more pleased and flattered than I can express by the victory I have gained in such an easy, effortless way, over the heart and head of this clever, cultivated Scotchman.

He has bestowed a searching and suspicious glance on Sydney Dale as the latter has followed me into the room, but presently suspicion seems to clear away, as is just and reasonable, for Sydney's gloomy face is not that of a successful lover. Deadly depression, which he does not attempt to disguise, envelops my old friend like a mantle,

and I am just beginning to feel that until he removes himself, and releases us from the restraint of his presence, there will be a growing awkwardness in my manner to Mr. Murray. This feeling has hardly bloomed into being before it and every other feeling is crushed out by Mr. Murray's next remark.

"I suppose you're expecting me to congratulate you on your sister's engagement? But, to tell you the truth, I don't feel inclined to do so! The lad's a handsome lad, and a pleasant one; but he's not the right sort of husband for a girl like Claire, and so I told your father."

Mrs. Poland ejaculates something, it doesn't matter what; Sydney moves nearer to Mr. Murray, and says eagerly—

"Has young Bligh got engaged to Claire Vincent? This is news to us all; you mustn't be surprised at her sister being too staggered to speak."

Even in the first madness of my misery I feel grateful to Sydney for coming to my aid, for seeking to save me from the humiliation of exposure. But I can't speak, words won't come, and a scream would, probably, if I opened my lips.

"They've been engaged for the last ten days, I think," Mr. Murray goes on, lazily looking at me with rapidly growing interest—such interest as shuts out anything like earnest feeling on Claire's account. "The lad is nothing, and has nothing; but he says that now that he will have such a sweet wife to work for, he'll make a career for himself; you'll probably give in your adhesion to the plan, because he's a handsome fellow—won't you, Miss Tim?"

"I can answer for it, that Tim will be glad of anything that adds to her sister's happiness," Sydney says, coming to my rescue again, like the gallant fellow he is, though the sight of my agony at the bursting of my beautiful bubble must have hurt him horribly. And at this juncture I do remind myself that, though I have been lightly won, and cruelly cast aside, I need not let the whole world know it.

"My dear! doesn't it astonish you very much? Not

that any one can be astonished at any one's falling in love with Claire," Mrs. Poland says, and I speak at last.

"I don't think I'm astonished; I'm only hurt that Claire should have let me hear it from any one but herself," I say in tones that I steady with much difficulty.

"There's nothing half so sweet in life
As Love's young dream,"

Mr. Murray chants out. "Remember, she's tasting it for the first time, and be lenient to her for forgetting you; by-and-by you're sure to hear all the details; but they're all the world to each other at present, and all the world is nothing to them."

I see Sydney watching me closely, striving by the earnestness of his gaze to make me repress any exhibition of the hideous weakness of my unrequited love. Strong, faithful, generous, fellow! why can't I love him, and be a happy, honoured woman, founded on the rock of a true, good man's affection? Why can't I turn away from the unhallowed recollection of that other one who has used me as a blind, who has deceived me and treated me with the most careless cruelty? Why can't I do these things, and be true to myself, and untrue to all the fatally weak instincts of my sex? Ah! my sorrow is so young still that I cannot find it in my heart to treat it with firm, reasonable harshness.

"Dear, dear, dear!" Mrs. Poland puts in, "to think of Claire making such a moderate match after all; if it had been one of the twins, now ——"

"He wouldn't look at one of the twins; he might marry anybody he pleased," I interrupt, throwing all my family loyalty over directly his claims to the highest consideration are aspersed, and Mr. Murray unconsciously satirizes the whole situation by saying—

"He'll have a strong advocate in you, that's very certain; if your sister is ever inclined to veer, you'll keep her straight. He's a lucky fellow, for he will have the loveliest wife and the sweetest sister that man ever had

in this world ; and I'm thinking that the last good gift is greater than the first."

Again Sydney comes to the fore, and spares me the necessity of replying by saying—

"We're treading on dangerous ground, don't you know ; we may injure his cause by talking about him ; for the man who is the first to break up a family circle is never too gladly greeted. I see Mrs. Poland is looking 'good-night' and 'go away,' though she's too polite to say it ; shall we go together ?"

Yes, Mr. Murray agrees that they shall go away together ; and so at last, at last, mercifully I am left to myself, for I rid myself of Mrs. Poland and her conjectures with the words—

"Before I talk to any one about it any more, I'll write to and hear from Claire."

"I'm afraid it's not all pure sunshine, my dear, or they wouldn't have let the first ray of it be thrown upon you by a stranger like Mr. Murray ; I'm afraid that the course of their true love isn't destined to run smooth."

I hurry away out of ear-shot of more of her blackly prophetic words. Claire, my darling sister ! my idol, before whom I have bowed down from little childhood, anything rather than that you should suffer ! I must write to Claire and to him, and tell them both, in language that will carry conviction with it, that I am happy in the thought of their happiness. I must do this, but it is the hardest act of self-abnegation that has surely ever been given to a girl to perform !

I write my letter to her, and, though the task is hard, I perform it, for it is not impossible. I tell her of my love for her chiefly, and I say a little about my amazement at the tidings, and my hopeful belief in his being capable of assuring her happiness. I beg of her to write to me, and not to let the gnawing pang of fear assail me that she is learning to unlove and do without me, because the other love has intervened. When I have worded this plea with all the integrity and pathos that is in me, I begin my letter to him. I begin it, but it is many weary hours

before I can finish it. How the man must have undermined me, to cause me to hesitate and doubt as I do about my choice of words in addressing him! My pen will not run glibly, my language is stilted! I throw off copy after copy, and one is too warm, and another too cold, while a third means nothing, and a fourth far too much. I am too true to write falsely; I am too indignant to write kindly; I am too proud to write truly; and I am too wrathfully restless to abstain from writing at all!

At length I scribble off something that is to a slight degree less unsatisfactory than anything else I have written. There is safety in its brevity, and yet, will not that brevity tell him what I have suffered in being compelled to write at all?

“DEAR THEO” (I write),

“I have heard the great news to-day from Mr. Murray. If you love Claire half as well as I love her, and as she deserves to be loved, you must be the happiest man in the world; and as I will believe that you do this, I will greet you as a brother gladly.

“Yours always ——”

I pause here and wonder whether I shall sign myself his “always affectionately.” No! I shall never feel “affectionately” towards him again, but I am sure of myself, of my own loyalty to my sister, and so I sign myself without fear his “always truly,” and I seal the letter.

How long and lagging are the hours of the night! How glaring and distasteful the first flush of the dawn! This first experience of getting up hopelessly tries me terribly, and sends me down a very jaded girl to Mrs. Poland’s breakfast table, where I find Mr. Murray already seated, looking as if he expected me to be very glad to see him.

“Mrs. Poland tells me you haven’t had a sail since you have been here,” he begins. “I mean to take you

out for one this morning ; there's breeze enough to bring the roses into your cheeks. We'll take a book and go out for a couple of hours' quiet enjoyment."

I would rather go to the bottom of the sea, and enjoy myself quietly there, than go out in a boat upon it with Mr. Murray, a book, and my own unhappy memories for my companions. But it would be both foolish and ill-bred to word this feeling, and as I am neither foolish nor ill-bred by nature and training, I compel myself to say as cheerfully as I can—

"It's just the morning for a sail ; and if you'll read to me, and the boat doesn't rock, I shall enjoy it."

"The sea's as calm as a mill-pond," he rejoins ; "and I'll read to you with pleasure. You won't be alarmed if we're not back for some hours, will you? for when I'm away with her and with Shelley on the sea I may forget how time flies," he adds, turning to Mrs. Poland.

Mrs. Poland looks at me wistfully, and answers him half deprecatingly, half warningly—

"I don't like boating under *any circumstances*," she says, emphasising her last two words in a way that is almost a challenge, "and I'm responsible for her, you know, Mr. Murray, and altogether I shall not be too well pleased if you keep her out long in this hot sun."

"You may trust her with me : she's the sweetest thing in life to me," he says dreamily ; and I wish with all my heart that he were not so unpoetically fat, and so poetically minded.

There is scarcely a ripple on the water as we get into the boat presently, and I can't get up a sensation of fear to distract my mind from my other miseries. The boatman puts up the sail, and subsides into the bow, where he and the bit of sky I catch, and the flapping sail, make up a perfect Hook.

I sit and play at steering, and Mr. Murray adjusts his rather stout person with some difficulty on a cushion at my side. He puffs as he gets into position, and looks altogether so middle-aged and plump that romance flies scared away, even though he reads "Weep not for

Adonais" in the sweetest accents that ever dropped from a man's tongue.

"If you and I were on the blue Mediterranean, the sea of poesy and phantasy, the sea of my youth, I'd make you understand Shelley better," he says presently, when I have too palpably not only not "wept for Adonais," but not listened sympathisingly to the tale of the manner of his death, and the many reasons why all generations should go on bewailing him bitterly.

"Wouldn't you like life in the south?" he asks presently—"blue unclouded weather, and grapes for breakfast, and the sweet *dolce far niente* air there is over everything."

"I don't feel to-day as if I should like life anywhere," I reply despondently.

"You're full of youthful vigour; you're the brightest thing that ever crossed my path! you're too good to take such a melancholy tone in earnest; what is it, my child? Tell me your sorrow, and let me try to soothe it."

I turn my haggard face, my weary eyes towards him, and there is such a wealth of sympathy in the kind, rugged face, that I am prompted to tell him truly.

"My sorrow is that I have been a fool."

"Some perfect trust you've had, some loyal faith you've pledged, has been betrayed?" he questions.

"My perfect trust has been betrayed, but there was no faith pledged—by either of us," I reply.

"By that lad who has taken your sister from you," he half assents, half interrogates. "Come, my sweet little friend, take a more hopeful view of it. He's an idle, graceless young ne'er-do-well now, but under her influence something like genuine manliness may crop up; think the best of him, and don't take other people's troubles on your young shoulders."

He is positively so blind about me that he does not see that my trouble is that I have lost Theo, not that I have lost Claire!

A sudden revulsion of feeling, a sudden flash of delight that as far as he is concerned my secret is my own still, causes me throw off my air of sentimental gloom, and fall

into the spirit of the hour ; sailing on that summer sea with a companion who can talk to me with the knowledge and understanding that perfect acquaintanceship gives, of the scenes amidst which Shelley wrote, is enough for the hour. And when this hour is past, there will be something else to catch if not to absorb my attention ; and so it will go on, and life will not be, shall not be, all a blank because I have gone into the market of love and bartered my heart away for nothing.

I've turned to the South, like a sunflower to its god, all my life ; there's no beauty in the rugged north to me, though it's the land of my birth and the land of my first love. I'd like nothing better now, if certain conditions were fulfilled, than to turn my back on England for the rest of my days, and anchor in Florence with the sweetest companions a man can have—books and the woman he loves.

I look back to what my life has been at Ravensbourne, and forward to what it will be, and I feel that my past has prepared a miserable future for me in the home of my youth. I look at the man by my side, and see that he loves me, and a vision of possible happiness, or at least contentment, in which Florence, and sunshine, and poetry, and a general warmth and langour are mixed up, floats before my mind's eye.

"I think I should like life in the South too, under certain conditions," I say languidly ; and he leans forward with animation, and tells me that now a Conservative Government is coming in his chances of a consulship are sure—that he has been told that it will be Florence, and that he will go there the happiest of men, if I will accompany him as his wife."

It is all over before I realise that I care no more for him than I do for the boatman in the bow. I sail back over the summer sea engaged to Mr. Murray, and I care very little whether or not the boat goes down before we reach the landing-place,



CHAPTER XII.

“YOU MAKE ME VERY HAPPY.”

THAT all Mrs. Poland's friendly fears are roused, and all her mental energies paralyzed when I go home, and tell her what I have done, are very minor matters to me. I am in a state of apathy ; and though I hate myself for being so un-girl-like, so unwomanly, so untrue to the traditions of courtesy in which I have been brought up, I can't rouse myself. I look vaguely into her face, while Mrs. Poland alternately bewails that she ever knew me, and that her husband ever knew Mr. Murray. She blames herself, and the boating, and me, in one breath ; and in the next, she defends herself from all possible charges of negligence, which may ever be brought against her. She wonders why I couldn't have encouraged Sydney Dale, who, she is sure, with a little leading on, "such as any girl is justified in giving a man," might have been brought to think about me. She wonders even more, how I could have been weak, vain, and wicked enough to encourage Mr. Murray, who is old enough to be my father, and much too fond of wine ever to go on working steadily for any woman. And I am not even irritated by her inconsistencies, nor stung by her manner of wording them. I seem to have lost all feeling, all fear, and all hope. But I have a faint kind of impression that I may care a little

for strange scenes, and manners, and for blue skies and seas, and eternal sunshine. I have also a faint kind of impression that it would stir some sort of sensation within me, if I could witness the way in which the news of my engagement will be received at Ravensbourne.

After talking round the subject verbosely for hours, Mrs. Poland-winds up with this exordium—

“Ponder well, my dear, before you write and communicate your folly to your friends at home. I ought to write too, but what to say about it, I don't know. Mr. Murray's age ought to have been a protection to you ; I shall never forgive him, and never think well of him.”

“I think I should like papa to know it at once,” I say, exerting myself to have a wish, and to express it. “As soon as papa knows it, there will be no going back, and I don't want to go back.”

“What a spirit for a girl to speak about first engagement in !” Mrs. Poland says, lifting up her eyes. And she is quite right. I acknowledge that it is a miserable, heartless, unfeminine way of speaking. But at this juncture I am miserable, and almost unsexed by bitter despair.

“I have nothing to go back to,” I say, raising my dreary eyes to her face. “Claire will soon be gone from me, and papa will let Aunt Helen come between us. Why should I go back to the old life that has nothing to offer me, when, at least, I can have change in the new one.”

She is too much vexed and perplexed to answer me reasonably, and if she reasoned like a Solon to-day, the ears of my mind would be deaf to her words of wisdom. She has failed to touch me in any way ; she has even failed to make me pity myself. My fate seems to me, even when she is making her worst representations concerning it, to be quite as good as I deserve. I have been found wanting by Theo Bligh. After this, ought I not to be at least passively grateful to any one who betrays the faintest recognition of my poor merits ?

Mr. Murray accepts the situation with a coolness that is very comforting to me. Having freely indulged his vein of poetry in the morning, he is going, he tells me, to devote the afternoon and evening to the writing of some political articles. There is a crisis somewhere or other, in Turkey or in Timbuctoo, and there is a difficulty somewhere else, and the always-ready Spanish question is being very much discussed just at present by the press. Altogether Mr. Murray derives, it is evident, just as much pleasure from reading his papers, and writing for them, as he does from the consideration that I have promised to go with him into flowery exile, if he can get a remunerative appointment there.

"It's a sample of what your life will be with him," Mrs. Poland says triumphantly, when the shades of evening fall, and nothing is seen of Mr. Murray; "he will read and write and talk to you about what he has read and written, when he can get no other audience, but while he can sit at a club over good wine, and get a circle of clever men round him, it will be little enough that you will see of the literary star you're going to marry in your madness."

"I don't want to see anything of him," I say thoughtfully, and when she naturally questions,—

"Then why in the name of common sense have you agreed to marry him?" I answer again veraciously,—

"I really neither know nor care 'why' I've made the promise, but I have made it, and so I shall keep it."

At nine o'clock this evening Sydney Dale comes to say good-bye to us. He is going to leave Brighton the next morning, "not for home." No, he's not ready for home yet, he says, but for the house of a married sister, who has settled herself away in wild Connemara with an even wilder Irishman. Trouble has fallen on this sister's hearth, he tells us. Her husband's lavish Irish nature has led him to live beyond his income, and the land has been neglected, and so has not brought forth plenteously, and the herds have been sacrificed to cover current

expenses, and altogether things are looking in a bad way in the eyes of the English trimly nurtured wife.

He is so engrossed by the consideration of this family difficulty, that I feel I am only thoughtful for him, and not absurdly reticent in keeping back from him the news of the change which has taken place in my status since he last saw me. The idea of having to discuss it with him becomes repugnant to me the instant I catch sight of his dear, kind, familiar face this evening: and as I sit by him and realise how entirely he belongs to my old careless, happy, youthful life, and how entirely Mr. Murray belongs to the untried and unknown, to the dubious and uncertain, I feel strangely tempted to put out my hands and literally cling to Sydney.

“I shall find you at Ravensbourne by the time I get back from Ireland, I hope, and let me find you looking yourself, Tim, and not the tired-out, fashionable young lady that you are here; and—I’ll always be like a brother to you; remember that.”

He whispers these last words, and I bend my head to listen to them, for they soothe and comfort me. I know that he is real, leal, to be trusted. I know that he loves me well with no selfish love. But I also know that the romance of my life is over, and that I may as well take up the burden of the reality of it uncomplainingly in the person of Mr. Murray. At least, I say I know these things, but the truth is that I know nothing of myself as yet. Only intuition tells me that if I am to be condemned to live again at Ravensbourne, my own dearly loved home, I shall sink prematurely into a monotonous-minded woman, and the intellect with which I have been endowed will become obscured and dulled.

“Will you say that you’ll be glad to see me back?” he pleads, and the demon of the desire to please rises up within me, and tempts me to tell him that “I shall be glad, that when he comes home he shall take Claire’s place with me, and be my chief friend, companion, counsellor.”

“And you could say all that to the poor young man,

knowing all the while that you have promised to marry this other one, and that by the time Sydney sees Ravensbourne again, you'll be known to belong so to Mr. Murray, that it will be a scandal if you go playing the game of friend, companion, and counsellor with anybody else,” Mrs. Poland says with earnestness, dashed with anger, as soon as he is gone.

For a moment or two I am frightened. Whatever I do seems to be wrong. Then the rash, reckless spirit seizes me. I may as well *do* what is wrong as be perpetually accused of doing it. I may as well have the game as the name.

“Sydney's liking will be a pleasure, a comfort to me ; I'll return as much of it as I can get,” I say doggedly.

“And do you think that it will be a comfort to him when you have taken as much of it as you can get, and then take to Mr. Murray, and go away leaving poor Sydney with the feeling that the girl he has loved from a little child has played with his good, true heart, and thrown it away out of wilful wickedness? yes, dear, I will tell you in plain words what your conduct will be if you act as you say you will,” Mrs. Poland says with quivering lips, and her head shakes with her strong sense of the enormity of my projected course. Her words recall my better angel, the dark spirit is exorcised for a time, and I kneel down by her side and rest my head on her bosom, and sob out a string of remorseful words.

“What *can* I do?” I wail. “I know that I have done very wrong in saying that I will marry a man whom I don't love, but having said it, I must do it, mustn't I? It will be worse of me to go back than to go on. It's too late for me to try to do right : I must go on doing wrong, not because I like doing it, but because I can't help myself.”

“It is never too late to try to do right,” Mrs. Poland says soothingly ; “you're so young to go headlong to destruction because you haven't the courage to confess that you have been wrong, and to bear a little censure. Mr. Murray, with all his faults, is a gentleman ; tell him

simply and truly that you have no love for him, and that you have been rash and wrong in promising to marry him, without having a particle of that love for him which is the only thing that can carry a woman safely and happily through all the trials of married life, and all the temptations of the world. You may not think so now, my dear, but depend upon it, I am right."

I know she is right, and that I am utterly wrong in all that I have done, and in all that I am weakly inclined to allow myself to drift into doing. Nevertheless, I shrink with all the force of my nervously organised nature from the task she assigns me of breaking it off with Mr. Murray—my admired friend, though uncongenial lover.

He may be too old for me! I do not love him! He may be addicted to wine; he may be imbued with the strongest intellectual selfishness; he may simply see in me a young hero-worshipping girl, whom judicious training may turn into his safeguard in the present, his nurse in the future. All these things he may be, all these things he doubtless is. But at least in him I think I recognise a way of escape from a great deal of monotonous misery, a great deal of desolation of feeling that without him will surely be my portion. Strengthening myself with this reflection, I pursue my wilful path, and tell her and myself that I cannot, with either honour or delicacy, retract my word and mar the prospect I have made for this man, who does me the honour of thinking it fair. But I cannot cast all feelings of honour, all scruples of conscience aside; and so, though I resolve to persevere in my course, my resolution makes me very unhappy.

In a day or two I get a letter from Claire.

"MY DARLING" (she writes),

"Your letter is like yourself, sweet and sympathetic. Theo and I are very happy, but there are drawbacks to our happiness which I cannot explain to you in writing. Theo sends his love to you, and thanks

you for your letter and congratulations. You will hear from him shortly, but just now he is worried by papa's doubts about the judiciousness of my having engaged myself to him (Theo), and Aunt Helen's distrustfulness of the wisdom of Theo having engaged himself at all. I shall be glad when you come back; your sagacious little head will be of value in this difficulty. What are you doing with Sydney Dale? Think well before you pledge yourself to marry a man whom you cannot admire as well as respect. Theo's brilliant qualities will naturally make me more fastidious than ever, and I never thought Syd *quite* good enough for you. Do tire of Brighton soon and come back to your affectionate sister,

“ CLAIRE.”

The letter is loving, but still it is not like Claire. Something in the tone of it, something in the wording of it, leads me to infer that she is either not perfectly satisfied with herself or with her prospects. I realise with pleasure that she has no doubt or fear as to any feeling I may have foolishly allowed myself to entertain for Theo. At the same time I realise with a pang that Theo must have garbled facts to her considerably for her to have this sure conviction, after the doubts and fears which I am sure now she did entertain on the subject, at one time. But I try to banish memory, and to cease from conjecture on the subject, and remind myself perpetually that Theo Bligh is going to be my brother, my darling Claire's husband.

During these days, my engagement with Mr. Murray becomes a ratified and accepted fact. He is far more practical and energetic on the subject than I had anticipated he would be, and he brings me papa's letter of consent before I know that his consent has been applied for. Papa's letter is a very characteristic one; but much as I admire his character, the letter disappoints me. He writes to Mr. Murray—

‘ My daughters are not marrying as I have expected them to marry. Claire has determined to try love in a

cottage, with a young fellow who has luxurious tastes which he will never attempt to curb, and idle habits which he will never endeavour to break. This is very sad and serious to me, but the days of locking up contumacious daughters are past, and the days of daughters listening to paternal advice are past too, it seems. As for my little Tim, the girl I thought would be left to me when the wilful and weak wills of the others had taken them away, I feel that she must be mad to dream of marrying you, a man who can cast no halo of romance or splendour over the future (and it is romance or splendour which wins a woman when there is no love in the case), and who is old enough to be her father. Still, if you like to take charge of a maniac, I can only say, may you be happy! I certainly am not so, in the prospect of my children leaving me in this way."

I read this letter from my father with tearful eyes, and a heart bowed down by the consciousness of the truth of his judgment. He is right in saying I "must be mad." I am mad—so mad that I determine to go on and immolate myself.

"He's not too sanguine as to our happiness, is he?" Mr. Murray says, as I hand him back the letter, "but we'll prove to him that May and December may be happy together, if December bears in mind constantly that only flowers and poetry and love should twine about the bright feet of his May. You can trust me to remember this, can't you?"

"I think you'll be kind to me, and take me away to some place that will fill me with new thoughts—and I do want new thoughts so much," I say piteously. And my middle-aged lover is obliged to be contented with this anything but warm acceptance of his promises and protestations. If he would only be chilled by my coolness, if he would only exert himself to feel indignation at my indifference, and cast me off. But he will not do this. He is to all appearances as satisfied as if I were happy and in love with him.

I have no feeling of girlish glory in my engagement.

He does not even strive to make me feel that I put out the light of all the other women who have shone for him before me. On the contrary, when he puts the pledge of his faith in the shape of a turquoise ring on my finger, he says the stones are "as blue as his lost Helen's eyes." And the only pang I feel when he says it, is caused by the knowledge that I am too indifferent to him to experience jealousy about his lost Helen, or anybody else.

"You make me very happy," he says to me frequently; "you're so appreciative and so jolly ignorant. I don't like learned women; now, you're something to strive for, and something to teach."

I make him happy, do I? But how miserable I am myself!





CHAPTER XIII.

THE MOON AND THE BROOKS.

MRS. POLAND and I both feel that to stay on at Brighton with the fallacious hope of deriving any benefit from its bracing air is a hollow mockery, after all these untoward complications of feeling and circumstance have environed us, and been played out. Accordingly we turn our thoughts homewards, and make preparations for returning, to bless our respective hearths again, and for fairly facing the questions by which our sadly prophetic souls tell us we shall be assailed.

Mr. Murray bears the news of my approaching departure beautifully. Hotel life, though he likes it, he confesses, is rather antagonistic to the work which is a matter of necessity to him. "When I have you with me always, to keep me straight, it will be all right," he tells me; "but just now very often the temptation to have a peg instead of writing a leader, is too strong for me. I am better back in my own study, where I can't call for anything every hour without giving myself a good deal of trouble."

He frightens me dreadfully by speaking in this way, and I tell him so, although, in my ignorance and innocence, I do not know half the cause I have for fear. But in reply to my outburst of alarm, he speaks so gently and

gratefully, that I am ashamed of myself for having dared to distrust him.

“My child, I would as soon bruise a wild rose as do anything that could give you a moment’s distress. You must trust me, my darling, and you will find that your trust has not been misplaced. I am not going to be the first of my clan to bring sorrow upon the woman who honours me with her love.”

I shiver when he says this to me, for I know that I am not honouring him with my love; and whatever his failings and faults may be, I feel this, that he deserves to be honestly dealt with by the woman to whom he offers his hand and the unstained name of his race. But I dare not risk bringing upon myself the sad, earnest, reproachful gaze that he will surely bend upon me if he ever discovers that I have used him as a mere temporary blind, to shield myself from the world’s detection of my blighted hopes respecting Theo Bligh. I keep up my fainting spirit by telling myself that something will surely happen to avert misery from the man who is so kind and generous, so tender and trustful to me! I don’t love him, but I pity him so much for his faith in my falsity, that my manner grows more gentle to him daily, and so, unintentionally, I bind my chains more and more securely about his willing feet.

Oh, Brighton, how I hate you, as I look at you through the gay, fashionable, careless atmosphere which surrounds you, and remember that I came to you free, and realise that I am leaving you fettered by my own wilful recklessness, by my own inability to bear the outer pangs of disappointment! What an evil pass I have come to! How I hate Brighton, and how I hate going home!

I feel like a convicted criminal when our journey comes to an end; and I find myself in the brougham on my way to Ravensbourne alone. How will Claire meet me? How will Theo meet me? I remind myself that he is going to be my brother, and promise my own sense of honour that I will meet him as Claire’s sister ought to meet him. A sister’s quiet love is all that I will

let my wayward heart give him in the future. But here I am at the door, and my strength is to be taxed in a moment.

It is a bleak, dreary, autumnal night; the wind has even a wintry sound as it whistles round the corners of the house. There is a certain comfort, though, in the way in which the warm light floods out to welcome me when the door is opened, and, joy! just inside my father stands with welcome and kindness for me visibly stamped upon his face.

I pass the steps with flying feet; I trip over the doormat, and fall into his arms, and I find comfort and safety there. He gives me a close, protecting clasp, and then he holds me away from him, and looks into my face, and says very gently—

“My little girl has come home an engaged woman, has she? A happy woman too, I hope!”

A ball rises in my throat and nearly chokes me; scorching tears collect round my eyeballs, but I resolutely force them back, for if I break down now, my unhappiness will be patent to everybody, and they will begin to surmise concerning the reason why I have rushed into it. Steadying myself with this reflection, I lift my eyes as fearlessly as I can, and face my father's scrutiny, as I reply—

“If you're not displeas'd at it, I am happy.”

The few moments given to the interview seem long to me, for Claire has not come to me yet; and though I dread the meeting, I do long for it so yearningly. As we pass on to the drawing-room I find time to ask where they all are, and I am told that Aunt Helen and the twins are dressing, and that Claire and Theo are strolling about the grounds.

What a reception! The indifference exhibited by Aunt Helen and the twins does not hurt me very much, but that Claire should hold aloof from me for a moment is a thing that stings me sharply. I am glad to free myself from papa's observant gaze, by running up-stairs to my own room, to which haven presently comes Aunt Helen, attended by Mabel and Magdalen.

Fresh from the sight of little Mrs. Poland, Aunt Helen strikes me as being larger than ever. In other respects she is unaltered. At a glance I take in these truths, namely, that she is as calm, as overbearing, and as much disposed to find fault with me as ever. The twins are—themselves.

“I am very glad you have come back, Tim,” Aunt Helen begins, giving me a large cheek to kiss; “I was afraid you might have consummated your folly by marrying that man before you gave any of us a chance of reasoning with you. I never heard of anything so ridiculous in my life as your engagement,” she says with slow scornful emphasis.

“We do all wonder so what you can see in him,” Mabel puts in.

“Theo says that ‘disappointed by Apollo, girls sometimes turn to Bacchus.’ You must have found and lost your Apollo very quickly, Tim. Theo likes to chaff everybody, you know, Tim,” Magdalen says deprecatingly, as a crimson blush burns over my face as I listen to the idle, foolish words wherewith Theo has been underrating me and the man to whom I have turned in my folly and sorrow.

“Don’t tell me anything more that he may have said,” I begin, but Mabel interrupts me to say,—

“Now don’t turn against Theo because he can’t admire your choice; you’ll find that we’re all his champions here now. We stand up for Theo quite as much as you used to do; don’t we, Aunt Helen?”

“Whom do you stand up for him against?” I interrogate.

“Well, I hardly know,” my inconsequent sister replies, “because every one likes him excepting papa. Sometimes papa *is* rather hard on him; but we adore him. He has a little to put up with, too, from Claire.”

“From Claire! from the sweetest-tempered, sweetest-natured darling that ever lived!” I ejaculate.

“Claire isn’t always sweet-tempered to him, but he never lets anything she says put him out; being en-

gaged gives her so much to think of, I suppose. She certainly has moods sometimes now." Mabel tells me this in a cheerful, commonplace way, as if it were the most unimportant thing in the world. But to me the statement is fraught with a significance. If Claire has "moods," Claire is not happy.

"Here she comes," Mabel says, as Claire comes in swiftly, and in a moment our arms are round one another's necks, and we are clinging to each other, as if we felt that we had not much else to cling to. This thought flashes across my mind in an instant, then I banish it—Claire is loved by and loves Theo! Claire must be happy.

"We'll always love each other, and always be true to each other, won't we, Tim?" are her first words, and they are spoken with emotion.

How heartily, how honestly, I answer "Yes."

"Just take off your hat and cloak," she says, taking them off as she speaks, "and come and see him at once, before the others are down; be kind to him, for my sake!"

"I'll be anything to him for your sake; I'll always be true to you in everything," I answer, as we go down arm-in-arm to the room where my brother-in-law elect awaits me.

Lissom, supple, and splendid looking, he comes to meet me with outstretched hands, with laughing eyes, and a face that has a more glowing flush on it than I have ever seen there before. But somehow or other it strikes me that the light, laughing air is not as natural as usual, that it is assumed to cover a sort of nervous excitement, which betrays itself in spite of his graceful gift of acting.

"Awfully glad to see you; let me imprint a chaste fraternal salute upon your brow," he begins, as he takes me by both hands and kisses my forehead; and at the tone of his voice, at the touch of his lips, I quiver through every fibre of my being with the miserable conviction that he is still the dearest thing on earth to me.

For all his carelessness, for all his easy grace, I detect

that it is a sigh of relief which he heaves as he turns away from me when I have greeted him with the words, "I am very glad you're going to be my brother, Theo." Perhaps he too has dreaded this meeting? Perhaps his memory has painted some scenes from our past, as vividly for him as mine has for me?

"So you're going to bring back the light of other days to Murray's life by accompanying him into his flowery exile, are you?" Theo says presently, laughing and swaying about as he stands up before Claire and me. Every debonair gesture, and every light, half-ironical accent are so familiar to me, and so desperately dear to me, that they inflict sharper pangs upon me than do his half-derisive tone of talking of my future husband. There is no doubt about it; I am much more loyal to my misplaced first love, than I am to my recently plighted vows to Mr. Murray.

"In plain English, I am going to marry him and go abroad," I reply briefly; "you can word the fact in a ridiculous way if it pleases you, but pray don't say it to me; be amusing at my expense to other people."

"Don't be savage," he says softly, bending down over me and forcing me to look him straight in the eyes at length; "I was merely quoting his own words to your father. I thought the idea pretty, don't you see? Like a line from a lovely poem, it's always running in my head. I wonder if he'll always 'lisp in numbers' to you when you're Mrs. Murray."

"Don't be rude as well as silly, Theo," Claire says quickly, but Theo does not regard her reproof; indeed, I think he scarcely hears it, he is laughing so hilariously at the suggestion he has thrown out.

"I am only putting the beautiful possibilities of the future before her. I can't do the blank verse business in conversation myself, but I want Tim to feel that I understand and sympathise with her appreciation of it," he says, affecting to excuse himself. As I steal a glance at him I see that he is watching me sharply, and I feel sure that in reality he is not so conscience-free, not quite

so careless, nor quite so indifferent about me as he feigns to be.

Claire leaves us presently on some slight pretext, and as soon as she is out of the room his manner changes with that miraculous rapidity which has been one of its chief charms to me hitherto. I distrust it when in all seriousness he mutters to me,—

“You don’t believe in this *badinage*, do you, Tim? You know that I feel all this too much to dare to speak earnestly of it before any one.”

“Then you shall not speak earnestly of it at all,” I say with determination. “I should like you to reverse your place—to be earnest about it before people, if you must say anything at all about it, and to treat me to nothing but *badinage* when we’re alone.”

He stands leaning against the mantel-piece looking down at me with those lightly glancing greenish hazel eyes of his, with an expression that is surely caused by some feeling of chagrin or disappointment. After a moment or two he changes his attitude; he gives me a side view of his face to look at only, and says,—

“You haven’t told me yet what you think of our affair. Were you surprised?”

“Partly yes, and partly no; not surprised at your loving Claire ——”

“Only astonished that Claire or anybody else should care a brass farthing for me, is that it? As you would have said ‘no’ had my presumption carried me in your direction, you’re rather staggered at discovering your favourite sister has shown more toleration for me; is that it, Tim, dear?”

He asks it with such a winning, pleading charm of voice and manner, that I forgive him for torturing me. I conquer all jealousy, all resentment, for the time being, and say with sincerity,—

“I think that Claire and you were born for each other, no one else would have been good enough for her, and no one but Claire would have been good enough for you.”

For a second my ardent, genuine tribute to his deserts (as I estimate them) touches the careless young Antinous before me into an exhibition of real feeling.

"'Pon my word you *are* good, darling," he says with impassioned emphasis, and he takes my hand, and presses it with fond fervour. But in another second he is his own gay, rattling, effervescent self again, for all the family come into the room, and he evidently thinks that there is need for a transformation scene.

"Tim's as serious as a judge," he begins, whisking about the circle like an animated young stag; "I've just been telling her that she's prematurely demure; we all know that it's the saddest sight of all to see—

'A gay and girlish thing
Give up her maiden gladness
For a name and for a ring,'

but this little episode hasn't come off yet; she has no right to relinquish the gay and girlish gladness before Mr. Murray pays her for letting them slide, with the little bar of gold and the name of his ancient race."

He positively sparkles with fun as he says this, and I come to the horrible conclusion that he has two manners, one for Claire and the others, and one for me alone. He wears two faces under that handsome, brilliant mask of his! Yet I, seeing this, fathoming it entirely, ache with the gnawing regret that only a woman who loves desperately can feel, for that I have lost him for ever, though he has been gained by the one for whom I have always and for whom I always will make silent sacrifice.

"Is that your engagement ring?" Mabel asks, taking my hand as she sits by me at dinner this night; "oh dear! only turquoise; I would have had something that looked a little less like one school girl's gift to another; it isn't half important enough."

"Certainly not for a consul's wife," Theo says with feigned seriousness. "As the representative of Britannic majesty abroad, some quaint device that was worn by

some of the royal houses from which he is collaterally descended would have been neat and appropriate—a broad band of gold, for instance, with the words, ‘Pledge of my faith; Fitzjames’ ring!’ engraved on it would be the very thing. I shall give the suggestion to Murray, and I am sure he will be very much obliged to me for it.”

“We should all be very much obliged to you if you would spare us any more laboured witticisms,” Claire says coldly.

“They’re not laboured in the least; they spring spontaneously from the fruitful soil of my own philanthropic heart. There’s not the least doubt of it that Murray is descended from that fellow who used to go loafing all about bonnie Scotland under the name of Fitzjames—the one who unearthed the Lady of the Lake after a bad day with the hounds, you know, Sir,” he adds, pretending to explain seriously to papa. “I’m sure,” he goes on, “Murray would be pleased at my prompt recognition of claims that he has been too delicate to put forward for our consideration yet; a Scottish gentleman of an ancient house ——”

His imitation of Mr. Murray’s manner is so perfect in its want of exaggeration, that, combined with his air of perfect unconsciousness, it is too much for me; I break into a fit of hysterical laughter, which ends ignominiously in a flood of tears.





CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE WILDERNESS.

WHEN we are sitting alone in our room this night, Claire opposite the looking-glass in which I see the reflection of her beautiful pensive face, I by the fire whose warmth comforts me like a living thing, for I am chilled and nervous after my burst of crying, and my teeth chatter, and my whole frame shivers when I try to speak—when we are sitting thus, I feel that my hour has come.

“Tim,” Claire begins, turning round and leaning her slight, white-dressing-gown-robbed form over the back of her chair, “I want you to tell me the truth, all the truth, and nothing but the truth; are you prepared to do it?”

“I will tell you nothing but the truth,” I say evasively, and the evasion does not content her.

“I was sure of that before I asked you, Tim darling: you couldn’t tell a falsehood, but—will you tell me everything?”

“About what?” I say piteously; “oh! Claire, do let me rest without questioning to-night; I’m trembling, I’m nervous, and I may say more than I ought, more than I wish, to say about anything.”

“What made you engage yourself to Mr. Murray?” she persists, utterly ignoring my plea.

"Vanity, I suppose," I say with a shudder. "I was flattered, I mean I am flattered, at such a clever man caring for me in that way. You know how I love talent, Claire," I say meekly.

"Nonsense," Claire says calmly. She never moves her beautiful steady eyes from my face; and I feel as if she were reading my secret, and my agony, my self-censure, and strong, true yearnings to so act in the future as to avoid giving her or Theo a single pang. "Nonsense; you have no vanity, and you've been too much accustomed to the society of clever men all your life to be overwhelmed by the honour done you by the first one who asked you to sacrifice your bright young life to his middle-age and selfishness. What was it? tell me."

She comes over to me, kneels at my feet, and taking my face between her hands, tries to read my soul in my eyes.

"I think that when I heard you were going away, I felt as if there would be nothing to come back to at home," I stammer out; "and while I was feeling this, Mr. Murray came, and talked to me about new scenes and a new kind of life, and made me think that I should make him very happy by doing as he asked me; and I do like him, you know, Claire; and altogether I shall be very happy."

I cling to her as I conclude my sentence, and hide my face in her neck, but she is not to be turned away by my caresses from her pursuit of the knowledge which she craves. She lifts me back very tenderly and says—

"This is worse than I feared even. Why, you won't even confide in me, poor dear Tim! How tired your eyes look! The tears you shed to-night are not the first you've shed during this last week, I'm sure."

"It's the journey, and finding myself at home again, and parting with Mr. Murray," I say. And as I utter my last hypocritical words, I see a sad expression of doubt and distrust flit over her face.

"No, Tim, it's not that last, at any rate. Don't try

and deceive yourself and me about your feelings for Mr. Murray ; and do, my darling, treat him as the gentleman he is. Don't deceive him either. He's not the man, clever as he is—it is not the marriage for you," she says resolutely. "Some blight has fallen on you, which has chilled your hot, true, tender heart, and numbed your judgment ; you have turned to Mr. Murray in despair, not in love? What rendered you despairing? what made you reckless, Tim? what is making you immolate yourself?"

I am nearly broken down by the passion and the pathos which she puts into her final appeal. But I brace my resolution with the timely remembrance of the fact, that if I do weakly respond to it, and confide to her the real reason of my having accepted the fate offered to me by Mr. Murray, that I shall plant a dagger in her breast which no after efforts of mine will be able to remove.

"Love of change, and liking for Mr. Murray," I say decisively. "Come, Claire, don't try to disparage him to me ; he's going to be my husband, and I mean to be very proud of him ; even papa admits his talents, admires them, in fact, and I'm ambitious, and mean to make him work on for a better name and a higher fame than he has won yet."

"You're clever, dear," she says, rising up, "much cleverer than I am, but the instinct of love teaches me to see through you like a crystal. You don't confide in me because you dare not for the sake of another person. My darling, loving, loyal pet, I won't importune you any more ; but, Tim, believe this, understand this, if I made a sacrifice for you now, if I surrendered something which is mine now, but which might have been yours if it hadn't been for me, it would be useless?"

She speaks so eagerly, so deprecatingly, and so self-excusingly, that I hardly recognise my high-spirited Claire. But I know only too well what she means.

Down at the bottom of my wicked, wayward heart I do still love Theo Bligh. But as Claire speaks that love

lies down out of sight, and all that I as sister owe to sister, all that I as woman owe to myself, comes to the fore.

"It would be useless, because it would be uncalled for, unnatural, the most Quixotic thing that was ever done in madness, darling," I say warmly. "I can't help knowing what you mean—it is that, if you had not existed Theo Bligh might have liked me; he never would, though, Claire, believe that."

"Does it hurt you still that he loves me instead?" she asks anxiously.

"Not a bit," I say stoutly; but I am suffering horrible qualms of conscience during all this cross-questioning, which for her sake I am compelled to answer mendaciously.

"It drove you into promising to marry Mr. Murray," Claire goes on; "that's what makes me so wretched. Theo was only a passing fancy on your part, and if you could have borne the first disappointment passively, your *true* love would come riding by in time; but you would go out and do something definite. Why couldn't you have been your own true little self this time, and told yourself that, though you had built a fair fabric of mistaken hopes on Theo's brotherly attentions, now that you knew they were only brotherly, you would not embitter my life by acting as if they had been of another order?"

Her tone, her manner grow colder as she speaks. With a shiver I recognise that she is scolding me, reprimanding me as if I had been guilty of some unaccountable self-delusion and selfishness. I can't defend myself. I can't tell this dear sister of mine, whose heart is evidently sick and sore with love for him, that he had tried with all his matchless easy art to make me believe that his attentions were not of that purely fraternal order which never turn to ashes on one's lips. I cannot tell her this, so I take up the burden of the shame of having proffered my love to one who had been obliged to courteously decline it, unrepiningly.

"I will never forget that Theo is to be my brother," is all I can bring myself to say; "and, Claire, just this, dear! you in turn must remember that I am your sister, and that not even Theo must know what you fancy you have discovered."

I make my pitiful appeal for common justice very unwillingly. But I feel that there is a strong necessity for making it. Claire loves me as well, perhaps better, than ever. But her judgment is a trifle distorted by a love that she is already beginning to feel is unwise, and by a jealousy that she is ashamed of herself for entertaining. I look in the glass and see myself, I look back at the low seat by the fire, and see her; it can't be jealousy.

Even as I think this she comes over to me, and kisses me "good-night," and coos out her trouble about the uncertainty of their future. "Papa's despising him more and more every day for staying on here, and doing nothing, and not trying to do anything; yet what can he do, poor boy? He has no money, he has no interest; and though he has hundreds of friends, they're no good to him in any emergency. Don't you wish we had fortunes, Tim?"

With all my heart I assent. Once more she kisses me and goes away, but she is back again in five minutes.

"There's one trifle I forgot to mention," she says, and from her manner of saying it I know that it has been on her mind to say it all the evening, "don't let one of the others ever find out that Theo and you are not exactly on the same terms you were before you went to Brighton."

"But we are on the same terms," I urge mendaciously, and anger clouds Claire's lovely face in an instant.

"I can trust you not to be on the same terms, however it may be with him," she says. And I understand that, after all, my sister does rightly gauge the relation that existed between Theo and me, and that she does cast us correctly for the parts we respectively played. How he

must have misled her judgment! how he must have perverted facts to have led her to suppose that I had given my love to him unsought! My god is tottering on his pedestal! but still—still, I am only a woman, and I shall prop him up again and again, for her sake now as well as his once idolized own.

It is difficult after this break in it to settle down into the regular routine of Ravensbourne life again. I am in a transition state; while the old is slipping from me I am unable to grasp the future, and the present seems hazy. There are times when in my new-born desolation I crave for Mr. Murray's companionship. He, at least, can talk me into taking an interest in things for the time being, however evanescent or fictitious that interest is. Moreover, I belong to him; and at home I seem to belong to no one, for papa is engrossed with his work, Claire is engrossed with Theo, and the twins are engrossed with themselves.

The one sharp, clearly outlined interest which I take in things that are passing before me is a change which I see creeping over Theo Bligh. He is as volatile, as careless, as amazingly idle apparently, as ever. But some subtle instinct teaches me that the volatility is mere excitement, and the gay fooling merely adopted as a mask. The darling boy whom I love with a passion that has taken such deep root in my soul that it can never be eradicated, is unhappy, and it seems to be of vital importance to him that his unhappiness should be concealed from every one. One other thing, too, interests me a little—Aunt Helen is altering. Her manner is no longer that of a large, well-fed, composed cow, but rather that of a cow whom flies are worrying. She still dozes after luncheon, and sleeps after dinner, but she often ejaculates in her sleep, and wakes herself from it with frequent jerks to inquire if she has "been indulging in that foolish habit of talking in her dreams." She assures us earnestly on two or three occasions when she has muttered incoherent words, that the "real living interests are subjects that are never discussed by sleep-

talkers ; the most innocent minds run on crime in their sleep," she says, to which theory I am antagonistic at once, for my mind does not run on crime in my sleep, and I trust that it is innocent when I am waking.

I hear constantly from Mr. Murray all this time, and his letters are charming ; we all pronounce them "charming," for I read them to the rest of the family, just as I would a couple of columns from the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Charming as they are, there is that about them which tells me that he takes more pleasure in writing them than he does in writing them to me. The literature is the first consideration ; the recipient a very secondary one. As I am not in love with him, this discovery does not hurt my heart, but it does not incline it more tenderly towards him ; and I breathe more freely day by day as I tell myself that I am not at all necessary to him, after all ; I am only a peg to hang some of his pretty thoughts upon ; I am doing him no injustice in contemplating going to him with my tepid trust and hero-worship instead of the love and honour for which he has asked.

One day at luncheon I announce that I am going to spend the afternoon with Mrs. Poland. I have been all the morning with Claire and Theo, and the latter has been in one whirl of apparently most joyous excitement. As there is no visible cause for this, it has caused me to be both speculative and sad, and so I think that a brisk walk through the meadows and woods, with a brief bit of Mrs. Poland's society at the end of it, will brace me up and change the current of my thoughts, which have grown rather gloomy lately under the influence of the sustained monotony of home life, and the dread that when this shall be broken up, it will be by a change that will be even sadder for me than the monotony.

By this time Mrs. Poland has ceased to flutter when she sees me. In the early days after our return from Brighton the appearance of any one member of our family at her gates was the signal for a sudden accession of nervous excitement on her part, which would have made her conduct seem criminal to the last degree had there

been any guilt in my engagement. She was always expecting to be called to account for that which to her was simply unaccountable. The dread fear that the charge of having slept while on guard would be brought against her by my father, robbed her return to her husband and her home of every particle of pleasure which she would otherwise have taken in both. And the weight of responsibility which she insisted on bearing upon her shoulders, because of being the wife of the man whose friendship had brought Mr. Murray into our midst, was sufficiently heavy to crush all semblance of her former genial manner out of the kindest-hearted woman in the county.

But these days of dire distrust are over now, and Mrs. Poland greets me this day with a face full of smiles. Her faith in time is large, and she has strong hopes that in my case at least absence may make the heart grow fonder—of somebody else! In other words, she is sanguine as to the probability of my first forgetting and then freeing myself from Mr. Murray under the influence of the glamour which the approaching winter county season is likely to throw over me. She sometimes words this sanguine expectation of hers to me, and I, having grown stolidly reticent, neither crush nor encourage it.

She is so cheery and comforting this day that I stay with her until the shadows begin to fall, and then I start hurriedly for home, determining to run through the meadows and take the short cut through the wilderness. Country-bred as I am, accustomed to being out at all hours on horseback and on foot, I am not likely to let myself fall a prey to needless alarms, though the veil of dim twilight envelops itself around everything before I gain the dense shade of the trees. Still it is with a start of pleasure, though I am no coward, that I see the red end of a fragrant cigar advancing rapidly to meet me in the growing darkness, and feel sure that the cigar is held between the lips of Theo Bligh.

“He is going to be my brother, I may be glad to see him.” I am reassuring myself in this way when he comes

up, and as he doffs his hat to me I see that he looks pale and unhappy.

“It would have gone hard with me, little woman, if I hadn’t got a word alone with you to-night,” he says ; and at the sound of his troubled voice my heart bleeds for him, myself, and Claire.





CHAPTER XV.

“A WELL BELOVED YOUTH.”

“**I**T would have gone hard with me if I hadn't met you,” he repeats, as I bring myself to a full stop before him, and look up into his handsome, harassed young face with my enquiring, sympathetic eyes.

“Is anything wrong with Claire?” I ask at once.

“Well, yes and no; I hardly know which to say to tell the truth,” he answers impatiently. “Claire has disappointed me a good deal to-day; either she doesn't care for me half as much as I thought she did, or there's a good deal of selfishness about her.”

“There's not a grain of selfishness in her nature,” I say warmly; “and as for her not caring for you, she has no other inducement but that of caring for you, to make her marry you.”

“We're not married yet,” he says, carelessly; “there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, you know. A girl who stands out for her own way, as Claire did to-day, is quite capable of throwing a fellow over, if he ever found occasion to thwart her.”

“Claire will never break a promise lightly; besides, Theo, you know she loves you ——”

“She's not blest with any very great power of portraying affection, even if she feels it; but that's not what I

came out to say to you to-day," he says, with the vexed careworn expression creeping over his handsome mobile face. "I want to ask you to help me—to be a real friend to me, Tim."

He takes my hand as he speaks, and puts it on his arm, and presses it affectionately, and looks down at it with pathetic tenderness. And I cannot meet his eyes steadily, for the pulses of my heart are quickened, and to still them I have to remind myself that he is going to be my brother, that he is Claire's lover, and that I am to marry Mr. Murray, who is as unconscious of all this infirmity of purpose of mine as one of the dogs at my heels—more unconscious, in all probability; for I often fancy that our faithful four-footed friends know a good deal more about us than they would in their loyalty like to mention.

In order to be a real friend to Theo, I must be true as Milan steel to Claire. Reasoning thus rapidly, I am justified to myself in assuring him warmly and earnestly that I will be a real friend to him.

"You see," he begins, "I have been wasting a lot of time down here, and time is money—is life to a young fellow like myself, who has brains and nothing else for capital, and wants to make a career. This time here with Claire—with you all—has been an idyl, a summer romance; but the stern realities of life have set in, they are placed very prominently before me, and Claire seems vexed that I can't help seeing them."

I know Claire so well that I answer at once—

"Claire will never want to make you idle—she will never put a pebble in the path of your ambition, and she'd rather give up the best man in the world than that he should give up his career for her. I speak for Claire as I would for myself."

"If you were speaking for yourself, now, I would believe you fast enough, Tim dear," he murmurs; "but I am not quite credulous enough to take in all those noble sentiments which you're enunciating about Claire. While she remembers that my ambition may forward her

own she's all right enough, and will further it to the best of her ability; but she's apt to forget that fact in the absorbing interest which she takes in herself, and in these moments of forgetfulness she would let me slide to destruction rather than take the trouble to hold out one of her pretty fingers to save me from it."

"Claire would never go to *your* sister if you had one, and speak against you," I say indignantly.

"Probably not. Claire would remind herself cautiously of the proverbial weakness of her sex—tattling. Now, I'm not in the least afraid of you're repeating a word I've said to Claire. I shouldn't value you and turn to you—I shouldn't love you as I do, if I couldn't trust you."

I am a reed shaken by the wind as he speaks. I ought to ice my heart and make my manner frigid. Instead of doing this, I remind myself that he is going to be my brother, and that on these grounds I am justified in doing a little evil to myself, in order that good may come to him. Perhaps, if the special form of evil which I contemplate doing were unpleasant to me, I should recoil from it. As it is, I heroically brave any painful result that may accrue to myself from pursuing such a course, and say—

"You may always trust me to do everything to further your happiness—and Claire's."

"Love me for myself a little," he whispers; "leave Claire out of the question sometimes. Tim! why did you go away to Brighton, just as I was getting to feel that life wasn't life without you? I mustn't say anything of this kind now, because—because you're a darling, and I am engaged to your sister, and you think that you're going to marry Murray, and be happy for ever after; but still love me for myself a little, won't you?"

We are walking slowly along among the trees in the wilderness as he says this. The whole situation is pretty, wrong, unworthy of him, and of Claire's sister! I remind myself that it is these things. I take my hand from his arm, I force my eyes to lift themselves with the semblance

of fearlessness, and I compel my tongue to speak without faltering.

"You may trust me, and confide in me just exactly as if I were your sister," I say. "Now, what do you want me to do?"

"It's a paltry, beggarly matter to put before a girl," he says complainingly; "but the fact is, I might do a splendid thing for myself if I could only put my hands on a couple of hundred pounds at the present moment—there's my cursed misfortune. I can't do it; mine are summer friends; they'll love me, and waste my time, and cavil at my not making a local habitation and a name for myself, but they won't risk their blessed two hundred pounds!"

He paused, evidently upset by the recollection of the ungenerosity of those with whom he has had to deal. And I feel very much as I should do if I saw the original Apollo Belvedere placed upon a tenpenny Paris plaster column.

"Oh, Theo! if I had two hundred, or two thousand, or twenty thousand, for that matter, you should have it."

"Now, look here, don't be ecstatic," he says quietly, "but if you want to help me, do this: just ask your father to let you have two hundred pounds; he will understand that it's for your trousseau, and by the time you want it for that purpose, I shall be able to refund it to you. It's not a great thing, this first favour that I ask of you, is it, little Tim? it's only asking you to put off the purchase of your wedding finery for a few weeks."

I would put it off for ever to serve him; I love him so utterly, that I would go in sackcloth and ashes from the present moment to the day of my death, if my doing so would make things pleasant for him; still, I feel that in asking me to do this he is asking me to do something which is ignoble. I am impulsive, but I am not an impostor. Why should Theo take it for granted that I am ready to go to my father, whom I regard as the grandest gentleman that ever lived, with a lie in my mouth? But I love him. I love every light and shadow

on the careless face that changes so rapidly, mirroring truly every rapid change within. Besides, in saving him, shall I not be serving Claire? Their interests are indivisible.

"Will you do this for me, and do it at once, Tim?" he asks softly. "Claire raved and ranted when I asked her to do it, although she is the one who will benefit by it in the end; but you have nothing to gain by making the effort for me. And so, as you are the truest woman I know, you'll make it?"

Aye! that I will! for my sister's sake and his, love shall win for him the lucre that he needs. I plèdge myself very quietly, merely saying, "I'll speak to papa to-night;" but he feels a certain security in my words I am proud to see, for he becomes his own irrepressible self again as we approach the house, and trolls out more thrilling than ever the ballad of "The Bailiff's Daughter of Islington."

"We'll dramatize this ballad for two, and cast ourselves for the parts, shall we?" he laughs. "You're just the kind of girl to play the little game she played."

"But I don't think that you're just the kind of man to be faithful to the girl for seven years," I reply.

"Well, I don't know that I am," he says, "and I think I should have 'sworn off' if I had found her sitting in 'mean attire,' in a hedge. To find the girl you've loved with seven additional years on her head, and in 'mean attire,' must be a trying thing. What a pity it is you women ever grow old! you're so nice when you're young."

He looks at me with the eyes of a connoisseur as he speaks, and I wonder how he will regard Claire when she has furrows on her brow and wrinkles on her cheek. Hastily I banish the horrible thought. Old age and Claire are antagonistic ideas.

"I'd take to writing for the stage," he goes on airily, "if it didn't involve such a lot of dirty work. I couldn't stand snobs of managers taking the high hand with me, and cads of actors grumbling at their parts; and that's

what all young dramatic authors have to go through at first. If it weren't for that trifling drawback, I shouldn't mind the career at all."

He speaks quite as if it were merely his refined sensitiveness to rebuffs which prevents him from placing himself on the same platform with Gilbert, and in my ignorance and infatuation I am ready to credit him with the power of producing some similar intellectual phenomenon to the "Wicked World." What can he not do—brilliant young Adonis that he is? Still it does occur to me to wonder a little that he does nothing at all.

"What do you think you'll be by-and-by, Theo?" I ask hesitatingly. It seems like presumption on my part to suggest that he should ever be anything more than he is.

"What shall I be by-and-by?—a jolly lucky fellow if a little robbery I'm in now turns out well."

"A little robbery!" I repeat, horror-stricken.

"Yes, don't be alarmed; I merely meant a little speculation not wholly unconnected with a horse—that's what I want the two hundred pounds for. Mind you don't disappoint me, Tim. Get me that money as soon as you can, and I'll be off without delay to play for fortune, and win it for Claire."

This last sentence settles me. It is for Claire that he is going to strive! It is for Claire that I am going to sneakily aid him. I go into the house fully resolved to make my appeal to papa before I go to bed this night, and firmly convinced that my resolve is a good one.

As we cross the hall, Claire meets us, and ranges herself by my side at once.

"Theo and you look like a couple of conspirators," she begins. "I watched you crossing the lawn from the wilderness gate. I couldn't see your faces, but there was a stealthiness in your step that was suspicious. What have you been conspiring about?"

She tries to speak playfully, but she cannot subdue the expression of real serious interest which she takes in the subject which she is handling in the dark.

"Our conspiracy is a most harmless and honourable one," Theo says gaily and mendaciously. "I've been telling Tim that I'm going in for writing for the stage. I've an awful lot of dramatic talent, and she's good enough to give me hearty encouragement—which is more than I can say of you, Miss Claire."

She looks at him with such love, such reproach, in her sweet lovely face, and I turn to leave them to make love and peace. But she follows me, and takes my hand, and says,—

"Is this true, Tim? is Theo going to try and do good work well?"

In all my life I have never paltered with the truth to my sister; I do so now, for I say with a ring of sincerity in my voice,—

"I think he's going to try."

She heaves a sigh of relief, and I leave them. When I see them again, it is at the dinner-table, and Theo is making arrangements for the disposition of our time for the next few weeks, and identifying himself with all these arrangements, as lightly and gracefully as if he had not an hour ago assured me that he was going off almost immediately to fight for fortune for Claire.

"Can you do a little copying for me to-night, Tim?" papa asks in a couple of hours later; and I acquiesce gladly, for I am rejoiced to do anything kind to papa to-night. I am going to deceive him for the first time in my life!

"It's good practice," he goes on laughing; "you'll have to copy for Murray in a little time. By the way, when do you think of becoming Mrs. Murray? I may as well know the worst at once."

I put my arms round his neck, and bury my head in his breast, and whisper,—

"Papa, I want to speak to you alone."

Aunt Helen hears the sound, but cannot catch the sense. She pounces forward, looking large enough to crush me, and says,—

"If you have anything to say to your father that you are ashamed for me to hear, pray take him into another room, and say it, Tim, but do not whisper in my presence, please."

"I am not ashamed to say it before you, but I don't care that you should hear it," I say as coolly as I can. "Do come into your study with me, papa; I feel there that I am more to you than she is."

I am sorry that I have spoken the words as soon as they are uttered. My father clasps me closer to him with a reassuring shrug, but I can feel all the while that my words have hurt him. As for Aunt Helen, she simply stands by silently, seething in a white fury. The look on her face is not a good one, as she glances from papa to me; but I feel triumphantly that she is powerless to hurt me with my father, as he says,—

"My daughters are more to me than all the world; we needn't retire to the study to prove your supremacy; still, we'll go there, my pet, if you please."

And we go there!

I carry my first begging petition very badly, very ungracefully, to the paternal throne: nevertheless, the great fact remains that I carry it! I get papa well down in the recesses of the plumpest arm-chair in his sanctum, and stand by his side with my arms round his neck, and my curly head poised on the top of his grey one, and then I say,—

"Papa dear, I shall want such a lot of new things to wear when I am married—you know that, don't you!"

"And you will want a lot of money to get the new things—is that what you want me to understand, my child?"

I nod assent.

"Of course I understood so much as that of my daughter's needs," he laughs. "I was saying to-day that as the lambs insist upon being slaughtered, they must be well decked for this sacrifice. Hadn't you better trust to Aunt Helen to order your fit out?"

With sudden injudicious energy I exclaim, "I don't

want Aunt Helen to have anything at all to do with it. I don't want her to know even that you have given me the money. I want to act for myself, papa. I ought not to marry at all, if I am incapable of managing such a little matter as this for myself."

He puts his hand under my chin and lifts my face up for the purpose of inspecting it more closely. Then he kisses me and says,—

"As you will, my child; you have a motive, I suppose, for this, and I'm sure that whatever motive you have is good. Now for the sum: how much do you want?"

"Two hundred pounds—is that all? Claire would have been a much bolder beggar. Well, for your modesty's sake, I'll double the sum, Tim; for you must dress your part of Consul's lady in silk attire—in brave array."

"Papa! papa! papa!" One word more in this strain from him, and I shall break down, and make a most absolute confession. I am saved from taking this course, which would be ruinous to Theo, by papa saying prosaically,—

"Let me see; I'll write the cheque for you at once, and cash it for you to-morrow, pet; will that do?"

"Yes, that will do, thank you a thousand times;" and, with downcast eyes and aching heart, I leave my father's presence.

Claire is not very far off. Claire captures me with a winning gesture and a winning word as I stumble upstairs, eager to gain the safety and solitude of my bedroom. For all the grace with which she accomplishes her end, I wish she had not done it when she says,—

"Tim, dear, you've done something you're ashamed of; what is it?"

Her face is glowing, her eyes are sparkling.

"I am not ashamed of what I've done," I say resolutely.

"'Of what you've done.' Then you have succeeded? O Tim! my darling, tell me at once—have you got this money for ——"

"For Theo, for *your* sake," I interrupted. "He told

me it was for your sake. But I've deceived papa, Claire, and Theo must be good to you to repay me for all this shame and misery."

"Don't cry, dear," Claire says soothingly. "I wouldn't have done it myself, because I'm to be Theo's wife, and I shouldn't like him to be able to say that I had ever done a mean thing; but what would have been mean in me is noble in you, Tim, and at least you'll always find me grateful."

I cannot answer her.

"I'll go and tell Theo now that his little ambassador has worked his royal will. Send him a sisterly message—say you're glad you've done it, won't you?"

"I am glad to have saved him," I sob; "but oh! Claire! papa has trusted us all our lives, and now——"

"The end justifies the means," Claire cuts in coldly. "Theo gets twitted for remaining on here at Ravensbourne, and yet no one has sufficient generosity to give him the means openly of going away. You're having done this will be his salvation, and mine, Tim—lay this flattering unction to your soul. You send your love to him, then, my pet," she adds with a kiss, "and I may tell him from you that he will have the money from his sister Tim to-morrow."

"You may tell him what you like," I say in my agony and impatience. So Claire leaves me with a light step to bear the good news to her lover, and I go to the glass, and scan my face, to see if the word deceiver is not legibly written upon it.





CHAPTER XVI.

“YOU ARE AWFULLY GOOD.”



DIVERSION occurs the day after I make my successful raid under false pretences upon my father's pocket. Papa goes up to town as he promised me he would do, and when he comes back he brings with him not only the four hundred pounds, but Mr. Murray! And I have to meet him as if I were glad that he has come!

During the whole of the day Theo has been so essentially himself, that I begin to doubt his having a single fear as to his future. I also begin to doubt his having the fervent desire to do something for Claire's sake with which he had impressed me yesterday. He is born apparently to play the part of curled darling and favourite of fortune, and he treats the little effort I have made on his behalf as so entirely a matter of course, that I am astonished at myself for having expected any gratitude from him.

“You must have treated the trousseau question very cleverly,” he says to me as soon as he can get me alone. “Claire tells me the way your father forked out at once, and I can tell you, little woman, I'm awfully pleased at your powers of diplomacy.”

“At my powers of deception,” I say indignantly.

“No, no, we'll have no hard words about it; you've done me a great kindness, and I shall never forget it,

never forget what I owe to you. I'm not the kind of fellow to turn round and revile a woman for being weak on my account; I know that you've done this because—well! because you think too much of me; but I'm grateful to you, Tim, and I'll never turn round upon you!”

His magnanimity simply paralyses me! Have I fallen so low for love of him, that his nature can dare to pity and despise me?

I don't ask this question aloud, I ask it of my own conscience, and to my joy my true conscience tells me “No.” What I have done I have done for Claire's sake, for his good! My love for him, ruinous as it may be to myself, will never lead me to do anything that may rebound upon and be hurtful to him!

Fraught with this feeling I turn from him, that he may not read my thoughts aright, and so gain more power over me, and I say—

“You could never turn on me for trying to help Claire; and till you do well, Theo, till you're free and independent and working for yourself, Claire will never be happy. You must—you will do something good for her sake?”

“By Jove! I'll do it for my own,” he says, “but they won't give me the chance. It's no use their thinkin of sticking me down to business; I can't stand routine, and I can't suck up to snobs because they happen to be in power and to have patronage. I can deal with gentlemen, but I can't deal with fellows whose women-folk stumble over their H's; I ought to have gone in for diplomacy ——”

“You'd have had to subdue your magnificent ideas a little if you had,” I suggest.

“Ah! your notions on the subject are derived from Murray,” he replies superbly. “Consuls have to do a lot of unpleasant work, but as an unpaid *attaché* to an embassy, I could have adjusted my angles to my niche very well indeed.”

“But to be that you must have a fortune of your own,” I say aghast. And he answers patronisingly—

“Of course, dear; no other fellow in my position

would have been short-sighted enough to have engaged himself to Claire—a girl whose face is her fortune. Not but that I am quite contented with mine in getting her.”

Oh, Claire! what are we all about? I ask the question of myself, but I cannot answer it; and I am still trying, vainly trying to think it out, when Mr. Murray comes.

He is a delightful friend. He tells us such a number of interesting things in such an interesting way, that he harmonises our circle marvellously. Above all—oh, be joyful!—he does not attempt to monopolise me. He makes no special claim on either my time or attention, and how grateful I am to him for this, until Theo says—

“He looks upon you as part of the gear it will be well for him to take out to his consulate. I shouldn’t like that if I were you, Tim. He’s all very well, but he must remember that we’re granting him an awful favour in letting you go to him at all. It seems to me that he should show he sets a higher value on it.”

He fumes and throws himself into an affectionate fuss about me; but somehow or other I can’t help feeling that, however wanting in chivalrous devotion to me Mr. Murray may be, he would never attempt to make me deceive my father. I have done this for Theo, and I am coward enough to try and brace myself to bear the stings of conscience, by telling myself that I have done it for Claire.

Calmly as I can, I say—

“I think, Theo, that the less we say about Mr. Murray and my future life the better; you will never try to make me look upon either in the best light, and—I have to live my life, you know. You can make it more bitter, but you can never make it one bit the brighter for me; let me alone.”

I regret it the instant I have made my appeal. Theo’s vanity is flattered by my implied admission of the sway he holds over me. His vanity is flattered, but his heart is not touched. His sorrow at my being pained is al-

together overruled and trodden down by his pleasure in having the power to pain me.

He sees how deeply I am stung, and he is so skilful in extracting a sting at once.

"Can't I make it a bit the brighter for you, Tim? then my will is very much weaker than I believe it to be, that's all I can say. My sweetest friend, why, you gave me your help when Claire refused me hers; do you think I am ungrateful? do you think I don't love you for what you have done, my darling?"

I find breath to utter the words—

"Not for what I have done;" and as he is a gentleman, he responds—

"I didn't mean that—I didn't mean to insult you by implying that you had purchased my liking. No, no, Tim: I gauged you the day I came here first, and I've never found my measure faulty. There's only one thing I am sorry for, and that is that you should have taken Claire into your confidence respecting this swim we're in about getting the money from your father."

I shrink appalled from him as he speaks, I feel that I am in the toils.

"It was for Claire's sake I did it," I cry; "you know that; you told me that yourself."

"Yes, but Claire will never acknowledge a debt of that sort," he says, as he proceeds with cautious cruelty to nip the end off a cigar. "Claire is an awfully conscientious girl—she wants me to be without fear and without reproach before your father. I am grateful to you, dear—more grateful than I can express, but Claire would have thought better of you if you hadn't given me a helping hand in what she considers to be the perpetration of a swindle. However! the thing is done now, and I am *awfully* obliged to you, and we will say no more about it."

I can say no more about it, for I am dumb!—dumb with amazement and grief that the two whom I love best in the world should be so unutterably wanting in the power of appreciating my share in the transaction. To

hear Theo speak, one could be led to imagine that it was myself I had served in being untrue to all my instincts. I can't attempt to right myself, I am dumb, and he thinks me ill-tempered.

"Don't show airs about it, because I don't garble facts," he says in a fine argumentative way. "I tell you I think you were awfully kind to do it for me; you wouldn't think the better of me if I told you I thought it was the right kind of thing for a girl to do, now would you?"

I feel hunted down, insulted beyond all my powers of bearing insult, yet I will not turn traitor and ruin him with my father. I remind me of one friend who will always be leal and trusty, who will always forgive and aid me, however deeply I may err.

"I will tell Sydney Dale what I have done," I say to myself, and as soon as I name him I feel safe.

"Now, don't you go making mistakes, and unburdening your heart to Murray," Theo goes on without regarding my silence. "He's an awfully clever fellow when he's got his pen in his hand—if he can hold it steadily; but he'd talk a *Saturday Review* article about the affair, and give it an importance it doesn't possess; moreover, if it comes to that, you like me a long way better than you'll ever like him, and you're not a girl to play a fellow you like false."

It is ingeniously put, but it goes beyond the line of my forbearance. He taunts me with the very thing which should give me the strongest claim upon every gentlemanly feeling of which he is possessed.

"I am not a girl to play false to any one, whether I like him or not," I answer; "but this is the last secret I'll ever share with you, Theo, for you don't leave me either Claire or my self-respect to turn to in this trouble and uncertainty which I've gone into on your account."

"Now, don't get melodramatic," he laughs, and his eyes sparkle merrily with fun and satisfaction at the way in which he is carrying everything before him. "Do the blank verse and melodramatic business with Murray as much as you like, when you're in your garden of roses,

over in the Sunny South ; but while you're my own fetterless sister Tim Vincent here, in the 'hardy north,' be what you always have been the whole way through—the most sensible girl it has ever been my lot to meet. Now perhaps I've kept you here long enough ; I don't want to get a rise out of Claire's jealousy.”

“How you insult us both !” I say as savagely as I can bring myself to say it to him ; but he merely laughs, throws away the end of his cigar (he has smoked it out—he never forfeits one half-inch of pleasure), and nods farewell to me as he goes out of the room to call Claire for her usual before-dinner stroll with him.

It is soon after this that Mr. Murray comes in with papa, comes in with a coat on that makes him look as broad as he is long, and a little out of breath from the effect of the sharp walk up from the station. By the time the two travellers are ready for dinner, dinner is ready for us ; and during dinner, though he makes me his theme and winds about me in graceful language, he does not distress me by any personal demonstration. After dinner the wine is good, and papa is a capital audience—I have no *tête-à-tête* to fear !

I force my thoughts away from the remembrance of the fraud I have committed upon my father, and am singing light-heartedly with Claire when the gentlemen come into the drawing-room. All my light-heartedness flees when Mr. Murray comes to me, and, in a louder, more assured voice than he has ever addressed me in before, says—

“They've given me a Spanish town instead of the sweet Italian one I coveted ; but it's not bad—it's on the shores of the blue Mediterranean of my youth. I have to take up my appointment very soon, and—you'll be ready to go with me, won't you, my child ?”

I shrink from him as lover, but I do like him so much as friend. Oh ! for the power to recall that hour in which my wilful reckless nature led me to pledge myself to him. I know his honourable, chivalrous character so well, that I feel sure that one appeal, the lightest appeal,

would be sufficient to make him release me. At the same time I feel sure that the appeal would hurt him horribly, and so I can't make it.

"Yes," I say, "I shall be quite ready;" and I smile a sickly smile, and try to think that my life will not be more of a colourless blank with him than it would be with any one else—since it can't be passed with the only one who could have put warmth and colour into it.

"Your father has been telling me what a modest sum you asked him for your outfit," he says in a matter-of-fact way. "He has been very generous, Tim; you won't require to be very well rigged in the out-of-the-way place we're going to, so if I were you I'd keep at least half of it for a future rainy day."

Something in the whole tone of his speech grates upon and disappoints me. I am inexperienced in these matters, but it does strike me that he is not striving to make me look at the future, which he has arranged for me, in a fair light. Can it be possible that he has awakened to a sense of the incongruity of such a marriage as ours will be? Now that the glamour of the sunshine on the summer sea at Brighton has passed away, does he perchance reflect that his ways of life and mine can never be bound up in one satisfactory sheaf? If he will only frankly tell me that these are his convictions, how delightedly will I confess to him that they are mine also! That remark of his about a rainy day has sent me down to the most dismal depths of depression. Am I going into poverty, among other things, with him? Why am I such a coward that I dare not speak the few words that would set me free? He is a gentleman to the very core of his heart, and he would understand me at once, and would release me promptly, if I only made the desire that he should do so manifest to him. But "out and for shame" on my infirmity of purpose! I tell myself that, though I may do it finally, I cannot do it yet. And so this evening passes.

I have been in my room about ten minutes when Claire comes in and tells me that the others have all

gone to bed, and that Theo is waiting to receive the money from me in the library. I have counted out the notes, and I push them towards her, but she says—

"No, no! it must not pass through my hands; you must take them to him yourself."

"When I have done that will you promise for him and for yourself that you will never try to make me his tool again, Claire?" I ask imploringly; and Claire tells me "not to be tragic, and to make haste down to Theo." So, accompanied by her, I go down to the man to whom I have been rendered slavish by love.

I am choking, trembling with nervousness, with an awful dread of some undefined evil growing out of this transaction. My teeth chatter, my limbs quiver, and I cling to Claire convulsively for physical support. Theo, on the contrary, is perfectly calm and pleased. He thanks me with the words, "Dear little thing, awfully good you are!" and a hasty kiss, and he neither sees nor cares for the fact of my being shaken to the centre of my soul with fear and remorse! And the heaviest trouble I had upon my young head on the day when Theo first crossed my path was that I had heard Aunt Helen call me "unattractive."

"Theo will break the fact of his departure to papa and all of them at breakfast to-morrow morning, and go up by the twelve o'clock train," Claire informs me; and Theo adds—

"And look here, Tim, dear, mind you look innocent and surprised. If they fancy you had any foreknowledge of the matter, they may begin asking all sorts of questions, and I don't think you would come with flying colours out of the examination."

I am heart-broken, shattered, by his ruthlessness, but I refrain from wording the agony I feel. It would hurt Claire to know how unhappy I am, and never shall Claire be hurt intentionally by me.

"I'll follow you up in two minutes," Claire says as she clasps and kisses me, and I rejoice in the permission to go and leave the room with flying feet. I look round at

Theo as I gain the door, and I see him counting over the bank-notes, looking brighter, more brilliant and beautiful, than I have ever seen him look before, and I try to take comfort in the thought that he owes his happiness to me.

The next day both he and Mr. Murray go up to town by the mid-day train, and we are alone again without a guest to break up the family routine for the first time since Theo's first appearance among us. Now that he is gone my nerves resettle themselves; and a feeling of almost peace and safety sets in when Sydney Dale comes home, bringing with him his married sister, Mrs. Tierney.





CHAPTER XVII.

“I AM SO GLAD—FOR HIM.”

SEVERAL weeks have elapsed since Claire and I took leave of our respective lovers, and we have quite resumed our dear intimate sisterly relations with one another. Mr. Murray still sustains a brilliant and cultivated correspondence with me, but his letters resemble first-rate journalism more and more every week. I like them, for I in my ignorance cannot be expected to respond to them in any but the tersest way. Papa likes them too: he says he shall feel that there is a literary blank in his life, when that long-looked-for appointment is given and taken, and I have gone to share it with Mr. Murray, and the brilliant letters cease.

Theo's letters to Claire are very frequent, but they are not public property by any means. No one but Claire would miss them if they ceased. Whatever intelligence he gives her, she guards zealously, even from me. She does not even tell me whether he is doing well or ill; she only tells me that he is “working hard for her.”

Christmas has come, and gone; the crocuses and snowdrops, and, above all, the hounds, are out in full force. I say, “above all, the hounds,” because since Sydney Dale's return Claire and I have taken greatly to

hunting under the chaperonage of Mrs. Tierney, and under the safe guidance of Sydney.

These beautiful bright February days, when we four ride happily along the roads, whose hedges are blooming already with the yellow aconite and blue periwinkle, and the woods where little clumps of pure white snowdrops lift up their graceful heads to greet us, and our horses in their stride brush aside the elegant daphne laureola, will never be forgotten. They are very sweetly, purely, truly happy days. Mrs. Tierney, devoted as she is to her reckless husband and her Irish home, is very happy to find herself back for a time in the cradle of her race, in the midst of peace and plenty, and with a brother whom she loves with a tender warmth that does equal honour to him and to her. While as for Claire and myself—she evidently is nursing some bright hope in her heart that gilds the pleasant present, even more richly than current circumstances would gild it; and I, having no particularly bright future to look forward to, enjoy the fleeting hours, and gather such spring roses as are about my path gladly and gratefully.

To tell the truth, there is intense comfort in Sydney's companionship. He is more than friend, more than brother, and less than lover, and I find it very delightful to stand on this neutral ground, with the knowledge if I overstep the border on either side, if I either go back or go on, I shall be in safety. Outwardly he is the frankest, kindest, most heart-whole friend that ever a girl had. In his heart he is at my feet! and I know it!

I think there are few men like him, unless they are bound by the powerful fetters of *esprit de corps* to the absent, authorised lovers. Syd knows that Mr. Murray has no more hold on the sentimental part of my nature than has the horse I am riding—not half so much, perhaps, for I thrill with pride and pleasure in having attained the mastery over my horse's spirit, and I feel no such thrill and pleasure in having attained it over Mr. Murray's. Nevertheless, Syd makes no attempt to sap my allegiance, though I gather from Mrs. Tierney that I

have been, that I am, and that I always shall be, the one woman in the world to him.

There is a lawn-meet one day at Syd's place, Dalesmeet, and papa has ridden over with Claire and me to the breakfast, at which Mrs. Tierney is presiding. As is usual at such meets, we have a grand gathering, and a very poor prospect of sport. Notwithstanding this last, I feel in unusually high spirits as I jump from my chestnut mare "Kismet," at the door of Dalesmeet House, and am met by Sydney, who must have kept a look-out for our arrival, as he runs from the dining-room where his guests are, the instant we pull up.

"We have half the county here, Tim," he begins. "More ladies out than we've had for the season, and some one you'll be surprised to see," he stoops down to add in a whisper.

Claire and papa are engaged with a group who have come out to welcome the beauty of the district. I feel that I must watch her, as I ask him anxiously,—

"Who is it?"

"Theo Bligh," he replies. "He's staying, it seems, with Sir Harold Torrens. Does Claire know it?"

"I don't know," I answer, but I feel sure that she does not; and so as we go through the hall I take advantage of the throng and the hum it is making, to say,—

"Do you know that Theo is staying with Sir Harold Torrens?"

She shakes her head, and compresses her lips, and I have just time to whisper,—

"They're here; don't mind it!" the advice forces itself through my lips, and I am glad to see that it acts like a spur on Claire. Her head goes up, her colour rises, her lovely violet eyes sparkle and dilate. She enters the room where the flower of the county are assembled, the brightest beauty in it.

We are greeted warmly by Syd's sister, we are surrounded instantly by the best set in the room, and for a moment or two I can't see Theo. Then he flashes upon my vision in a faultless hunting-suit, the most striking-

looking man in the room, and he is standing by an equally striking-looking woman. He catches sight of us at once, and comes forward elastically at once, making his wonderful eyes sparkle a thousand welcomes. He grasps my hand in silence, then passes on to Claire—to Claire, who is the cynosure of all eyes—and my heart leaps with joy to see that he does show that he is proud of her.

Then I turn my eyes again in the direction of the lady he has just left, and I know that I am looking at beautiful, graceful, popular Lady Torrens.

What do I see? A woman above the middle height, well and gracefully formed, and capable of carrying herself commandingly whenever she cares to do it—a sweet, frank, fair face, lighted up by a pair of fearless grey-blue eyes that are well outlined by arched brows and long dark lashes—a mobile, restless mouth, and an ever-varying expression—a woman that I like at once for her free grace and beauty, for her manifest fearlessness, and above all for that dominant characteristic of *generosity* which is so visibly stamped upon her, that I, stranger as I am, recognise it, and respond to it, and suffer the prophetic truth to sink into my soul concerning it, that it will sway me whithersoever it will, should it ever care to do so.

By the time we are ready for the start I can see that Theo has quite made his peace with Claire about having kept her in the dark as to his present place of sojourn. He is most *empresse* in his manner of devoting himself to her—puts her up on her horse with the most tender assiduity, adjusts reins and habit and stirrup with the skill and celerity of a lover and a horseman, and keeps close by her off-side for the next hour. But when we get away after a stout old dog-fox, he shoots ahead of her. Theo Bligh, to be happy, must take a prominent place, must be the first in everything. Sir Harold Torrens' hunting stables are famous, and Theo has judiciously selected a splendid mount from them for himself. Accordingly, now he leads the field, and Claire is well contented in her pride for him that he should do so,

although the ambition which urges him on separates him from her!

The one thing in which I excel my sister Claire is the art of riding. She has a pretty graceful seat, and she can look quite at home in the saddle while her horse pursues beaten tracks and does nothing unlooked for. As papa—guided by Sydney—has taken care to provide her with a horse that is exactly suited to her requirements, she always does look perfectly at home, and graceful, in her saddle, and as she knows the country well, and is well piloted, she sees as much of the run as do those of us who ride straight.

It is different with me. Kismet has been my deliberate choice, in spite of her bad name for a certain nervousness of temperament, which amounts at times to diabolical temper. She is a thoroughbred, was overrun on the race-course at two years' old, and has never learned to be way-wise. She is fidgety, she gets hot about nothing, she has bursts of most perplexing skittishness at most inopportune times. Nevertheless, I love Kismet, for she is as fleet as the wind, and, when she can command her temper, she flies her hedges like a bird.

It happens that she starts in an unusually good temper this day, and so, with Syd keeping by me stride for stride, we are in a very good place, not far behind Theo Bligh. But now, creeping up to us faster and faster, and presently sweeping by us in a way that makes Kismet leap in her gallop, there comes Lady Torrens on her celebrated horse Wildfire, and in a minute or two Theo no longer leads the field alone, for Lady Torrens is well up with him.

Whether the vague feeling of dissatisfaction which affects me at this sight communicates itself in some subtle way or other to Kismet or not, I cannot say. But from the moment of being passed by Lady Torrens' black horse, the mare goes wildly. In vain I give her the most loving encouragement to regain her composure with both hand and voice. She becomes almost uncontrollable, refuses a hedge, and takes me for a fierce burst

in a perfectly contrary direction to that in which I desire to go. In fact, if I were not more at home in my saddle than I am in any place in this world, something unpleasant would probably happen to either Kismet or me.

Her fury expends itself in a rushing gallop and a series of plunging bounds that strains her girths severely in a heavy field, and I come out of the encounter rather excited, and, to tell the truth, rather elated. To my surprise, Sydney meets me with an anxious face, and his voice falters as he says,—

“Tim, let me change our saddles. You must never ride that she-demon again.”

“She hasn’t done anything very bad to-day, Syd,” I plead.

“She’s not a safe mount for you,” he says. “She’s lost you the best part of the run, and in watching you I’ve lost sight of the field altogether.”

“I’m sorry she has cost *you* the run,” I say humbly; “but we shall soon hear of them; we’ll soon pick them up. They’re sure to go away to Dogberry Gorse—they always do from your place, it seems to me. Kismet will go like an arrow now her temper’s over.”

“Her temper is sleeping, like a tired tigress, for a time,” he says. “It’s safe to wake up again. Without any nonsense, Tim, she’s a dangerous beast, and to please me, dear, you won’t ride her after to-day, will you? She stopped short in her gallop just now as if she had been shot. You’re bound to come out of your saddle some day or other, if she tries that trick often. You won’t ride her after to-day, will you?”

“If I sell her, some other woman may ride her, and I couldn’t bear to hear of it; I couldn’t bear the sight of it, Syd,” I plead.

“Jealous of her, are you? or vainly jealous of your reputation of being able to manage the most unmanageable beast that was ever bitted? How’s that, Tim? you’re not jealous in—in other matters.”

“No, I’m not,” I say confidently; “at least, if I have the feeling, I’m ashamed of it.”

"But you nurse it about Kismet. Well, look here, let me have her; you'll be sure then that no other woman shall ever ride her, and I'll get you something that will compensate you for the loss of Kismet."

I am unaccountably reluctant to accede to his proposition, but he presses it so hard that after a time I give in; and he takes my promise that I will send Kismet over to his stables to-morrow, and leave the choice of the horse that is to replace her to him.

"I'll make it all right with your father; he has been nervous all along about your riding the mare, I know," he says. Then we drop the subject, for we catch sight of a few stragglers who are land-marks to tell us which way the field has gone; and Kismet justifies my statement concerning her—her temper has expended itself for this day, and she does go along as straight as an arrow.

We kill this day at Dogberry Gorse, and the field disperses here. We began late, and have had a long run, and there is nothing more to be done this day. We find ourselves riding homeward in the dying light with Sir Harold and Lady Torrens and Theo; and presently papa, who has known Sir Harold on the magisterial bench, introduces him to Claire and me, and a minute after Sir Harold introduces us to his wife.

We soon fall into the following order. The roads are somewhat narrow, and we pair off; Sir Harold and papa lead the way, Lady Torrens and I follow with Sydney, and behind us ride Claire and Theo Bligh.

Pretty Lady Torrens, who is an ardent sportswoman and a perfect rider, has enjoyed her day to the uttermost. She has been perfectly carried, she has been in a good place all the day, she has been in at the death, and she has won the brush. Her manner is as frank and friendly as her face, and she enters into conversation with me freely.

"I've often heard of your sister's beauty," she says to me, "but I've never seen her before. It's a treat to look at anything so exquisite and know that it's young, and

likely to last, and adorn the world for a long time. I wonder I've never seen her or you before."

"We don't go out much," I reply.

"But you ought to go out much—of course you ought. You don't contemplate remaining the Miss Vincents—or Misses Vincent, whichever is right—all your lives, do you?"

She asks it with an air of laughing amusement, and I feel sure that the rumour of our unpropitious engagements have not reached her ears. I, as a rule, am very chary of speaking of either Claire's plighted troth or my own. But on this occasion I am prompted to go on, and say—

"Haven't you heard Theo Bligh speak of us?"

"Mr. Bligh speak of you!—never! Did you know him before to-day?"

She looks me steadily in the face as she says this. There is a look of surprise mingled with one of inquiry in her eyes. Evidently she is astonished at my having called him by his Christian name. Equally evidently she wants to know all about my intimacy with him.

"We have known him for some months," I say as quietly as I can. "He stayed with us at Ravensbourne for many weeks; I wonder he hasn't mentioned us to you, for he is engaged to my sister Claire."

Some instinct restrains me from looking at her as I say this, but I know that she shudders. In a moment after, though, her vivacious voice rings out upon the air with the words—

"He has indeed shown the most wonderful modesty in keeping anything that redounds so greatly to his honour a secret." She says it in a pretty, eager way, in which there is not the semblance of affectation, but in which I fancy I discern a little ring of some true metal that she does not wish all the world to hear, or understand. When I do look at her, she is bending forward, caressing Wildfire's neck, speaking gently and lovingly to her horse as if she felt glad that there was something that was tender and true to turn to.

The instant she becomes aware that I am looking at

her she turns on me with a glance that is at the same time bright and tearful.

"You see, I'm a little disappointed," she begins in her eager impulsive way. "I thought he had made such a friend of me—I thought he would have told me everything, at least such a thing as this; but I am so glad—for him."





CHAPTER XVIII.

LADY TORRENS CALLS.

“**I** was never so tired in my life!” are the first words I hear from Claire when she gets home this day. After parting with the Torrens, when our roads branch off, Sydney Dale and I ride home briskly, and he and I are having a comfortable cup of tea by papa’s study fire when Claire and papa come in.

“I was never so tired in my life!” Claire repeats, throwing aside all my attempts at assisting her to take off her hat and gloves.

“We’ve had a very light day, too!” Sydney remarks.

“Do you call it a light day?” she retorts. “Well, to me a day that begins with a midday breakfast and finishes at Dogberry Gorse is a very heavy day.”

“You certainly seem to have had enough of it,” papa says.

“I have, papa,” she answers piteously, “enough of hunting, and enough of everything else; I was never so utterly worn out in my life.”

“I am glad you are tired, and I hope that there will be an end of this tearing after the hounds soon,” Aunt Helen puts in. She has come into the room during Claire’s last speech, and in contrast with us—a pair of lissom slender-limbed, habited girls—she looks more like a large white milchcow than ever.

Claire is standing before the fire, one slight foot rests

on the fender, one delicate hand grasps the mantle-board. How I wish that Theo was here to mark the beauty of these points of hers.

"You did upset me so, Tim," she says, turning straight upon me suddenly. "When I saw Kismet go off in that way I was sure there would be a scene, and I do so heartily detest a scene."

"But neither Tim nor Kismet made one," papa says dryly.

"No, but I had the fear for an indefinite period that they would," Claire says hastily, and then she runs from the room quickly, and I follow her, for I see that she is wounded and sore, and that it is not about Kismet or me that she is so.

She has pitched her hat down, and is unbuttoning her habit with rapid fingers when I reach her room.

"Claire," I begin, "let me help you. Dear, don't be frightened about me and Kismet any more; I am going to send her to Syd to-morrow, for he pronounces her an unsafe mount for me."

She gets rid of her habit, and wearily casts the folds of her dressing-gown about her, and says—

"I wish Syd were as fond of me as he is of you; how I'd turn to him, the dear true fellow, in any trouble!"

"So I do," I say.

"And so I can't—nor would I if I could, if it comes to that. No, I'd rather hug my woe to my heart than share it with any one else."

"Has Theo annoyed you?" I ask.

"'Annoyed' is not the word: I can't be annoyed with Theo for choosing to stay with old, disreputable Sir Harold Torrens if it pleases him to do so; but he ought to have told me he was there, he ought not to have allowed Lady Torrens to visibly triumph ——"

"Claire!" I interrupt.

"Oh yes, I know, she's a married woman and her fame is sacred, but Sir Harold *is* old and ailing, and Lady Torrens may soon be in the market with a large fortune. She *must* be meanspirited to trifle with an engaged man."

"Do you mean with Theo?" I ask. "If so, let me tell you she didn't know till I told her this evening that he was engaged. Don't make a foe of her in your imagination, Claire."

Claire laughs scornfully.

"She has evidently fascinated you," she says—"fascinated you into the folly of believing her. How credulous you must be! Theo tried to disarm my suspicions about her flirting with him by telling me that she 'wasn't the kind of woman to hang her chains about a fellow whom she knew to be engaged.' How does *that* agree with her statement."

"Not at all," I am compelled to admit. But at the same time I have a higher opinion of Lady Torrens' veracity than I have of Theo's. However, it would be unkind to tell Claire this; besides, putting aside the unkindness to Claire, I shrink from the pain I should inflict upon myself in wording any sentiment that is derogatory to Theo. He is very faulty, and I am beginning to see him with clearer vision every day. But though the scales have fallen from my eyes, I love him still—how I love him still!

"Has he got anything to do yet?" I venture to ask presently; and Claire rises up impatiently and begins to pace up and down the room.

"Got anything to do! Theo's not the kind of man to find employment for himself; it must be found for him and thrust upon him. Oh, dear! what will my life be with him, I wonder! He began lamenting his want of money to-day as we rode home, and when I asked him why he didn't work and make some for himself, he said 'he had no trading blood in his veins.' Tim, what a happy thing it would be if I could leave off loving Theo."

Tears of wounded love and pride well from her lovely eyes as she says this; and as I have no comfort to offer her, I remind her, prosaically, that it is time she began to dress for dinner.

"I'm not going down," she says abruptly. "I'm too

tired to rouse myself, and I can't stand being conjectured about and pitied."

"Shall I come up to you after dinner?" I ask.

"No no; I shall only talk myself into a more miserable frame of mind than I'm in already if you come up; besides, I want to write to Theo—I parted with him very coldly, and if I don't write and remove the impression that I'm annoyed with him, he won't come here to-morrow; his is such a bright nature," she adds lovingly, "that he would rather keep apart from any one, however much he loved the person, than hear or say any fault-finding words."

She looks happier at once, now that she has begun to excuse him, and I leave her with a comparatively lightened heart. It would be too terrible if after all Claire and Theo should come to misunderstand each other, for she loves him with a love that will leave her poor indeed if it is unrequited.

Sydney Dale, rather to my surprise, has mastered all the incidents and grasped the whole dramatic situation of the little domestic piece of plot and passion which is at present engaging the interest of our house.

"Claire is a little distressed at Theo's being with Torrens, isn't she?" he asks me. "I'm afraid if Sir Harold gets him on the turf that Theo will never do any good for himself."

"Do you mean that he'll lead Theo on to bet?" I ask anxiously.

"Well, Sir Harold is a regular racing man, you know," Sydney answers, "and if he sees a young fellow is well inclined to fling away his money after horses, he's not the man to balk him."

"But Theo has no money to throw away," I urge, as I remember how ignominiously Theo had obtained command of the two hundred pounds.

"But no one, to hear Theo talk, would guess at that fact," he laughs; "besides, he has been lucky in his betting transactions lately—he told me so himself."

"Poor Claire!" I sigh.

"Don't be distressed," Sydney says kindly. "Lady Torrens loves riding, and takes a keen interest in every race in which her husband's horses run; but she loves fair play better, and she won't see any young fellow tempted to take the road to ruin if she can help it. Sir Harold wouldn't put himself out of the way for any one, but she would."

I am a little reassured by this statement, but my mind is not set perfectly at rest. Lady Torrens' will may be good to do the good deed of putting a check on Theo's spirit of gambling, but I know Theo too well to suppose that she will have the power to divert him from any path he desires to tread. He may seem to act under her guidance, but in reality Theo Bligh will please himself under all circumstances.

Claire is quite her own bright sweet self again after a night's rest, and after having held out the olive-bran chin writing to Theo. She sends the letter over to Sir Harold Torrens' quite early, before breakfast; but the morning passes away, and no Theo appears in response to it. But just as we are rising from luncheon, Sir Harold and Lady Torrens come to call.

"I have lost no time in coming to offer you my congratulations," Lady Torrens says, coming up heartily to Claire and me. "Miss Vincent, your sister told me of your engagement, but she didn't mention her own; I gained that knowledge, though, from Mr. Bligh."

Then she goes on to ask if we are going to be married on the same day, and to shudder in a very unaffected way when she hears that my lot is to be in a far-off dull town, on the shores of the Mediterranean.

"The 'sunny south' is all very well in books," she says; and I know at once that Theo has been giving an imitation of the poetical side of Mr. Murray's manner, and I feel abashed and uncomfortable; "but how will you do without the hunting? I watched you yesterday, and I saw that you sent your heart over everything first, and your horse was bound to follow it. What a lovely creature your mare is."

"She's mine no longer," I say pathetically. "Sydney Dale fancies she's unsafe, and so he has persuaded me to send her to him, and he's going to get me another."

"I am glad of it," she says quickly. "I'm glad—I'm delighted that she's safely away from you. To tell the truth, though I wished to see you both again, I really came to-day to speak about Kismet."

"You know her name?" I ask in astonishment.

"I gave her the name. Two years ago my husband had a string of horses up in Yorkshire, and on the race-course a horse of his that he had backed very heavily was beaten by several lengths by this chestnut mare. He made up his mind to buy her, and got her with much less difficulty than he anticipated—the fact is, her temper is so vile that no one will put money on her, though she's fleet as the wind. It *is* a relief to me to find that you're safe from her mad caprices."

"Tim, you've had a lucky escape, thanks to Syd," Claire says warmly; and then she goes on to tell Lady Torrens how nervous Kismet's escapade had made her yesterday, and how, in consequence, she had made herself disagreeable to Theo Bligh during the ride homewards.

"Mr. Bligh ought to have come with us to-day," said Lady Torrens; "but he altered his mind about it just as we were starting. Do you know"—she hesitates for a moment, then adds rather anxiously—"that he rides in the steeple-chase next Saturday?"

We shake our heads.

"They are all gentlemen-riders. Most of them have ridden several steeple-chases in Ireland, where they go at racing speed over a stiff hunting-country. Is Mr. Bligh accustomed to the work? I never saw him in the saddle till yesterday, and then it struck me that he went wildly and rashly."

Lady Torrens speaks so thoughtfully and earnestly, that I fathom at once that she does distrust Theo's prowess and skill as a horseman—his courage no one can doubt. But Claire resents the implication that her hero is less than perfect in every position,

"If he has undertaken to ride, he'll do it well, be sure of that," she says; and then she asks, "Whose horse is it?"

"Sir Harold's, I am sorry to say," Lady Torrens replies, and Claire colours with vexation. And presently, as we all go out together to show Lady Torrens our green-houses, and the otter-pool, and some of the other things for which we are famous at Ravensbourne, Claire whispers to me—

"She ought to be proud of his riding their horse, instead of being afraid that he'll lose them the race. I believe she has taken a dislike to him since she heard he is engaged. I can't bear her, Tim; I wish I had never heard of her."

Claire is unmistakably, unjustly, obstinately, jealous! Her manner grows constrained, and presently she leaves me to entertain Lady Torrens, and makes an excuse to go back to the house.

As soon as she is gone, Lady Torrens turns from the close inspection of the ferns, and says to me—

"Is Mr. Bligh usually as reticent on the subject of his friends and his plans as he has proved himself lately? I am more disappointed in his character than I can express to you. In my estimation he is proving himself selfish, vain, and deceitful. But your sister's heart is bound up in him, is it not?"

I tell her "Yes," and I abstain from adding the truth that so is mine also.

"Poor girl! may he prove himself worthy of her eventually. Is he well off?"

"Not at all," I say eagerly.

"Then, again, he has not been candid," she says in a vexed tone. "I told him the other day that I shouldn't be a true friend to him unless I told him that for a young man who has to make his way in the world, ours was not a good house to stay at; nor was my husband's racing, betting set a good set for him to be in. His answer was that his way was 'made for him in the world,' and that if he lost his own fortune, he could always 'pull himself to—"

gether by making a rich marriage ;'—and all the time he is engaged to your sister ! He is too utterly contemptible !”

“I wonder why he never told you about Claire,” I say musingly ; and Lady Torrens does not help me to a solution of the problem. But she stoops forward and kisses me on the forehead, and says—

“Theo Bligh, though he often talks without a motive, never holds his tongue without one, dear. But now I know how he is situated, I *will* take a stand : he shall not be led astray on the turf by any one connected with me, if I have any influence over either him or my husband.”

And I thank her gratefully for this, for I know that she means it, and means it well ; and just as I am doing this, Sir Harold and papa appear in the conservatory, and the horses are ordered round, and Lady Torrens and her husband ride away, and Claire and I stand on the steps watching them till they take the turn of the drive, and are out of sight. Then Claire says—

“Let us call the dogs and go down to the otter-pool ; I want to have a long talk with you quietly.”

I accede to her proposition, and tremble !





CHAPTER XIX.

HEART-SICK.

LAD even of this momentary diversion, I leave my sister, and run round to the stable-yard to call Music and Heartless. By way of further prolonging the time, I endeavour to unloose the big St. Bernard, Rescue, and I peep in for a moment at Kismet's empty stall. Poor Kismet! sorry as I am to lose her, I feel more oppressed by the prospect of this *tête-à-tête* walk with Claire than by anything else. I know that she is going to talk about Theo, and to take my opinion about Theo—or, rather, to ask it. For I love Theo with all his faults much too well to give her or any one else my real opinion concerning him.

Claire has not grown impatient, she has only become very much dejected when I rejoin her in the front of the house, and for a while she seems to be as glad as I am that we have the dogs to bestow our attention upon. But presently she sends the two otter-hounds off with a word in the direction of the river, gives Rescue her gloves to carry, and linking her hand in my arm begins to take me for my preliminary canter over the hot plough-shares. My ordeal has commenced, and I must get through it as honourably as I can for myself; but above all, I must get through it honourably for Theo, for the sake of her happiness!

"Has Lady Torrens been speaking to you of Theo?" she begins; "I know that she has, I needn't ask you. You've always told me everything, Tim darling, since we were tiny girls together; tell me the worst now."

"There's nothing bad to tell," I rejoin earnestly. "She said she thought a fast, sporting set like her husband's, you know, was a bad set for a young man like Theo, now that she knows he's engaged."

"Now that she knows he's engaged!" Claire echoes scornfully. "So she's going to make him smart socially in her house 'now that she knows he's engaged!' If it's bad for him now, it was bad before these evil tidings came to her ears—officially."

"They had never come to her ears at all," I say bluntly.

"Nonsense!" Claire replies suspiciously; "but I won't argue that point with you. I only want you to understand that if she gives Theo a hint to leave her house and the society she suddenly declares to be dangerous to him now, I shall not like her the better for it; nor will Theo like you the better for having urged her on to take such a course."

I am so innocent of this of which I am accused, I am so shocked at the accusation, that I remain silent.

"What is it?" Claire goes on, with a sudden access of emotion which seems to indicate an intensity of feeling which the circumstance hardly warrants—"what has he done, or what have I done, that you should plot and counterplot with a stranger about us? Lady Torrens came here to-day to find out from you whether or not there's a flaw in Theo. Tim, have you been false to him?"

"Neither to him nor to you," I find breath to say.

"I will believe you, I do believe you," poor Claire says, "but we women are all so weak, and—he liked you very much at one time, Tim, and tried to make you like him. I know all that, and—he's not a man to be easily forgotten."

She is cruel in her candour with which she lets me

understand that he has told her of the conquest he achieved over me, without any special effort on his part—any special effort, that is, that was apparent to others. She is cruel, and he is cowardly! Some horrible instinct insists upon forcing this explanation of their conduct upon me for a moment. The next I fling off its degrading influence, and am true to myself, and to them.

“If Theo were a man to be easily forgotten, I shouldn’t wish you to be his wife,” I say; “and as for my being weak about him, I shall go on being weak about you both all my life, I hope.”

We are close by the river bank now, and the old habits of our childhood come back upon us. Rescue goes into the river after a stick, and Music and Heartless plunge their noses into the holes in the bank, utterly regardless of the fact of its not being the otter-hunting season. We are girls still, girls whose only misery so far has been that a reality has fallen short of our ideal. Our youth, our vitality, asserts itself here in the open air, and we shout to Rescue and encourage the otter-hounds with all the force and energy, all the heart-whole enjoyment in the pursuit, which we expended upon it in former days before Theo Bligh and Mr. Murray came to cumber us, the one with the burden of loving him, the other with the burden of being loved by him.

Presently Claire, growing tired of throwing dirty sticks into the river with her delicate hands for Rescue’s amusement, stops that portion of the sport, and says to me,—

“You drift back into romping childhood very readily, Tim; do you realise what a change has come over us both since we used to come here at this time last year, and find real pleasure in making the dogs our playfellows?”

“I find real pleasure in making them my playfellows still, Claire,” I say deprecatingly. “I shall feel parting with them awfully, awfully!” and as I speak I conjure up a vision of *all* the good-byes that will have to be spoken before I start for my new home under Mr.

Murray's auspices, and I bless Rescue's fat honest head for being at hand for me to bury my flushed face and tearful eyes in it.

"What's come to us," Claire goes on speculating, "that we're not as happy and contented as we were a year ago? We have the dogs, and the river, and each other, and our youth still, and other things in addition; why aren't we as happy as we were? Are you jealous of Mr. Murray?—is it that with you?"

I am giving all my strength to the task of breaking off a big out-growing root, wherewith to lure Rescue into the river again. Nevertheless, I shake my head very energetically as I say emphatically,—

"No!—I should like to be."

"No, you wouldn't — a thousand times no, you wouldn't," Claire says, throwing herself spiritedly into the argument. "Jealousy sears one's brightness so horribly. Who can be at one's best when you're watching for a word or a glance to be given to some one else? Do you know, Tim, I think jealousy is the real Hades."

"What an awful thing an eternity of being on that kind of ignominious look out would be!" I say laughingly.

"It's an awful thing to have a time of it here," Claire says; "it makes one so pitifully low. Fancy wanting to pull down one fellow-creature because you suspect another fellow-creature of preferring the first to yourself."

I throw my hardly gained stick away without regard to Rescue; I turn to my sister, and I *pray* to speak aright to her.

"I think you'd like a better woman than yourself to be preferred to you; but the 'better woman' will never be found, and so you're safe, you will never try to pull any one down."

"Then don't you try to build any one up in Theo's estimation against me," Claire says lightly but warningly, and out of the fulness of my heart, out of my firm belief in Claire's perfect ascendancy over Theo's mind, I say,—

"I pity the woman who ever ranges herself against you in Theo's estimation—he wouldn't spare her, for he loves you."

"Don't give me false security," she says anxiously; and the fear possesses me, that in order to be quite loyal to her, I cannot be loyal to him.

"I don't like the idea of her assuming that she has influence enough over him even to keep him from evil," my poor sister goes on peevishly, before I have made up my mind as to what I had better say; and I perceive that her malady is at its height, that the fever must expend itself, for that no cooling draughts of verbal wisdom from me will avail to allay it.

"I wish I knew some one who had sufficient influence over Mr. Murray to keep him from evil all the days of his life," I say, with an attempt at a light-hearted laugh, which breaks down into a sort of sobbing gurgle that is anything but mirthful. "If such a person only exists, and will be kind enough to point out to him how unfit I am to be his wife and the companion of his exile, I feel as if I should be so happy that nothing would ever trouble me again."

"Nonsense! that's all sham!" Claire says indignantly. "You'd get out of it if you were as tired of it as you profess to be."

"It's an awful thing to break an engagement in cold blood," I say musingly. "You write yourself down such an utter fool for having gone into it at all."

Claire's eyes flame, and all her beauty is transformed from its gentleness as she says,—

"If that was the only thing that kept me back from breaking *my* engagement, wouldn't I do it at once! I'd 'write myself down a fool' without the slightest hesitation; but I love Theo's faults better than I ever should love any other man's good qualities, and so for my heart's sake I must keep to it—I love him so that I can't leave him."

Her words catch my ear, and recall some other words whose music has sunk into my soul, and I begin

to half hum and half "howl," as Claire calls it, the words—

"What shall I do for thee?—weary thee?—leave thee?"—

Hum—hum—hum—hum, because I've forgotten the words. I relapse into song here—

"I love thee so dear that I only can leave thee."

"That's a form my love will never take," Claire says; "until he shows he's tired of me, I'll hold him as my very own before all the world. What form would your love take, Tim, if you doubted him—I mean, doubted any man—and loved him still?"

"I'd just ask him to clear away the doubt—to tell me if it were an idle or a well-founded one; and, if it were the last—if I found he had gone from me, Claire, well—I'd never go after him."

"Wouldn't you hate him in that case?" Claire asks, setting her small teeth firmly together; "wouldn't you love to make him suffer? wouldn't you hurt him if you could? wouldn't you have revenge?"

Myreckless, untutored nature lies down tamed, softened, and saddened inexpressibly as my sister speaks. My sweet, fair-faced sister is vindictive! The truth forces itself upon me—she can hate where she has loved!

The idea of unloving is repugnant to my nature; the idea of placing revenge on the throne where love once sat is repulsive to me. I feel that I could leave Theo, that I could resign all prospect of ever seeing him again; that I would rather die than attempt to win him back; that I would serve him, if it were in my power to do so, until my life's end: but I could never hate him, nor try to harm him! How, then, can Claire, whom he has placed on the pedestal of his open regard, speak even in jest of doing these things! She must love herself better than she does him after all.

"Wouldn't you have revenge?" Claire repeats.

“I think I should say, ‘I love thee so dear that I only can leave thee!’” I say, thinking it better to put forth my views in other people’s words than in my own.

“I wish I could renounce Theo in that way,” Claire says, subduing herself suddenly, “but I can’t. I could only leave him under one condition—namely, that I left him for a man who could put me into a much better position than Theo can ever hope to touch.”

“No, you’ll never leave him in that way,” I say coaxingly. I cannot endure the idea of my sister ever treating this man with meanness, though my prophetic heart tells me that he is quite capable of treating her in any way that will best serve his own interest. Still, as I would rather myself be wronged than wrong another, I do earnestly hope that Claire may never be the aggressor—the one to play false—to break vows that were made in faith and love, and in the youth that should be so pure and loyal.

“You’ll never leave him for another man merely because the other man is rich and Theo is poor, will you, Claire darling?” I repeat. And poor Claire looks at me wistfully, and answers truthfully, with all semblance of hardness and worldliness banished from her manner.

“Something tells me that I shall never be parted from Theo, but it will be his ‘will’ to leave me—Tim, his interest to remain. Theo will never disgrace himself openly in the eyes of the world by jilting a girl like me; but if he can do it quietly, and get well paid for it, he’s just the man ‘to love and ride away!’ at a moment’s notice.”

“Yet you love him still—better than anything in the world,” I say confidently, for I judge her by myself, and I love him still, “better than anything in the world.” Yes! better even than my own happiness, though I am still young enough for happiness to be an object to me.

“I wish I knew where this steeple-chase is to be ridden,” Claire says, as we walk home; “it’s so annoying to think of other people—other women—being there to flatter and

encourage him, and of our being in the dark about it altogether."

"Lady Torrens won't be there to flatter and encourage him," I say.

"Nonsense! she's sure to be there. Most likely she has worked him her colours on jacket and cap—she's just the kind of woman to do that sort of thing; and she'll tell him to ride for her favour, and urge him on to all sorts of foolish exploits. But we shall not be there to see the exhibition, that's one comfort."

But there evidently was no "comfort" in this reflection for poor Claire, in spite of the energy of her assertion, and I grow heart-sick for her.





CHAPTER XX.

MY IDOL SLIPS.

THERE is a letter lying on my plate when I go down to breakfast the morning after my walk and talk with Claire, which takes away my appetite. It is from Mr. Murray, who evidently looks upon a wedding as a little incident which can be got over without being led up to by any absurd or conventional preliminaries. His own preparations for leaving his native land, and assuming the consular dignity, are completed, and he writes to tell me that he thinks we had better be married "next week!" I read on to this clearly worded expression of his desires and opinion, and then the words jumble themselves together, and the lines seem to be swimming about before my eyes. I feel that the letters flutters; I feel that my eyeballs are floating in scalding tears that must not be shed; I feel—that they are all looking at me, and that I must say something presently.

"Why, Tim! what's the matter?" Claire asks, leaning towards me.

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head imploringly; at least ——"

Papa glances up from his paper, first at me, then at the epistle in my hand.

"Letter from Murray, eh!" he says. "What does he say?"

“That I’m to be married next week,” I blurt out; and if I were announcing my impending execution I could not feel more miserable, or speak more hopelessly.

Papa looks away from me abruptly, and jerks the paper nearer to his face; Aunt Helen gives forth the verdict, “Next week! Impossible!” and my twin sisters proclaim that they “have always said that Tim never would have her things ready whenever she was married.” Only Claire is silent. But she draws her chair nearer to mine, and takes one of my trembling hands in hers, and lets me feel that she does understand it all so fully that I may dare to speak to her.

“Not a bit of the trousseau begun even,” Aunt Helen says. “Absurd as this marriage is in itself, both Mr. Murray and Tim seem to do all in their power to make all the circumstances attending it ridiculous.”

“You see he’s a Scotchman, and in Scotland you needn’t be married at all to be married, you know—at least, if you say you’ll be somebody’s husband or wife, and somebody else hears you say it, it’s quite as good as if ——”

“You jumped over a broomstick,” papa says, interrupting the twin who was expounding. “Remarkably lucid, Mabel, my dear, but I think Murray is prepared for a little more ceremonial on the occasion than you suppose. But how’s this about the trousseau, Tim? I thought you had been making active preparations for many weeks?”

I turn scarlet and shake my head; and Claire says hurriedly—

“It’s all right, papa; she can get everything at a day’s notice. *’U* go up to town with her, and we’ll get the trousseau together. Come, Tim dear, run up with me to your room, and we’ll make out the list.”

I am glad to escape; I am trying to get out of the room, but papa rises, takes hold of me, and kisses me, and as he does so whispers—

“I thought that money would have burnt holes in your pocket long before this, my child. How is it that you have been so dilatory?”

"I don't know," I stammer: "I always put off *everything* disagreeable if I can, you know."

"It's not too late," he mutters anxiously. "My poor child, if it's repugnant to you, it's not too late; tell me?"

"Not now," I say, bursting from him and rushing after Claire, who has regarded the whispered colloquy with eager interest.

"What *shall* we do if Theo can't let you have the money, or at least some of it back at once!" she commences as soon as we are safely in my room.

"Be lowered in papa's estimation for ever," I cry despairingly; and Claire retorts, "Now please don't become supine about it, Tim. Sitting down and weepingly contemplating the worst side of the case won't improve matters: something must be done, for papa must never know that Theo had that money from you. I hope Theo will come over to-day; his bright brain will get us out of the scrape."

"It ought to, considering that it got me into it," I say.

"Now don't harp on that 'mouldered string' and don't look so woe-begone: your expression of face is enough to put any number of suspicions into papa's mind, and any number of questions into his mouth. Do exert yourself, dear. Suffer anything rather than betray my Theo."

She kneels by my side as she says this, she lays her royal-looking little head on my shoulder, and I promise her that I will do anything rather than betray the trust which her Theo has reposed in me—for his own good!

"There's always the other two hundred to fall back upon," she goes on. "Papa's not likely to ask to look into your dressing-case and purse to see how your finances stand. You're free to spend that, and Theo will soon refund you the rest, and no one will know anything about it."

"Only Mr. Murray asked me to keep two hundred for a rainy day," I say, shivering, as I repeat his phrase.

"That really is expecting too much, even of you," she says, kissing me tenderly. "Poor dear Tim! 'rather twenty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay;' rather wet weather all the year round with Theo Bligh than one rainy day with Mr. Murray. What did make you fall in love with him?"

"In 'love' with him!" I echo.

"I won't ask you, though," she goes on hastily. "What lives we used to plan out for ourselves when we were young, Tim! Your love was to be like little Elsie's in *The Romance of the Swan's Nest*: 'I will have a lover, riding on a steed of steeds; and the steed shall be red-roan, and the lover shall be noble;' that was your idea, and Mr. Murray is the reality!"

I wince, and reply—

"And yours was 'the happy prince with joyful eyes, and lighter-footed than the fox.' Theo realises your ideal well."

"How I wish I could see him ride to-morrow!" she cries, with a sudden thrill of exultation in her lover's glorious appearance. "No one will look like him, no one can! How he'll swing in his saddle ——"

"I hope he won't swing out of it," I say prosaically; and then—I can't bear any more just now—I remind Claire that it is the day for refilling the flower baskets and vases, and that to do it is my office.

For the first time since the receipt of Mr. Murray's letter, I breathe freely when I find myself away in the wilderness, where I have come to gather foliage, and mosses, and ferns for my baskets. Prowling hither and thither among the trees that mercifully intervene between me and the windows of the house, I dare to droop dejectedly, I dare to look as wretched as I feel.

Presently, before I have had energy enough to gather a single leaf, or tear up one bit of emerald moss, a few brilliantly whistled bars of a popular waltz fall upon my ears, and Mr. Theo Bligh comes springing through the wet tangled undergrowth like a young stag.

"What brings you into this morass?" he begins.

“Nothing but the fervour of my devotion to your many excellences would have led me to follow you. I never knew a girl go out of her way to catch a cold and a red nose as you do. Why, I ask, the wilderness when it’s wet?”

“Why did you follow me?” I answer. “I didn’t want you.”

“It’s not civil to tell a guest that you don’t want him under any circumstances,” he says gaily, “especially when he comes to you brimful of plans for your welfare and happiness.”

He pauses, and I begin—

“Oh, Theo! have you brought me ——”

“An invitation from Lady Torrens for Claire and you to go and stay with her for a few days.”

“Have you seen Claire?”

“No, I saw your fluttering garments disappearing in this direction as I rode up, and came after you; I wanted to say something to you alone, in fact,” he adds, his manner clouding over a little, and a light scowl marring the brightness of his handsome face. “What made you tell Lady Torrens about Claire and me?”

“She asked me if I had ever seen you before the other day, and I told her yes, you were engaged to my sister,” I reply curtly.

“That’s just what I didn’t want you to say. A fellow when he’s staying in a country house, where there is a lot of gossip going on, hates to have his engagement blurted out all over the shop. Moreover, Lady Torrens is just like the rest of you, as unreasonable as a woman can be—she chooses to fancy that I’m not ‘straight-forward,’ as she calls it, because I didn’t go into her house with a trumpet, proclaiming, ‘Hear ye, all whom it may concern! I’m engaged to Claire Vincent, a tocherless lass with a lang pedigree.’”

How heartless he is! how vain he is! how utterly regardless of the feelings of every living creature but himself! I know him to be all these things, and yet—

we women are constituted in such a wonderful way—I don't love him one bit less than I did on that summer day when he first flashed across my path.

"Don't begin to scold me," I say, and I know that my tone is tired, I know that there is a very giving-up air about me altogether. It hardly surprises me when he says—

"What a wet blanket, what a kill-joy you are, Tim, since you have got engaged! Come on; let us gather our mosses and ferns while we may, and then go in to Claire and luncheon. I'm like Maud Müller at the present moment—'a vague unrest, and a nameless longing fills my breast.' I require food and 'sustenance,' by which last I mean a peg."

"A what?" I ask.

"A brandy and soda; and mind you never let out to Lady Torrens that I've taken one at this hour of the day, or she'll get *me* scratched, as she has failed about the horse."

"Doesn't she want you to ride, or doesn't she want Sir Harold's horse to run?" I ask.

"She doesn't want me to ride—she's taken a feminine fad into her head that I'm too 'spasmodic,' as she calls it, to deport myself decently; but if I kill her husband's horse I'll show her that I can ride."

"What's the worst you have to do?" I ask tremulously.

"The worst is a thundering big fence-and-water jump; and that's a mere nothing to Grey Dolphin, a horse who'd take a church if it came in his way. You'll see the black-and-green come in in a very good place, Tim."

"We shan't be there," I say.

"Oh yes, you will; of course that's what I've come over about. Lady Torrens won't go unless Claire and you go with her. You'll see, in spite of her pronouncing me 'spasmodic,' that I shall be cool enough to bow to you as I pass your carriage."

"Please think of the race and your neck, and don't

risk either for the sake of showing off before us," I say hastily.

"Showing off! Is it likely that I, who've ridden dozens of races, should care to 'show off' before a lot of people who won't even know whether I'm going in good form or not?" Theo says, with an air of the most magnificent contempt. "I wouldn't have gone in for this local affair at all—it's altogether out of my line—if Lady Torrens hadn't asked me to do it; but when a woman asks a fellow to wear her colours, and ride the horse she's backing, and all that kind of business, what's to be done?"

"You told me just now that she didn't want you to ride at all," I remind him.

"Yes; but that's only since she found out that I'm engaged to Claire. There's a good deal of 'high falutin' sensationalism about Lady Torrens; she quite thinks that it's the right kind of thing for her to do, to put the drag on about Claire."

"I am glad she does remember Claire's claims on you," I say reproachfully.

"Who wants to forget Claire's claims? I don't. If I were to forswear every manly sport and pleasure in life, and turn myself into a moody milksop, would Claire, or you for her, be one bit the better satisfied? What did you like me for at first?—tell me that, Tim dear?"

"I'm sure I don't know," I tell him truthfully.

"Of course you don't know, but I can tell you why it was: I was just myself—a fellow who goes in with ardour for whatever comes in his way. I pledged myself to ride this race, just as I pledged myself to marry Claire—the opportunity of doing it came in my way, and I embraced the opportunity. I don't go out of my way to do things, but if they're well in my path I don't avoid them."

Poor Claire! what a pity that she was so "well in his way!" I have to look away from him resolutely in order to think this. As soon as I steal a glance at the

handsome, fearless, open-looking face which surmounts the gallant, well set up, stalwart young frame, I alter my opinion, and instead of pitying Claire, I pity myself.

“Let’s get on a little faster,” Theo suggests. “Claire will be pleased, won’t she, at my answering her letter in person?”

“Claire’s always pleased to see you,” I say; and I might add, “and so am I—idiotically glad.”

“I know she is,” he answers egotistically. “Have you managed to get up any of that feeling for Murray yet?”

He bends his head, and looks into my face with laughing eyes. My engagement evidently strikes him as being a great joke—a comical episode in his career which affords him a certain amount of amusement, for which he is rather pleased with me for supplying him than otherwise. What my feelings may be on the subject he never pauses to consider.

“For my own sake, it’s to be hoped that I have got up the feeling,” I say mendaciously; “for I am to be married next week.”

“No!” he cries out in a startled tone; and a tiny sensation of triumph thrills my heart for an instant, while I believe that he is not so utterly indifferent to all that concerns me as he sometimes leads me to think he is. The next instant the triumph fades away as he says—

“What a bore! for I can’t touch a farthing of that money you lent me, and I suppose you’ll be wanting it, won’t you?”

“Of course I shall, Theo.”

“Well, I really don’t see what’s to be done for you. However, it’s no use discussing an unpleasant topic, and howling over the inevitable, is it?” And as he speaks he seems airily to dismiss the subject from his mind, and goes forward with the bound of a deer to jump over a long, high-backed garden seat that is in the middle of the lawn.

Either through the grass being slippery, or his nerves a trifle shaken in spite of himself, he falls as he lands, and when he rises, I see that he grasps his left wrist.

“Are you hurt, Theo?” I cry anxiously.

“My bridle-hand’s strained—what cursed luck!” he mutters.





CHAPTER XXI.

“CAN SHE BE CRUEL?”

THEO vacillates a good deal in his treatment of the subject of the strained hand. When it is suggested to him by Claire that he should make it the excuse for doing what we all wish to have him do, namely, resigning his place in the steeplechase to-morrow, he declares himself to be absolutely unhurt, and indignantly repudiates the idea of proclaiming himself “such a muff to the Torrens’ set,” as to be turned from his purpose by “a bruise and a girl.” Nevertheless, when this effort at interfering with the liberty of the subject in his person has passed from his memory, he makes great capital out of the strain. He tells papa that he is on the brink of getting a good appointment, but that this accident will militate against his chance of success; and when papa reminds him that he does not write with his left hand, Theo glides gracefully out of the difficulty, as only Theo can, and holds his hand out to Claire to be bathed and bandaged.

I do not for one moment doubt that it is extremely pleasant and amusing for Claire to sit on a low chair by the side of the couch on which Theo reclines, tending that strained wrist of his, and making him feel himself to be essential to her happiness, and to the well-being of the world in general. But it is not pleasant or amusing

to me to watch them. If it were only summer weather, I could relieve them of my presence, and try to forget them in the companionship of the dogs out of doors, or of my own thoughts in my own room. But on this dreary, chill February day, I am tempted to stay by the bright, big drawing-room fire; and as I turn my face to the cheery glow, and my back to the pair of lovers, they presently forget that I am there—and I am too dazed by all that is happening around me to remind them of the fact.

What complications are about me as I sit here in my day-dream! To all outward appearance I am as unharassed a girl as I was that first day, when I scuttled away from danger in the shape of the then unknown Theo Bligh. In reality I am in debt to my father, and to my conscience, the sum of two hundred pounds. But what is that compared to the debt I shall presently owe to Mr. Murray, the man who is going to take me in entire faith, and who will surely find me so terribly wanting?

Suddenly my pity for him changes into pity for myself. I may be very wicked, but I am not wicked enough, surely, to merit such an interminable vista of misery as this which stretches out before me. To go through a long life, perhaps—for I am young and healthy, and full of that vitality which death respects and keeps aloof from—*bearing* this dread monotony of a loveless chilled life, from the very prospect of which I shrink appalled.

“I can’t endure it! I can’t endure it!” I cry aloud, in my agony of impatience; and I break down altogether, bending forward into my own lap, in a state of supine wretchedness which I cannot combat, although I despise myself for yielding to it.

I am raised from the depths by a strong, nervous arm; I am restored to a consciousness of my utter imbecility by the words—

“Tim darling, is it a nightmare? or a pang of conscience on account of some little unconfessed crime, such as murder, or arson, or ——?”

"Is it a desire to make a little scene, since no other form of entertainment was at hand?" Claire cuts in coolly; and at her words I remind myself of where I am and what I am doing, and I unwind myself from Theo Bligh's embrace, and lift my hot, tear-stained face from the lappet of his coat.

"I meant that I can't be married," I exclaim, looking imploringly from Theo to Claire. "It's too horrible now that it's coming so close. I didn't think it was half so awful when he asked me, but to go away from—from everything I love, and live with him always! Claire, don't let me do it; I'd better die!"

"A deal better," Theo observes philosophically. "As a member of the family I should certainly say 'die,' or you may be tempted to bolt, if there were no other alternative; but there is an alternative—break it off: it's easily done."

"How lightly you speak of breaking an engagement in which honour is involved," Claire puts in.

"She'd far better do it before than after marriage," Theo says quietly, lounging back to the sofa. "However, it's an affair that she only can settle for herself; but I think Tim, if you give Murray the benefit of that little scene you've just rehearsed, that he'll be ready to declare with Montrose, that 'he'll never love thee more.' By Jove!" Theo goes on—and I see that the blood rushes to his brow—"I should know intuitively if a girl recoiled from me in that way; but some fellows have hides like a rhinoceros."

I don't love Mr. Murray, but I must be loyal, though it hurts me to open my lips on the subject.

"If he ever saw me look sorry he'd release me on the spot," I explain; "but I'd never look sorry before him. And, Claire—Theo—you will never, either of you, betray what a goose I made of myself just now, will you?"

I go up to my sister and clasp my arms round her neck, and my sister unclasps them, and almost pushes me away.

"You really may trust me, Tim, not to do a single

thing that will give you the slightest excuse for being unstable and infirm of purpose. You're so unpractical—you have so little real understanding of what you want yourself—that I believe, if you were to get out of this engagement, you'd get into another that would be equally uncongenial to you before a week was over your head. For my part, I shall be far more at rest about you when you're safely married and away."

"Oh, Claire, you're joking!" I cry.

"Claire, I think you are giving out your real sentiments with a lucidity that does you credit," Theo says, with a dash of earnestness in his mirthful manner that makes me wonder what it is all about. "I'm sure you'll be far more at rest about Tim when she's safely married and away."

"For her sake only," Claire says quickly.

"Exactly! You're afraid till it's ratified that the Murray bond will break, and that Tim may enter into a fresh alliance with some reckless, good-looking scamp like myself. Well, Claire, what better fate can you wish for your sister than you have chosen voluntarily for yourself? A duplicate of me would suit Tim's taste a good deal better than ever Murray will.—No offence to your future lord and master, Tim, but, as Swinburne observes of Mary Queen of Scots, 'Do I not know thee to the bone, my sweet?' Don't I know you, Tim?"

He asks it with all the wheedling emphasis of which he is master—and he is master of such a large amount of wheedling emphasis. Still I am silent, for it is a question that my sister's lover ought not to have asked me; and even more than the contemptuous certainty it implies as to the state of my feelings, does it bespeak a sort of regardlessness of Claire's, which makes me fear that he will grow careless as to her suffering on his account—careless enough to allow her to perceive it.

"You think Tim much more shallow than she is, if you believe that you have fathomed her," Claire puts in. "Because she isn't rhapsodical about Mr. Murray, you mustn't fall into the error of thinking that she's not very

proud of his having chosen her; its only that she feels ——"

"That there's a nearer one still, and a dearer one yet than all other," Theo interrupts, bringing out his words and his light laugh as carelessly as if he had never probed the weakness of my heart for him, and found out all that was to be known of the root of my disease.

"I wasn't going to say that," Claire rejoins; "I was only going to tell you that she feels nothing more than the little natural sorrow, the little natural hesitation, which every girl feels when she's going to leave 'her own' for the first time in her life, never again to come back to them as 'their own' entirely. Why, I shall feel the same when it comes to the point, and I shall be leaving them for you."

There is such proud love, there is such open idolatry in these words of hers, that Theo forgets the strain, and rises from his recumbent position, pleased, flattered, and eagerly anxious to continue the subject.

"I believe it is true," he says, taking her hands in his, and drawing her nearer to him caressingly; "I do believe that you would throw over your family, and the brightest fate and fortune that could be offered you, for me."

Either she does not heed my presence, or she has forgotten it. With a passionate gesture she frees her hands, and as her arms twine round his neck, and her face buries itself on his shoulder, she says—

"No fate could be bright without you. Theo, don't ask me to go there! Leave that woman's house; I can't be her guest!"

"You must, dear, for to-morrow, if you want to see me ride," he says blithely. "Come, all my attention will be given to Grey Dolphin to-morrow; I shall think more of him than I shall of any woman on the course."

"More than you will of me?" she asks reproachfully.

"Well, to be honest, more than I shall of you," he answers; and even I know that there is something unchivalrous in his brilliant candour.

"By the time I've ridden home and ~~crossed~~ it will be

the Torrens' dinner-time," he goes on. "Now, look here, Claire; I shall settle it for you. Don't stay there unless you like, but spend to-morrow with Lady Torrens. Her husband will be awfully annoyed if she doesn't go, and she swears—I mean, she says—she won't go without you. Be with her by twelve o'clock: my race comes off at one."

"Do you really wish me to go with her? Do you really wish me to be there?" Claire asks.

"It wouldn't do for you not to be there now," he says, with a look of vexation. "There has been talk and a fuss, you see; and if you're not there, she will think there is something wrong with us; and if she once thinks that, I should get the cold shoulder from her. You women are kittle cattle to deal with."

"Then, to please you, I will go, Theo; but, what with my anxiety about you and my dislike to Lady Torrens, I shall not have a very happy day," Claire says wistfully.

"I tell you that Grey Dolphin and I are like one. By Jove! we must be the two parts they talk about in the Symposium, which must come together to form a perfect whole," he laughs gaily, by way of reply to her first objection. But I observe that he ignores the subject of her dislike to Lady Torrens. Indeed, the statement as to the feeling existing does not seem to make the slightest impression upon him. The fact is that Theo has gained his point about Claire's being present to see him ride. Having gained his point, he light-heartedly casts behind him all consideration for the pain that point may inflict upon any one else. I see all this; I understand it perfectly. Nevertheless, he is selfish in such a gay, bright, easy way, that there is the most subtle fascination in his selfishness. Claire can't be angry with him; and as for me—I find it impossible to like him one bit less than I did when I first began to love him, and was blind to all his faults.

"Mind you look your best to-morrow," he says to Claire in parting. "It will be known all over the place

that you're engaged to me, and I want other fellows to see that I had some excuse for the weakness of which I've been guilty."

"The folly is not irreparable," Claire says. But even as she says it she clings more closely to him, and smiles more winningly on him; and I understand clearly that, with her own good-will, she will never relinquish the hold she has on him, however weak that hold may grow. I would relinquish him—if he were mine to relinquish—at any given moment, if he seemed to wish it. But Claire will cling to him. Whose love is the truest, I wonder, Claire's or mine?

Having finally taken his leave of Claire, he gives me a farewell greeting in parting.

"Good-bye, Tim. I shall be awfully sorry when you go; especially as you'll go as Mrs. Murray, and I shall not be allowed to write to you as I please. Think better of it while there's time—there's a dear girl."

"Think better of it!" I hardly dare to think of it at all.

As soon as he is gone, and Claire is no longer under the invigorating influence of his presence, her spirits sink rapidly, and she develops a sort of peevish, nervous excitability which is quite a new feature in her disposition.

"How foolish we were to let him persuade us to go to-morrow—especially to go with Lady Torrens! We ought to be up in town buying your things, Tim. The end of it will be that you won't be half ready to be married when Mr. Murray comes, and your dilatoriness will give him a very just cause of offence against you at starting."

"I don't care," I say desperately; "he has so many just causes of offence against me that one or two more will signify very little. Claire, what can I do—what shall I do?"

"Marry him, of course; unless you want to marry someone else and create a scandal," Claire replies coldly; and the conviction shoots home to my heart that Claire

is anxious to get rid of me—that she does distrust me with regard to Theo.

And all the while I know that I would die rather than wrong her or win him. However, these are noble sentiments which it would be absurd to endeavour to substantiate now. Accordingly, as I am called upon to say something, I tackle the far less difficult question of my clothes.

“I’ve made up my mind not to be married in white,” I say, with abrupt decision.

“Nonsense!” Claire rejoins. “Why should you want to make yourself conspicuous by being married in something that’s out of the way? It will look exactly as if you wanted to call attention to what you are doing, and why you’re doing it, if you startle people into questioning the reason why you’re dressed in some unexpected colour. You’ll just wear white, Tim, dear, and the description of your dress in the *County Press* shall read just like that of any other person. I should say”—and now Claire looks at me critically—“that you can stand satin even—and satin is awfully trying; but I do think you can stand it; and it will be such a grand dress for you by-and-by, when you’re illustrating our national hospitality in a foreign land.”

I look at my dear Claire, and for the first time in my life I ask myself, “Can she be cruel?” And I will not hear the answer that my despairing question has demanded.





CHAPTER XXII.

“THE FAVOURITE AGAINST THE FIELD!”



WHAT a day it is! What a sweet, fresh spring day this is on which we drive with Lady Torrens, between hedges that are bursting into every shade of green, to the trysting-place of the sporting population of the county. This trysting-place is a pretty, bijou Swiss cottage belonging to Sir Harold Torrens—a lovely toy place some miles from town, village, post-office, butcher, baker, and every other convenience that is essential to the well-being of humanity. In consequence of this it is untenanted; but it is beautifully kept up, and is as habitable and home-like on a sudden emergency—such as the present—as if it were always occupied.

It is set like a gem in the middle of a velvet lawn. Its walls are covered with lattice-work, and are brilliant on this sunny spring day with scarlet japonica, monthly roses, yellow jasmine, and glitteringly green ivy, which is fast spreading over its thatched roof and eaves. Inside, the rooms are draped and furnished with flowered chintzes—even the looking-glasses are framed in chintz—and large baskets of trailing plants are pendant, in place of chandeliers, from the centre of every ceiling. Refreshments are served in a dining-room which is fitted up with a lightness, brightness, and grace, that makes

it seem like a banqueting hall for Queen Titania and her darling elves. Even Claire, who has been sad and silent during the drive, is charmed into animation by the beauty and fitness of the adornments and arrangements; and there is almost cordiality in the tone in which she congratulates Lady Torrens on her taste, when we learn that the Swiss cottage and all about it, within and without, has been designed and carried out by her, "unaided by landscape-gardener, upholsterer, or artist," as she tells us herself.

"People speak disparagingly of love in a cottage," Claire says, "but in such a cottage as this it must be a poem. Isn't it so, Lady Torrens?"

"I've never tried it," Lady Torrens says; and then she blushes, for she has previously mentioned to us that she and Sir Harold spend a good many weeks here every summer.

Glancing from her to Claire, I see that a corresponding blush has mounted to my sister's cheek, but hers is a blush that seems full of happy thoughts. Probably she is picturing to herself what life would be like here with Theo. At any rate, I do this for an unguarded minute or two, and the picture that I paint is that of an Elysium on earth.

The cottage stands on the highest part of the grounds, and out under the verandah we get a capital view of the whole course. It commences on the border of the lawn, bears away to the left over rather a stiff hedge, then along on the flat for a field or two, then over a hurdle and ditch, then along by the side of a hill, which is the turning-point, then over a stone wall—a bad jump by itself, but not so dangerous if it had to be taken alone; but parallel with the wall, deceitfully close to it, an ugly grip yawns.

"It's the only confusing bit in the whole course," Lady Torrens says, pointing it out to us and some other of her lady guests, as we stand outside the cottage windows. "When once I see them well over that, my heart will be lighter."

As she speaks, Theo, with a loose coat over his jockey costume, runs up to us, and answers her last words as he shakes hands with Claire and me.

"We have to go round twice, remember; don't let your heart get light too soon. That brown beggar that Sir Harold is riding changes from a lamb to a lion almost as suddenly as that sweet Kismet of yours, Tim."

"I'm not afraid for Sir Harold—I mean I have such absolute confidence in Sir Harold's skill," Lady Torrens says. Then she adds—and an uneasy expression creeps over her face as she speaks — "And you will be very careful, I'm sure, for Miss Vincent's sake. You must promise us that you will rival Sir Harold in caution?"

She speaks very earnestly, and her lips quiver for an instant, and Theo grows radiant with pleasure at this proof of the interest she takes in him. His handsome face flushes; his tell-tale eyes sparkle with gratified vanity. He forgets Claire's presence among other things, and bends his haughty, beautiful boy's head down towards Lady Torrens.

"I'll promise to do my best," he says; "for when it was first started it was understood we were to ride for your favour, and that you were to give the prize. You've backed out of the last part of the arrangement; but I choose to consider that we're riding for your favour still."

She draws her lithe figure up in a stately way at once.

"My favour will never be given to any one who does anything against my will and judgment," she says coldly. "This race is entirely against my will and judgment, and no one knows this better than you do, Mr. Bligh."

He merely laughs in reply, gives her a thrilling glance through his eyelashes, and turns to Claire.

"Look sharp at that corner when we're passing," he says, pointing out the angle of the lawn; "that's where

I am going to raise my cap to you—that's where Grey Dolphin will have me at a disadvantage if he chooses to take it."

He steals a look at Lady Torrens as he speaks, but Lady Torrens—though she is conscious of the look, I am sure—will not respond to it.

"Theo," Claire cries in a sudden access of fear for him, "don't do anything rash—don't risk anything.—Lady Torrens!"—she turns appealingly to our hostess, forgetting everything, forgiving everything, throwing aside all her vain imaginings and foolish jealousies in her genuine fear for Theo—"Lady Torrens, do use your influence; do insist upon his riding without any show-off or folly at all!—I sha'n't be able to watch you, Theo, unless you'll promise me that you'll not play tricks."

He begins to move away, and she follows him, urging her request most winningly, most passionately; seeking to make him regard her wishes with a winsome grace that I think only Claire possesses. As she does so, Lady Torrens says to me,—

"How much too well she loves that careless, thoughtless, fickle boy! No, I won't say that she loves him too well; for if anything can exorcise that demon of selfishness which possesses him, it will be the love of such a pure, good girl as your sister Claire; but she is allowing herself to become subservient to him; his caprices affect her, and it is not for her happiness that she should let him see this. If he had a nobler nature——" She pauses, and I say, rather crossly—

"You're beginning to find him full of faults, Lady Torrens. You liked him well enough the other day to claim him as your intimate friend, and to feel hurt because he had not told you of his engagement, and now——"

"I know him better, though I do not like him less," she interrupts. "My child, we're all alike in this: we see his faults clearly when we don't see his face; when we look in that we forget them all,"

Claire comes back to us now with cloudless eyes and a mouth that is curved with a happy smile.

"He made me give him a rose," she says to me; "and he promises that he will ride steadily, and not go looking about him and lifting his cap, or any nonsense of that kind. And as for riding for her favour, Tim," she adds in a whisper, "he says he only told her he would do that to flatter her and keep her in a good humour. He says she's a most exacting woman and will have no medium manner from any man. If he's not the slave of her whims, she won't even treat him with conventional attention. I consider that a detestable nature—don't you?"

"Yes—but it's not hers," I say bluntly. "If she has ever seemed to demand flattery and devotion from Theo, it must be because, to serve his own ends, he has given her both freely at some time or other. It's mean of him to run her down to you, Claire," I continue indignantly. "It's cowardly to cast all the blame on the woman, even if there has been any foolish half-flirtation going on; it's not like a gentleman! How can he do it?"

Claire shrugs her shoulders. "When your flow of intemperate language has ceased, I have a remark to make," she says.

"I've said all I'm going to say," I reply, cooling.

"Doesn't it occur to you that if there has been any 'foolish half-flirtation' between them, that it must have been entirely her fault?" she asks contemptuously. "She! Lady Torrens, a married woman of position, and he a young, warm-hearted, warmer-headed, impressionable man—it must have been her fault!"

"Perhaps so," I say resignedly. "Anyway, I would rather be the one in fault than the one so frightfully false as he must be to talk about it and against her."

Our conversation ends here, for they are weighted and mounted by this time, and are falling into position at the edge of the lawn.

In another minute they are off! For a few seconds

dead silence reigns among all of us who are out under the verandah, but presently chatter resumes her dominion over the majority, and only Claire, Lady Torrens, and myself are silent. Lady Torrens is bringing a powerful pair of glasses to bear upon the forms that are flying round the course. Claire's sweet eyes see them vividly enough without any artificial aid; and as for me — I believe I should know what was happening if I were blind.

From the sporting crowd assembled at a short distance from the cottage, shouts are wafted to us every instant, and we learn that Grey Dolphin is the favourite, and that he is being heavily backed. "The favourite against the field, bar none," is the verdict given at the end of the first round; and Theo puts on a spurt at once, and skims ahead of the rest without an effort, apparently. For the first time Lady Torrens speaks.

"He is riding it splendidly," she says—somehow or other, it never occurs to one of us to question whom she means by "he:" we all understand her perfectly well—"not one of them will creep up to him. Grey Dolphin's the winner."

As she says it we see Theo lifting the good horse to the big jump. He rises to it in a way that suggests invisible wings, then the others come popping up and over, and—one is knocked out of the race when they go skimming along over the flats. The favourite has dropped into the grip, and has not come out again!

In a moment the spot is surrounded, and Grey Dolphin bounds out of his temporary difficulty and gallops riderless over the field; and Claire and I make a dash down the lawn, and arrive at the fringe of the crowd, breathless, shaking, heart-sick with dire apprehension. Even in this supreme moment I envy Claire, in spite of this agony of suspense which is her portion! She may show her anguish; I must conceal mine.

He is lifted out of the fatal ditch and laid on the grass till a stretcher can be fetched, and Claire kneels

by his side, and looks into his insensible face with all the love she feels. I stand by passively till Lady Torrens comes down to us, and sends me back to the cottage with orders as to bed and bandages, and a doctor. Presently he is brought in, and we learn that his arm is broken, and that there is concussion of the brain.

"Hadn't he better be taken to our house at once?" Claire prompts me to say, and the doctor's answer strikes dismay into our hearts.

"He mustn't be moved from here for some time—for some weeks," he says. "I can't tell yet how much mischief is done; but if he's to pull through it he must be left here quietly.—Are you staying here now, Lady Torrens?"

"We only stay here in the summer," she says.

"That's unfortunate. Well, I must send him in the best nurse I can get; but I'm sorry you can't be here to look after him; he'll want more care than a rough country nurse will give him."

I go and give this intelligence to Claire, and for the first time since Grey Dolphin failed his rider, her face is recognisable as the face of Claire.

"Aunt Helen will come and nurse him, of course, and I shall come with her. I should have been more than disgusted if Lady Torrens had assumed the post. I'll send for Aunt Helen at once. I'll write, and I shall wait here till she comes."

"If I'm ever ill I hope Aunt Helen won't nurse me," I say petulantly, for the outsider sensations are strongly upon me. Claire will know a little, at least, of what love in a cottage is like, if she stays here to help Aunt Helen to nurse Theo. I shall remain in the most dire ignorance concerning it. (How I would tend him, though, if I had the opportunity!) Is it any wonder that I feel inclined to unjustly deride love in a cottage? Is it any wonder that I think that Claire "really ought to go home"?

As I realise that I do really think this, I almost recoil from myself. Am I growing so mean in my misery

that I would debar my sister from the enjoyment of any legitimate bit of happiness—and surely this, of nursing the man she is to marry, is a legitimate bit? I strive to be magnanimous; I struggle to put my own foolish pain aside, and I succeed to the extent of being able to say—

“Your place is here, Claire, undoubtedly. Shall I come over to-morrow with the things you’ll want?”

“Well, no; I think you’d better be getting on with your own trousseau,” Claire says dubiously. “You see, any one can bring my things, but no one but yourself can select yours, as I shall be absent; but write to me, and—don’t let there be any hitch about the marriage, dear: we Vincents will be getting ourselves terribly talked about, if we don’t take care.”

“Claire,” I mutter mournfully, “what is this that has come between us?”

“Nothing—it’s a mere idle fancy on your part that anything has come between us,” she says, and she tries to smile; but I see that it costs her an effort to do this, and so her words carry no conviction to my sore, suspicious heart. I am turning away discomfited and depressed, when she adds abruptly—“There is something between us, Tim, my darling. It is my hateful fear that Theo likes you so much that he’s on the brink perpetually of loving you better than he does me. Oh, Tim, I am ashamed of the feeling, but it’s a real one!”

It is a real one, and a cruel one too—cruel to me, who am undeserving of the implied distrust! Cruel to poor Claire, whom in its blind savagery it tears, and rends, and weakens. It is a devil, and must be cast out.

“There shall be no hitch of my making about my marriage,” I begin with trembling lips; “but as for Theo’s liking me, Claire, his liking has never shown itself to me.” (May I be forgiven this lie, which I am telling to make her feel happier!) “He has played with me to amuse himself, as he would play with a kitten.”

“The play has been too strong for the poor kitten,” Claire says, knitting her brows a little in inquiry, not

in anger. "Go now, dear; get Aunt Helen over as soon as possible, for until she comes, Lady Torrens will stay."

I take a down-hearted leave of Lady Torrens, and am driven home; and I go at once to Aunt Helen's room with my evil tidings, and the request for her immediate attendance at the Swiss cottage. Mabel meets me at the door with a tumbler and a fork in her hand, and before I can give my news, she drowns my voice by proceeding to whisk up the yolk of an egg with amiable but noisy zeal.

"Aunt Helen's bronchitis has seized her so badly," she tells me in a distinct whisper, "Magdalen and I are quite nervous about her. Doctor says she's of such a full habit that he's afraid it will go hardly with her. We haven't been able to get her to swallow anything to-day."

I pass my sister and creep up to the bedside. Even my inexperienced eyes tell me that Aunt Helen is very ill indeed. She breathes with difficulty, her face is unnaturally flushed, and pain is lord paramount evidently in her heavy head and blood-shot eyes. I hate myself for being a messenger of woe; and when I have told her about Theo, and she moans out an entreaty to be let go to him, and tries to lift her agony bound head from the pillow, and fails to do so with an even more piteous moan than the first—when I have seen and heard these things, my heart softens towards Aunt Helen inexplicably.

"Don't fret," I say soothingly; "he will be well looked after, though you can't go to him. Lady Torrens will stay, I'm sure, as you're too ill to go yet, and Claire can remain with her."

Her eyes flash excitedly, even through the film of suffering by which they had been overspread a moment before. She makes me jump up from my sympathetic, stooping attitude, by exclaiming—

"Claire must come home at once. I can quite trust him to the care of Lady Torrens; and I should not be

doing my duty to one of your father's daughters if I allowed her to remain in a position which could be questioned. Claire must come home at once: it is my duty to insist upon it," she winds up in a hoarse painful whisper.

The sense of duty and the determination to do it, invariably renders Aunt Helen more detestable in my eyes than she is when she pounds along her path with an air of stolid disregard to every consideration that does not concern her own immediate comfort and well-being. When this latter course is hers, I am justified to myself in letting my well-established dislike to her reign absolutely over me. But when, in grand duty's name, she thwarts, vexes, hurts and injures us, I fail to plead my own cause satisfactorily even to myself.

"It will be cruel to bring Claire away from Theo now," I plead. "You are fond of her, you know, Aunt Helen; and you do love Theo: let her stay."

Aunt Helen moans and turns her head wearily on the pillow.

"I'm too fond of them both to let her stay," she murmurs. "Don't oppose me, Tim; she must—she shall come home! If *I*, his aunt—the one who loves him best in the world — am satisfied to leave him solely in the care of Lady Torrens (if she'll accept the trust), rather than that one of you ungrateful wilful girls should be compromised, it will be strange indeed if you offer any opposition."

"You're hurting Aunt Helen by making her talk," Mabel says, pushing me aside. "Now, not a word more; you are so awkward in a sick-room, Tim. It's to be hoped Mr. Murray will always enjoy rude health, or he'll discover that the art of listening well isn't the highest a wife should possess. Please go!"

I go, with this thought crushing all power of speech out of me. For some reason or other, Aunt Helen wishes to separate Claire from Theo, and her wish to do so is not based on any honest desire for Claire's real happiness and welfare. What noxious weeds of

suspicion will spring up and poison poor Claire's already sick mind if she is compelled to come away from Theo now! The craving that possesses me to set everybody at ease and everything straight makes me injudicious, as usual, and I exclaim aloud, as Mabel hustles me out of the room—

"I'll go and speak to papa: he shall decide about Claire."





CHAPTER XXIII.

SYDNEY IS STRONG.



GO to papa's study in a white heat. The fervour of my spirit of partisanship for Claire is kept alive by the irrepressible dread I have, that I may not do all I can to secure for Claire this privilege of helping to nurse Theo, which is her right. I enter the room with a rush, and, as the window is open, the draught I make flutters a lot of loose sheets off the table, and disperses them—written side downwards on the floor—in a way that is very maddening to the one who has just inscribed them, and who has doubts as to their being dry. Without looking round, papa says impatiently—

“I wish you could come into the room as the others do. What have you come to bother me about now?”

Never in my life have I been spoken to in this way by papa before. I spring to his side, and put my arms round his neck. I must keep papa at any cost of current displeasure from him.

“Forgive me, I'm so unhappy,” I begin; and he throws down his pen, and takes my face between his hands, and exclaims—

“My little Tim here! I thought it was Mabel or Magdalen. They've worried me awfully to-day, by insisting upon reporting the progress your poor Aunt

Helen's illness is making every ten minutes, and declaring that they feel sure she 'has something on her mind.' When the twins begin to dabble with mysteries and melodrama, the family peace is likely to be wrecked, for they do it clumsily, don't they, Tim?—as clumsily as you opened the door just now."

Papa puts me away from him affectionately but firmly; he wants to write, and I am very much in his way. I have never had either the temerity or the inclination before this hour to intervene between him and the pursuit that I love and honour, but now I am both brave and irrepressible.

"Papa," I begin, taking the pen from his hand, "the young people of your real life claim precedence over those of fiction. Theo has met with a bad accident; Claire wants to stay and nurse him, and Aunt Helen says Claire sha'n't do it. Claire's your own child, papa; contradict Aunt Helen, for Claire's sake, for once."

"What's happened to young Bligh?" he asks anxiously.

"His horse fell at a stiff stone wall and landed him in a ditch."

"It's not a hunting day?"

"No, papa—he was racing," I explain hesitatingly.

"Steeple-chasing, in fact, when he's hardly safe in his saddle on the flat," papa says sternly; and there is no anxiety, but a great deal of anger in his tone now.

"Where is he? and how is he hurt?"

"His arm is broken, and the doctor says 'there's something like concussion of the brain,'" I reply as firmly as I can.

"There's nothing 'like concussion of the brain' but concussion of the brain itself: why couldn't the ass say what he meant?" papa says contemptuously. "Where did it happen? Where have they taken the boy?"

"To Sir Harold's Swiss cottage. Claire is staying there with Lady Torrens," I say with a whimper, for the strain upon me has been a long-continued and a heavy one.

"She must come home, Tim," he says quietly. "Lady

Torrens is not like an old friend, or even an intimate acquaintance. Claire mustn't stay in a stranger's house to nurse a lover, who in all probability will never be her husband."

He puts his pen down as he says this, rests his elbow on the table, and his chin on his hand, and gazes gravely and silently at nothing particular ; and I gaze at him and discern that it will be useless to make any appeal against this decision of his.

"You're quite right, my child," he says presently ; "the young people of my real life ought to claim precedence with me over those of fiction. I'm afraid, though, that I haven't yielded them this precedence often enough, or Claire and you would be differently circumstanced now."

"Don't mind me," I plead ; "I've never expected much happiness from—I mean, I never thought about marrying at all, so I can't be disappointed, however it turns out. But Claire loves Theo as well as he does her, and everything that keeps her away from him, and everything that happens to make her uncertain or anxious about him, really hurts her."

"That's not an uncommon condition with girls who are in love," papa says, half laughing. "Well, it's gone too far for me to forbid her nursing her love-sick fancies, but I do most decidedly forbid her to stay there and nurse him. My opinion of him is that he will throw Claire over for the first woman with money who is weak enough to listen to him ; and I only hope that my opinion is well founded."

"It will kill her !" I say passionately.

"Not at all," papa replies coolly ; "it will be very unpleasant to her for a time, but it won't be half as unpleasant a position as that of his wife would be in a year or two on a tightened income. Does Claire—or do you think that Theo Bligh would consider any woman's happiness or peace of mind for a moment unless that woman ministered to his comfort, his love of luxury, and his habits of idleness ? If Claire could put money in his purse, he would remember that he is in honour bound to

her. As she can do nothing of the sort, he'll accept her devotion until he meets some woman with a soft heart and head, who is willing to pay a high price for the pleasure of being his neglected wife."

I think very highly of papa; I do most firmly believe in his love and care for us, but I do question now why, if he thought all this, he should have allowed Claire to taste the happiness of being engaged to Theo at all. My feelings are expressed in my face, I suppose, for he says presently—

"You wonder I didn't forbid the engagement at first, I see. If I had done so, Claire would have gone through life regarding me as her natural enemy, and Theo as superior to the very best fellow she could ever possibly marry. You've been allowed to reason about things for yourselves ever since your reasonable faculties developed, yet such is the perverted nature of women that a hare-brained boy turned Claire's head at once, and Murray's talents made an idiot of you. And now," he adds, rising up, "I will go and bring Claire home myself; and when she comes, Tim, don't you sympathetically urge her on to feel more aggrieved than she'll be naturally inclined to feel. This is a question of decorum, and I am bound to deal with it to the best of my judgment."

He prepares to start, and I stand by in silence, smarting under a sense of defeat. He is our father, and I am as sure as I am that I exist at the present moment that there is no alloy of selfishness, no desire to tantalise us, no wish to sport with our feelings, in any determination he comes to concerning us. At the same time I feel intensely for the agony that will be Claire's portion, when she knows that it is decreed that not only is she to be separated from Theo for a time at this crisis, but that he is to be left in charge of Lady Torrens. And I have it in my heart to pray to papa to be more sympathetic and less paternal for once.

But I dare not word my prayer, for I feel too fearful of his doubts of Theo being well grounded to dare to oppose them. I know that Claire will think that I have not

exerted myself to the uttermost in her behalf. I know that the twins and Aunt Helen will chant hymns of praise and thanksgiving for my defeat. I know that Theo, when he recovers—if he recovers, Heaven help him!—will think that my weakness for him made me a weak advocate for Claire. I know all these things, for sorrow has taught me well. Above all, I know that we two poor girls are altogether hopelessly wrong.

It seems such a long, long time before papa comes back with Claire and news of Theo, for I spend the whole of it in loitering about vaguely, and in evading the twins, who are continually making missions of mercy into unexpected places, in order to procure for Aunt Helen something which the commonest understanding ought to teach them Aunt Helen cannot possibly want. They pervade the whole house, in spite of their voluble declarations to every one who will listen to them that they can't be a minute out of Aunt Helen's room—"she requires such constant attention, poor dear!" Our old housekeeper, Mrs. Martin, comes to speak to me, and to extract information from me "about Mr. Theo." (Theo is a most popular person in the household: he fees and smiles upon all who can serve him, and do serve him, with equal liberality.) And when I have told her all I can recall of the episode that made my brain reel, she informs me that the twins "are born nurses"—born "blessings," she calls them. "They've been in and out of that room ever since Mrs. Bligh was taken without stopping, as one might say, and without a thought of saving their poor dear legs." I strive to sympathise with the strain on their poor dear legs; I struggle to respect my sisters for their feats of pedestrianism and self-sacrifice; but I cannot feel cordially disposed to greet them kindly when they perpetually interrupt me. The truth is, I am nervous, shattered, heart-sick, uncertain of myself and everybody else, and I have no one to turn to for counsel and support.

Just as my solitude and the interruptions to it have grown altogether unbearable, Sydney Dale comes in, and

I tell him all that has happened, and a little of what I fear will happen.

"Claire will break her heart at being brought away from him; and who knows what misery may come of bringing her away? Theo may think she was careless about him, and if he thinks that ——"

"If he thinks that, he must be a more conceited fellow even than I think he is," Sydney interrupts. "He wouldn't have Claire set her father's judgment and wishes at defiance in such a matter."

"He's very fond of her, you know," I say, with a qualm, "and so he's tenacious."

"He's very fond of himself, and so he's awfully exacting," Sydney rejoins. "I'm of your father's opinion: I don't think that it will ever be a marriage; and if, by any unlucky chance, it comes to one, it won't be a happy marriage."

"There's a risk, of course; there is in everything," I say wearily. "He mayn't be a model of fidelity—what man is?"

"I know one man, at least, who, having shot his arrow and missed his mark, will never aim at another target," he says gravely; and I am too conscious of his meaning to say anything depreciatory of such a course of constancy in reply.

"I don't understand a fellow giving the reins to his fancy in that way, and trying to pluck every flower he thinks fair, and getting tired of them one after another. You're not fickle either, Tim," he adds, looking me straight in the face. "And though your loyalty is misplaced, I love you for it."

"Your loyalty is misplaced too," I say with a burning blush. "*All* loyalty is misplaced, I'm beginning to think, in such cases. Be a dear, sensible fellow, Syd. Send me away from home with this bit of happiness, at least, in my heart—that I may hope to hear of you soon with some pretty, dear girl as your wife, who'll make Dalesmeet a paradise to you, instead of the purgatory it will be when Mrs. Tierney goes."

He laughs—but it is not a hearty laugh, by any means—and tells me I must always think of Dalesmeet while he lives as the house of a bachelor brother who will always gladly welcome me and mine, and of Kismet as the petted tyrant of the Dalesmeet stables. “I’ve got quite fond of the mare. She’s as gentle as you are yourself at times; but occasionally she loses her temper and would hurt me if she could, which you never could do, and never have done—intentionally.”

“It’s a dreadful world,” I say despairingly; and he rouses himself at this into the semblance of cheerfulness and satisfaction with things as they are and as they are going to be, and tries to make me understand that all the painful part of that Brighton episode is blotted out of his memory. Two or three times I am on the brink of telling him the dilemma I am in about the money, and two or three times I check myself successfully. At last I feel that I must make him comprehend that Theo had not been merely making a vain-glorious display of his horsemanship when he met with his accident (as Syd is evidently only too well inclined to think). So I make the disclosure to Syd as creditably as I can, that Theo has a debt of honour, to pay which he risked his life.

If he strove to get the real truth from me gradually, bit by bit, Sydney would never do it. But he is so absolutely impolitic and truthful that I am at a disadvantage immediately.

“What do you know of his debts of honour, Tim?” he asks. “Are they so heavy that he has been compelled to burden Claire and you with the knowledge of them?”

“I only know about one,” I stammer, “and that he can’t prevent my knowing—and it would be mean of me to split about it, Sydney. You know I never did split about anything, did I, Syd? Don’t you tempt me to do it now.”

“I wouldn’t tempt you to do anything that is wrong for the world, my darling,” he mutters; “but—you want help, Tim, and, till I know your trouble, I can’t give you that help. No other man has a better right to offer it

than I have, Tim; I have known you such a long time, dear, and I know you so well."

I am touched by his appeal, but not sufficiently touched by it to relapse into the "confiding fool" mood. If he made half such a point of his love for me as he does of his knowledge of me, I should surrender without discretion, and tell him the tale of my weakness and my woe. But he keeps his head in a way that compels me to keep mine. I do not dread verbal reproof or lecture from my dear brother-lover, but I do dread the outburst of honest indignation which will sparkle from his eyes, and flash from his true face, when he learns that I have been false to my nature and my father at the bidding of Theo Bligh.

"You are so good," I murmur, and he shrugs his shoulders at the epithet—the best man in the world would revolt at being called "good" when he is only loving—but I disregard this fact, and proceed to expound my unformed views to him. "You are so good. You don't know what it is to be tempted by vanity or any other little passion, Syd. Theo has snares laid for him on every side ——"

I pause, and he nods his head and says, "I grant it." He won't even disparage the lures which are placed in the path of his magnificent rival.

I feel myself to be counsel in a bad cause, but my overpowering admiration for Theo drives me on. I am committed to myself to admire and uphold him now, and in spite of all my fears about him, and all my distrust of him, I dare not draw back now. My idol is shaken on his pedestal, but, like a woman, I try to prop him up still.

"You see," I say eagerly, "even you, a man who doesn't like him too well, cede him the right to be a forgiven sinner from the commencement. He is unstable as water, he is easily led astray, he is just the kind of man that every sensible person would eschew and denounce; but I'm only a woman and a fool, Syd, and I would ——"

I falter, and bend my face down into my kindly shrouding hands ; and Syd asks—

“You would do what, dear ?”

“Die for him, if that would do him any good—or save Claire,” I add spasmodically, as my beautiful sister comes into the room with papa, with a white, angry face and a manner that is composed too carefully.

I spring to her at once, and ask her—

“Is he better ?” and she flings off furred jacket and hat before she answers—

“Address your inquiries to Lady Torrens, Tim ; I can tell you nothing, absolutely nothing ! Syd, dear old boy, it *is* a pleasure to find you here !”





CHAPTER XXIV.

SYDNEY IS WEAK.

DAYS pass without any outer change in the round of our daily life at Ravensbourne. Some official circumlocution keeps Mr. Murray "hanging on," as he calls it, in town, and again our marriage is indefinitely postponed. Our marriage! I often catch myself looking at my reflection in the glass and wondering why I haven't altered more than I have, under the influence of the idea of it. I do look such a mere girl still to be the wife of such a man as Mr. Murray. When my hair breaks loose, and hangs about me in copper-coloured festoons, I am, as Theo Bligh says, "much more like an unbroken chestnut colt than a consul's wife." Perhaps it is the consideration that I shall have a little more time to study, and master a few more matronly graces, which causes me to heave a sigh of relief when I hear that "our marriage" is deferred indefinitely. Perhaps it is for this reason, but I more than suspect myself of rejoicing chiefly because I am left within reach of daily tidings of Theo Bligh.

He stays on at the Swiss cottage, under the care of Sir Harold and Lady Torrens, and for a while his progress is very slow. What torments of concealed agony and anxiety I go through during these days! Claire is justified in looking pale and harassed—her lover is at death's door, and she is not with him. But I am only expected to

exhibit a tender, outspoken, sisterly sympathy; and as I can't exhibit this without betraying my real feelings, I stultify myself altogether, and am accused by the twins of being so selfishly absorbed in my own affairs that I take no interest in "poor dear Theo."

Claire is not with him. Even now, when he is in actual danger, when Aunt Helen, in her newborn helplessness, lies weeping hopelessly about him all day long, when papa removes his veto and offers to take Claire over to Lady Torrens, Claire is not with him. "He is well taken care of, I'm sure of that," she says, in reply to papa's offer, "and too many authorities in a sick room are apt to complicate matters: while Lady Torrens watches over him he does not need me—I doubt if he misses me."

It is in vain that I remonstrate with her, in vain that I plead as passionately for her to consider her own happiness and his as if I were pleading for myself. It is in vain that I beseech her to put Lady Torrens out of the question altogether. Claire is firm—obstinate in her resolve not to go near Theo while Lady Torrens remains at the Swiss cottage. "It may be natural that she, as his hostess, should stay to take care of a guest who has been half killed by her husband's horrible horse, and who is lying ill in her house, but it's not nice," Claire says; and I can only answer her that "it is natural."

At length there comes a letter from Lady Torrens to Claire that ought to charm her over to Theo's side at once. "Mr. Bligh has recovered consciousness for the first time this morning—ten minutes ago only. His first words were—'Where's Claire?' Come to him without delay, for he is impatient to see you, and any outbreak of impatience may retard his recovery," Lady Torrens writes. And Claire throws the letter down, and repeats her resolve not to go to the Swiss cottage while Lady Torrens stays.

"What will papa think—what will Theo think—what will Lady Torrens think herself!" I urge.

"I am perfectly indifferent as to what they think," Claire

retorts. "I dislike her so that any show of kindness from her would be odious to me, and any show of gratitude to her would madden me. Aunt Helen ought to exert herself, and go and take Lady Torrens' place. My belief is that Aunt Helen is as well as I am now, but that she has a motive in almost thrusting Theo upon Lady Torrens' care and kindness. She has a motive, and I am to be sacrificed to it."

"If he were my Theo, no one but himself would separate me from him," I say.

"And Lady Torrens would very soon teach him how to do it," Claire cries out. "You would act very differently to me, I know that; you'd make friends with Lady Torrens and rely on her honour, and one fine day you would find that you had relied on a broken reed. At least, I'll not gather up the dust and hand to her which she is trying to throw in my eyes. Nor will I wear the willow for Theo. There are other men in the world who would give their lives to gain the love that Theo doesn't take too much trouble to keep."

This is the first intimation I have that Claire is capable of carrying her resentment to what I regard as the extreme length of even contemplating the possibility of tolerating any other man's love. I am shocked and surprised at the revelation, but I am more shocked and surprised when, presently, I see that she is drawing on Sydney Dale to be one of the men who would give their lives for that love of hers which Theo Bligh has kept such a slack grasp of recently.

Claire has a genius for winning, and I fear that Sydney, in his unsuspection, will be readily won. It has been a matter of wonderment to me, ever since Sydney let slip that half confession of his liking for me at Brighton, that he should have broken down the fraternal barrier which custom had erected for my sake instead of for Claire's. But now that Claire is engaged with his knowledge, and while the man to whom she is engaged is *hors de combat*, it is more than a matter of wonderment to me that he should be so un-Sydney-like as to allow

her to lure him on to even seem to forget Theo and Theo's claims on her for a moment.

I must confess that though she is not justified in her efforts to beguile the time while Theo is absent and ill, in the way she is doing, that she is justified in her doubt as to the genuineness of Aunt Helen's suffering, and the integrity of Aunt Helen's conduct. Aunt Helen is keenly anxious about something, but she is no longer ill. She makes a great parade of getting up from her sick bed one morning, and being driven over to the Swiss cottage swathed in furs to see Theo; but the sharpened visions of Claire and myself see that no suffering is involved in the matter, and that it has cost her neither pain nor fatigue to make the effort. For some reason or other, Aunt Helen is practising a deception upon us. For some reason or other, though her affection for him prompts her to go to Theo, some other feeling in connection with him induces her to feign and plead physical inability to relieve Lady Torrens of the charge which has been laid upon her.

These are doleful days for me. My future is hazy; my intercourse with Claire is embittered by the sarcastic tone in which she speaks of Theo, though I know at the same time that she longs to be with him, longs to show him some of the love she feels, and make him respond to it; and, lastly, Sydney Dale is becoming estranged from and altered towards me. When we three—Claire, Syd, and I—ride out together now, it is by her side he keeps the whole time. Or if he does leave it for a minute, a pretty, half-imperious, half-coquettish gesture and smile from her takes him to his station, flushed, happy, and yet half ashamed of himself. My pulses have never been quickened by the slightest pang of love for him, but I did respect him so thoroughly; and now he is showing himself to be even as other men are—weak, vain, and false!

Yes, false! Even I, a girl deficient in a man's sense of honour, know him to be false, when I see him thrilling under Claire's glances, and remember that Theo is lying,

ill and in unconsciousness of all this, at the Swiss cottage.

But through it all I can't get up a feeling of anger against Claire, the beautiful temptress, my own darling sister. " 'Tis want of thought, not want of heart," I tell myself at one time; and, again, at another I apologise for her to myself, by declaring that her love for Theo, and Theo's love for her, places her on so high a pedestal that she does not see the devotees who are worshipping at the base of it. Even as I think this I tell myself that it is a pretty theory, but that the practice is very imperfectly carried out.

So we go on, through the blistering suns and cutting winds of March, until April comes upon us warmly and weepingly (after the manner of weak woman); and still Theo Bligh lingers on, an invalid at the Swiss cottage, and still Aunt Helen is "too ill" to displace Lady Torrens from that situation to which social duty and humanity have alike called her.

Where am I when I hear it? Gathering snowdrops at the foot of the big weeping elm-tree on the lawn. Some one comes out to me and says—

"Oh, Miss, Sir Harold Torrens is dead, and my lady has sent for you and ——"

I hear no more. My gathered snowdrops I send flying to the uttermost ends of the lawn, and I go fleetly into the house, where I meet white-faced Claire.

In my excitement I hurl myself at her, catch her hands and say—

"Come with me, darling. Lady Torrens has sent for me; her husband is dead: she is in trouble."

"In trouble!" Claire repeats contemptuously. "Her trouble is over, Tim; mine is beginning: will you desert me for her?"

"Desert you?" I echo.

"Yes, desert me; it has come to this. 'Who is on my side—who?' Go to Lady Torrens, if you like; but, if you do it, never come back to me."

She is in earnest; she is *really* ungenerous for the first time in her life.

From the very bottom of my heart well out the words, "Poor Lady Torrens!"

"Spare me that, at least," Claire cries out. "Don't pity her for her release from slavery—for her newly acquired power of going into new bondage honourably. Oh, Tim, spare me this! Don't pretend to pity her."

Claire is transfigured for an instant. All the gentleness vanishes from her beauty; all the possible cruelty that has been dormant all her life comes out. My sister looks like a lovely vengeance, as she rears her slight frame up before me, and commands me not to feel or express any pity for Lady Torrens' bereft condition.

In default of anything original, I fall back upon a platitude, and say—

"We ought to go to her, Claire. Just think how unpleasant it will be for her to be left alone at the Swiss cottage now."

Claire almost writhes.

"Don't talk to me about it, Tim," she cries. "She has right, reason, conventionality, hospitality, charity, everything that's good, ranged on her side in justification of *her* course; she is Lady Torrens; she is a married woman; she is his dead friend's wife; she is above suspicion. I know all this, but I hate her the more for holding these winning cards; for she is a rich *free* woman now, and Theo wants money."

She droops and almost falls as she says it—she, the pet of our county side, the girl on whom so much love has been lavished all her life that she has come to regard it merely as a dutiful daily offering.

I am so afraid myself of what he may be tempted to do that I at once deprecate her fear of him.

"Oh, Claire," I say, "Theo is a gentleman." Then I essay a feeble witticism, and add, "Like the sons of Erin—

Though he loves women and gold astore,
Sir knight he loves honour and virtue more."

"I wish you wouldn't follow in his track, and quote appropriate lines," Claire grumbles. "I hate the habit of bringing poetry to bear upon every bit of practice in real life. It may be pretty and soothing at the time, but if the rhythm is good it haunts one, and helps one to idealise all the misery and cruelty, and falsity and baseness ——"

"Claire!" I interrupt.

"Yes! I know him as he is, and would marry him to-morrow and go into abject slavery to him," she cries recklessly. "*You're* clever and bright and sweet, Tim, and your own nature is a grand crucial test by which to try that of other mortals, but you have not taken his measure more accurately than I have. I know him in every phase—his perfidy, his mean ambition, his selfishness, and, above all, his deadly art of charming! Don't I know him well, Tim? Even you can't know him or love him better than I do?"

"I am loving him for your sake; I'm trying to know him through you," I protest. And I do mean what I say, for I would not hold out one velvet paw to my sister, while I scratched her with the other, to save my life.

"Ah, you poor child!" she says contemptuously; "you're a better girl than I am, I suppose; at any rate you're more easily hoodwinked."

I can't tell how it is that the matter is settled, but it does arrange itself in some way or other. Papa takes me over to the Swiss cottage, and I find myself with Lady Torrens, but before I meet her I see Sydney Dale, who has a few words with me.

"Claire ought to be here with you, Tim. Why hasn't she come?" he asks.

"Claire is unsettled," I reply, "and you have helped to unsettle her, Syd."

He looks so guilty, so sorrow-stricken at my accusation, that I repent me on the spot of having made it.

"Claire is as sacred to me as if she were Theo Bligh's

wife," he answers; "but you won't blame me by-and-by, Tim, if he breaks his trust and I tax her faith again, will you?"

He asks me to sanction his love for my sister as eagerly as if he had never proffered it to me! What can I do? My fealty to Theo forbids me to wish Sydney God-speed in his wooing of Claire; nevertheless I can't help feeling how secure and well cared for Claire would be, if she could only forget Theo and take Syd contentedly for better and worse. I trust to intention, and let the words that rise to my lips speak themselves aloud.

"I'll never blame you for anything you do, Syd, for you'll never do anything that a man should be ashamed of doing," I say quietly; and I am rather startled when Syd comes and takes me in his arms, and kisses my forehead, and says—

"You darling Tim! I will try my hardest to retain that good opinion of yours, and to do so I must put myself out of the reach of temptation. I'll not see Claire again until I know what line Theo Bligh will take now."

"Do you think—no, you don't think ——" I begin; and he puts in—

"I think it will depend entirely upon Lady Torrens whether Theo turns traitor to Claire or not. If she's as straight as I think her, she'll have nothing to say to him, but you never know what a woman is till she's tried."

It is true: you never do "know what a woman is till she's tried." I go into Lady Torrens' room, expecting to find her rather sad—death can't touch even an enemy without saddening one—but certainly not expecting to find her as sorry as she is. Her eyes are swollen, her face is white; she is nervously agitated, and seems to pine for kindness and sympathy. Is it possible that she can really have cared for old, uninteresting, horsy, dissolute Sir Harold?

"You're a good child to have come to me in my grief," she says, kissing me. "I am very much alone in the world now he is gone. You don't know—no one knows

—how good he has been to me, and what care he has taken of me. I can never show him any more than I am grateful—that's what hurts me."

"I didn't know you cared anything at all about him," I say brusquely, for an impression begins to pervade my impressionable mind that there may be some truth in what Claire has said, namely that Lady Torrens may be capable of acting a part for the sake of blinding me.

"I didn't care anything about him in the way you mean, my child," she says quietly; "but"—the tears well up into her eyes again as she says this—"I knew that, however far astray my thoughtless nature led me, I had a sure refuge at any moment in him. He was generous, lavishly generous to me, and I should be a worse woman than I am if I didn't feel heavy-hearted to-day at the thought of his being gone from me for ever."

We sit in silence for some few moments after this, for Sir Harold has never been lavishly generous to me, and I can't get up the faintest feeling of gratitude or regret concerning him. Moreover, I feel sure that she is just the kind of woman to have any number of friends at her own sweet will, and so her allusion to her forlorn condition has failed to touch me. Lastly, I remember that Theo Bligh has been tended by her assiduously for the last few weeks, and this remembrance is the parent of a thousand doubts and fears. These are not dispersed when she says, suddenly—

"You have not asked for Mr. Bligh. How strangely your sister is treating him!"

"In what way?" I stammer.

"In not coming to see him; in avoiding my house as if a pestilence prevailed, while her lover is lying here in suffering and danger. Do you think he is obtuse or callous? Do you think I am blind? Your sister is behaving bitterly to him and to herself, and she does it because she hates me."

She looks me full in the face as she makes her assertion, and I can't deny it.



CHAPTER XXV.

“’TIS AN OLD TALE.”



HE makes a band of her handkerchief, covers her eyes with it, and leans back in her chair as she says this, and presently she goes on.

“Tim, I’ll be very candid with you up to a certain point; beyond that you must not press me. When I knew you first, Theo Bligh was an acquaintance of mine of a month’s standing only, but circumstances had thrown us very much together, and he is not the man to abstain from seeking to make a woman he admires admire him in return. He had succeeded so well with me that, if I had not heard from you that he was engaged, I should have arranged it so that he should have left my house and not crossed my path again. But your news was a tower of strength to me: I dared to trust myself with another woman’s lover. I knew that it wasn’t in me to tempt a man whose heart and honour were pledged, by the show of any sign of interest in him. I will only tell you that though all these long weeks I’ve nursed him as if I had been his sister, that I can look your sister fairly in the face, for I did not overrate my power over myself.”

She pauses, and with delight I acknowledge to myself that I am compelled to believe her.

“Claire isn’t often unjust,” I say extenuatingly, “but

she has been unhappy and unsettled, and she has fancied things, I suppose."

"She has had no right, no cause, no foundation whatever for her idle fancies," Lady Torrens answers calmly. "I'm not going to affect to be indignant at her having thought me, a married woman, capable of carrying on a flirtation; I've done it a dozen times very successfully and pleasantly since I've been married, but never with an engaged man. It was not my own bonds, but his, which restrained me. I should like your sister to understand that, or she will be more suspicious of me than ever now that I am free."

"Theo is a trying man to be engaged to, you know," I plead.

"Trying! He's torturing," she says. "Your sister's will not be a happy lot as his wife—though I'll frankly confess that I would marry him myself if he were free. As it is, I'll spare him the temptation my presence would be to him. If he perjures himself, it shall be through no fault of mine. When you leave this house to-day I shall leave it too: the Hall is the proper place for me now, until the new baronet comes to take possession; and the nurse is quite competent to take care of Mr. Bligh."

"Is he quite out of danger?" I ask tremulously.

"Quite," she says decidedly. "He will recover rapidly now, for the nurse has a hoarse voice and is very ugly, and Mr. Bligh would rather exert himself and give himself a little pain than listen to hoarse voices, or look at ugly women. You will probably have him at Ravensbourne in a few days. Wouldn't you like to see him," she asks suddenly. "You ought to take back a first-hand account of him to your sister."

I feel that I grow guiltily glad at the thought of seeing him again. I try to say nay to her proposition, but "he is going to be my brother," I remind myself, and so I say—

"Yes; he may have a message for Claire."

She rings for the nurse, and that authority gives me leave to see her patient, on condition that I don't stay

too long, that I don't let him talk too much, and that, in fact, I put myself entirely under her supervision. I give the requisite promises, and follow her into a little morning-room on the ground floor, which opens into the verandah. The day is mild, the window is open, and the scent of violets is wafted in on the light breeze that just lifts the rings of hair that are lying loosely on Theo's brow.

He is stretched out on a sofa, looking, in spite of his pallor, as gay and bright and handsome as it is his normal condition to look ; but his bandaged arm, and a cut which extends from his left eyebrow up to the rings of curls, where it loses itself, reminds me that he has gone through a great deal of suffering since last we met.

He sends the book he is reading skimming across the room as he catches sight of me, and holds his hand out to me warmly, and greets me with vivacious words and smiles.

"Dear little Tim, I'm glad to see you again before the ring is on your hand, and the veil is on your brow. I say, old Murray seems to be taking it very easy, doesn't he? Just shove this pillow straight for me, and sit down."

I straighten his pillow with hands that tremble, and he watches the trembling with laughing eyes. Neither his accident, his estrangement from Claire, nor Sir Harold's death, have depressed him in the least. He is exactly the same brilliant, careless boy who chased me from the dining-room window to the side entrance on that summer morning when I saw him first.

"I came over to see poor Lady Torrens, and she asked me if I would like to see you. I don't disturb you, do I, Theo?" I ask timidly, for somehow or other we don't seem to be on the same terms of easy intimacy that we were on before he rode Grey Dolphin to his downfall.

"Disturb me! Not a bit of it. I have seen nothing but that hideous old devil's face for the last three days. I thought when there was nothing more to be done for

ner departed lord, that Lady Torrens would have remembered that a wounded knight was boring himself to death under her hospitable roof, but she hasn't been near me yet, and I'm awfully glad to be disturbed by you.”

It is not the most complimentary way in the world of greeting me, but it has never been Theo's wont to waste many compliments on me, unless he wants some substantial and immediate return for them. But I am in such abject bondage to my desperate regard for him, that I gladly gather up the smallest crumbs of civility from him, and look upon them as more succulent morsels than can ever fall from another man's lips.

“We have been so anxious and wretched about you all this time, Theo,” I say, seating myself on the chair by his pillow.

“Of course you have,” he responds; “I've been anxious and wretched about myself too, I can tell you. It's no joke for a fellow to smash his bridle hand and arm as I did; besides, as I have been lying here, I've had time to think what an awful fool I've been in the course of my life ——”

“And to make up your mind never to be one again,” I suggest.

“Good resolutions are not much in my way, but I have made one or two lately, Tim. One is about Claire. Wouldn't you like to hear it?”

“Yes,” I reply, but I wince with the pain of the dread I have that I am destined to carry home evil tidings to Claire.

“It's this, Tim. I'm as idle a dog as ever lived—I know that—and the habit of indulging myself in doing nothing good is growing upon me. I've made up my mind to give Claire up, and leave her free to make a better match with a better man. I'm not going to be selfish about her, at least, any longer.”

“Give her up?” I stammer.

“Yes. Just put your chair where I can see you without twisting my neck to look at you. It will be an awful

wrench for me, I can tell you ; but I can't flatter myself that Claire will care very much about it. Judging from the perfect indifference she has shown for me lately, and from the preference she's exhibiting for Mr. Sydney Dale, I should say she will receive her order of release with a good deal of satisfaction."

He gives out his heartless decree with so much easy grace, he looks so superbly handsome lounging there, with his head resting on his sound arm, that I realise with all the greater intensity that it will be to rob Claire's life of all its brightness if he does carry out this resolution of his, which he has the heartlessness and audacity to speak of as a good one.

"Well, what do you say, Tim?" he asks impatiently. "Are you dumb? Of all things, I object to my remarks being received with a stony stare and stolid silence. What are you going to say?"

"Claire loves you, Theo," I say, with a sob ; "I think it would kill her if you do as you say you will."

"Nonsense! that kind of business isn't done by girls of this generation," he says, with his gay smile. "Mine is by far the most unpleasant part of the affair, as you'll perceive if you only think about it for a moment. I shall have to go to your father with a confession of my utter incapability of making an income sufficient to support a wife upon ; and I know your father well enough to feel pretty sure that he will say something neat and incisive by way of reply, which will rankle in my mind for some little time."

"And that will be your sole suffering, your only punishment!" I cry angrily. "Oh, Theo, you can't mean to be so cruel? It's surely not in the heart of a man who *looks* as you do to be so callous, so cold, so horribly cruel to a girl like Claire? She does love you so!"

He moves uneasily, and his eyes refuse to meet mine ; but there is neither hesitation nor embarrassment in the tone in which he says—

"I tell you I shall act as a man of honour ought to act"—he speaks as loftily as if he were determining to

do some decent deed—"and Claire will be the first to do justice to my motives and pronounce them right. As for you, Tim"—he puts his hand on my arm, and draws me nearer to him—"I know you better than you do yourself. The flame of *your* wrath against me will soon die out. Why, you couldn't hate me!"

No; he is quite right, I can't hate him, though I know perfectly well that his conduct is hateful and despicable to the last degree. His personal influence is still so strong over me, that I not only can't hate him, but, if it were not for Claire, I would lay my offering of love at his feet, notwithstanding my conviction that he would take it for one hour and spurn it the next. Surely nature must have been in a most vengeful and splenetic mood, when she gave so gracious an exterior to such a graceless heart and mind as his.

"I've thought it better to say this to you, Tim, before I write to Claire. You can put my real motives before her better than I can word them in a letter; you can make her understand that it's a question of honour with me, and that I do it entirely for her sake."

The lies rise so readily to his lips that, for a moment, I delude myself into the belief that he must believe them himself. The next instant I recover my reason, and answer—

"If I tell her your real motives, I shall have to say harder things of you than will be pleasant for me to speak, or for her to hear. Are you deceiving yourself, Theo, or are you only trying to deceive me, when you speak of your selfish, mercenary cruelty as a point of honour?"

"Mercenary! A new feature in the case," he laughs. "The name of my faults is legion, I admit, but if you'll kindly tell me on what occasions I have developed the miser's spirit, I shall be extremely obliged to you. Good Heavens! why, I've never even entered myself for the race for wealth; on the contrary, I've conducted myself uncommonly like a lily of the field, and been reviled for it. I can neither toil nor spin, but if you will be good

enough to propose any scheme to me by which Claire and I can live in comfort and respectability on nothing a year, I shall be your debtor for ever."

"You were in just the same position, you knew all this, when you engaged yourself to Claire," I say.

Then I check myself. It is not meet that I should plead to any man to keep faith with Claire. My sister's dignity, my family pride, my womanly delicacy all alike protest against my taking such a course. On the other hand, if, for want of a saving word from me, this fickle, unstable nature does veer away altogether, and Claire regrets it lastingly, remorse and self-reproach will claim me for their own through all the days of my life.

He rouses himself from his lounging, easy attitude at last to answer my last rebuking reminder, and I see, with warm pity that is indeed near akin to burning love, that the splendid stalwart form has become worn and wasted. He catches the change of expression in my face at once, and plays upon the feeling that produces it instantly.

"You see now how seedy I am, don't you, Tim dear? I haven't made much of a howl about it, but it's been touch and go with me, I can tell you. You ought not to be hard upon a fellow in my state, when he's struggling to do what is right and honourable at the cost of a good deal of pain to himself."

He catches his breath with difficulty, apparently, as he says the last words, and with a sound that is half laugh, half sob, throws himself back upon the couch; while I, fairly melted now, kneel down quiveringly by his side, and murmur forth entreaties that I may get him something, or call for the nurse, or bathe his forehead, or do something that may relieve this sudden access of pain or weariness.

"It's no use," he says languidly. "Get up, there's a darling. If that old harridan comes in, she'll blow it all over the house and make mischief out of it. You see it's true, I'm not good for much."

All the passionately loved, the well-remembered sweetness and brightness of the smile that has been the

sunshine of my life, and that has scorched me so horribly, glorifies his face as he speaks. The look of langour and weariness has fled; as he reclines there, I don't see that his form is attenuated. Once again he is the brilliant, well-beloved youth of the first happy weeks at Ravensbourne. I shall not be called upon to renounce him to that most hideous of all rivals—Death.

"You're good for a great deal of health and happiness and prosperity, I'm sure of that, Theo," I say hopefully; and as I say it, the nurse comes in, and I have to leave him unwillingly enough, with Claire's fate still in the balance.

Lady Torrens is waiting for me, dressed and ready to start for the Hall, whither the dead Sir Harold has been already carried, to lie in state for the gratification of the morbid curiosity of his tenants and constituents. She lingers for a moment or two under the verandah, questioning me, before we part, as to what has passed between Theo and myself.

"Does he know that I am going?" she asks; and I say—

"I did not tell him so."

"That's just as well; he will be told after I am gone, and I shall be spared an appealing message from him, which might possibly tempt me to break my resolution, and go in and see him again. Have you a good account of him to render up to your sister, Tim?"

I shake my head despondently.

"What! has he gone back? isn't he so well?" with the genuine loving anxiety that can't be feigned.

"He's better in health, he's as bright as ever in mind, but in his heart he's changed to my sister Claire," I say looking at her steadily.

"Changed! Has he let you see the change?"

"Changed so completely that he talks of breaking off his engagement for the *honourable* reason that he can't maintain a wife on nothing a year, and that he won't either toil or spin to make something."

"What a source of unhappiness he is to every one of

us!" she says dejectedly. Then she gives me a rapid kiss, gets into her carriage, and is driven away, leaving me more unhappy, more uncertain, more dubious as to "what is, what is not" than I have ever been before in my life.

I send for my pony-carriage, and while I am waiting for it I stroll towards the open window of the room in which Theo is. He must know my step, for he calls out—

"You *are* coming to me? You're not going away without one good-bye?"

I spring through the open window gladly, in response to the heartfelt tones of the summons, and his face is covered with a fiery blush, as he stammers out—

"You, Tim! I thought I heard you drive off just now?"

"That was Lady Torrens," I say falteringly; for, alas! I not only realise that the heartfelt tones were not meant for me, but I also understand thoroughly for whom they were meant.

Claire meets me at the lodge gates as I go home, and gets into the carriage with me.

"I don't want to hear anything about the widow's tears and woe," she begins; "I don't believe in either. Papa was saying just now that if she's left as every one expects she is, she'll be the richest woman in the county. Don't pretend to believe that she's sorry to be left free to enjoy her wealth, and with wealth to enjoy her freedom."

"For all her wealth and freedom, she went off to the Hall with a very heavy heart," I say.

"Oh, is she gone—coy, careful Lady Torrens? Now, why should she pretend to think it necessary to leave the Swiss cottage simply because Theo Bligh is there? There's something underhand going on, I always find, when people go out of their way to be so conspicuously proper. She wants to let the whole world see how soon Theo Bligh will run after her."

"There would be something conspicuously improper in that," I remark.

"There would be, there will be ; but the impropriety will be on Theo's side, not on hers : she's evidently determined to be without reproach. Did you hear of Theo?"

"I saw him," I say, with a cold shudder, for I dread being cross-examined.

"Did you?"

Glancing askance at her, I see that her eyes dilate and her face blanches, but she is evidently not going to question me. Growing bolder under this conviction, I say—

"Theo thinks you have shown indifference to him, and he has heard of the changed tone that has come over your intercourse with Syd. I think Theo is hurt, Claire."

"And what do you think I am?" she asks, with almost fierce energy. "I am hurt so that a look or word from any one now makes me smart all over ; I've bent so low under the influence of my love for Theo that I feel in the dust, and he won't hold out a finger to lift me up. His cruel, capricious fancy has changed to me ; but, though I feel sure of this, I can't ——"

She pauses, and I whisper—

"What, dear?"

"Do what I feel I ought to do—give him up. Tim, he won't be able to help loving me when he sees me again, will he?"

Her lovely face turns itself eagerly towards me, and looking at it I can but endorse her belief in the efficacy of its charm. But Theo's selfishness is as potent as her loveliness, and—Claire has no money!



CHAPTER XXVI.

“CLAIRE FIRST!”



WE live in a state of direful uncertainty for some little time after this. The worst of it is, that it is uncertainty that we dare not discuss and speculate about among ourselves ; for, disguise the truth from ourselves as we may, there is a great deal of humiliation in it. Sir Harold Torrens has been laid in the tomb of his fathers, and a clergyman cousin has come into the title and entailed property, which latter is utterly insufficient to support the title. Accordingly the Hall is let to the widow, and Lady Torrens still reigns over our part of the county by right of her beauty, grace, and wealth.

There has been a brief correspondence between Claire and Theo, but what the whole purport of it may be no one can tell. She merely tells us that Theo will come to Ravensbourne as soon as his health is sufficiently re-established for him to bear the excitement of meeting us all. Meantime, he is going to leave the Swiss cottage and stay with a friend.

“You’re satisfied about him?” papa asks her when she gives out this information. “You’re sure you wouldn’t like me to go and see him, and find out exactly how he’s progressing, and if he is doing well?”

Papa asks significantly, and Claire's answer is significant too.

"Perfectly satisfied, papa; perfectly convinced that Theo had much better be left to himself for a time."

She so evidently means what she says; she is, I see, so perfectly sure that good will come from the course which she desires may be pursued, that I can't help feeling convinced that Theo must have written some very clever and reassuring lie to her. But I dare not investigate. Whatever he has said has made her comparatively happy for the time, and I am getting very much afraid of looking ahead.

My own position is, to speak plainly, an ignominious one. The *trousseau* has in some marvellous manner been got together, thanks to Claire's taste and ingenuity; even the wedding-cake—an awful mass of indigestion that gives me the preliminary shivering fit of bilious fever as I look at and smell it—has come. The twins, and Claire, and a nice-looking, unimportant, young girl friend of ours, have arranged to dress in a pair of pink and a pair of blue costumes respectively; in short, "bride and bridesmaids wait the groom," and the latter is not forthcoming. The position *is* an ignominious one, but what joy there is to me in the ignominy of it!

Mr. Murray continues to write me long letters, and they still continue to be of the order which may be read aloud and commented upon in family conclave. But they weekly more and more resemble the letters a clever man would write to a clever boy, whose tastes and sympathies were in unison with those of the man, and who was bent upon chalking out a career similar to that which the man had achieved, than they do those an ordinary mortal lover would address to the ordinary mortal woman he desires to wed. But then Mr. Murray is not an ordinary mortal lover; and surely I'm not an ordinary mortal woman, or I shouldn't be so perfectly well satisfied with the utter lack there is of anything like lover-like devotion on his part.

During this period of uncertainty the twins come more

to the fore, in all household and social arrangements and questions, than they have ever done before. Claire and I seem to slide away into an indistinct background, and this not through any undue pushing on the part of Mabel and Magdalen, but just through sheer inability on the part of Claire and myself to hold our own. We two seem to have had our day; and, ah me! how much the bitterness exceeds the brilliancy of it. But the twins, in their hazel-coloured freshness, are ready for any number of dawns and settings; and we—Claire and I—watch them, and are compelled to confess that they are not declaring themselves ready without being well prepared.

“Whatever encounter they go into they’ll never come out worsted, Tim; they’re such sensible young women,” Claire says to me one day, as we watch the twins driving off with Aunt Helen to the first archery meeting of the season. “They will love in the right direction, you’ll see, and they will marry well, and people will be justified in comparing their case with yours and mine, to our disadvantage.”

“Our cases are not ended yet,” I say, and I try to say it hopefully.

“Heaven help us both! no, they’re not,” she says piteously. “Mine will drag on longer than yours, and conclude more miserably, Tim; for you began by expecting nothing from your scheme, and I began by expecting the highest earthly happiness from mine: but everything has changed, everything has faded and grown dim, even Sydney Dale’s liking for me.”

She turns away into the house, shrugging her shoulders, as she goes, in a giving-up, renunciation-of-all-things-pleasant way that touches me into unwise confidence.

“Syd’s liking for you is so strong, Claire, that he dare not see you, for fear of being a traitor to Theo, till he knows whether Theo is going to be true to you or not,” I say with injudicious warmth; and Claire checks her dejected progress indoors, and comes back to me.

"How do you know this?" she asks.

"He told me so himself, the day I went to Lady Torrens—the day I saw Theo. Claire, if I could kill the regard I have for Theo, I would advise you to turn to Syd: he's such a good, true fellow; his love will last."

"His love for you hasn't lasted, apparently," she says dryly. "He told me himself that to marry you has been his hope from hobbledehoyhood; and yet, as soon as I began to wheedle and flatter and humbug him because I was piqued with Theo, he relinquishes his hope, and shows himself a Samson shorn of his locks at once."

"Consider what a Delilah you are," I urge; "have mercy on him."

"He has had none on himself," she says contemptuously. "What a coarse net it was I spread for him! He must have been blind or stupid, indeed, not to have seen that it was woven by jealousy of and rage against Theo; yet he went groping into it, and sat stolidly fettered, pretending to believe that I *meant* the nonsense I spoke and acted; and now that I really should be glad of his company for diversion, he takes a sentimental scruple into his head and keeps out of my way. 'Afraid of proving a traitor to Theo,' indeed! I detest the idea of a man being cautious for me in that way; it's a direct implication that I can't take care of myself."

"He only wants to take care of himself, and to save himself from being hurt further," I say humbly; and Claire changes her mood in a moment.

"Darling Tim," she says, "if he had gone from me to you, as he has from you to me, I shouldn't have had a generous thought, much less a generous word, for him."

Later on this same day, I go out for a ride on the horse that Sydney has given me in exchange for Kismet, with the dogs for my companions. I ride far away through the little-frequented, grass-grown roads and lanes that I have known from my childhood, and try to believe

that the wicked wish that I may not live to see another spring is a natural and good one. I am so full of health and vitality that there is not the faintest probability that the wish will be gratified. But the idea of my marriage is hourly growing more hateful to me, and life holds nothing pleasant for me.

I ride on for hours, regardless of time and distance, until I find myself in a village I have never seen before. It is a large, well-built, clean, thriving-looking village, surrounded by comfortable, prosperous farmhouses and yards. A river spanned by a substantial bridge runs right through the middle of the street, and I pull up on the top of the bridge to rest my horse, and survey the pretty new scene, and let my weary dogs splash and drink in the water underneath.

I sit there staring at the setting sun so long, that when I turn my head at the sound of a horse's hoofs, I am too dazzled to recognise the face or figure of the horseman, but a voice that I know well shouts out hilariously—

“Halloo, Miss Tim! I thought you had gone to other climes long ago?”

There is something so coolly heartless in the expression of this supposition that I am goaded into saying—

“You may be quite sure that you'll hear when I am to start for other climes, Theo. You and I have a little affair to settle before I go, you know.”

“Good heavens! how marriage, or the prospect of marriage even, alters and spoils the nicest girls!” he says, sitting at ease in his saddle and lolling forward on to his horse's neck. “You were the nicest girl, out and out, the nicest girl I ever knew, when I saw you first, and now you've degenerated into a mercenary little woman, full of anxiety as to ways and means.”

“I've degenerated since you knew me first, I know that,” I say, “but not into a mercenary little woman, Theo.” (I pine so to set myself straight in his unworthy estimation that I am quite prepared to enter into an abject explanation and defence of my conduct.)

"Theo, how could you try to hurt me by pretending to think that I could have married and gone away without your knowledge?"

"How could you be so utterly foolish as to believe for a moment that I meant what I said?" he rejoins laughing. "My dear Tim, Murray's matter-of-fact and careful cultivated, pruned, and directed humour is spoiling your intuitive perception of it. I thought that *you* knew perfectly well that *I* knew perfectly well that you would just as soon have gone into the untimely grave at once as have left me without a clue to your whereabouts."

The whole scene swims before me; I feel that I am gasping for my breath and grabbing at my reins, vaguely, weakly, for a moment. Then I steady myself and recover my reason.

"Claire's husband will always have a clue to the whereabouts of Claire's sister. When do you come to us at Ravensbourne? Tell me your plans as we ride home."

"Let's whistle up the dogs," he says cheerfully, taking a little silver call from his pocket and using it effectively; "and when we've got them safely, I will tell you what my prospects and plans are as we ride home together."

"Where are you staying?" I ask eagerly; "not with _____"

"Not with Lady Torrens; set your sweet, jealous, womanly soul at rest about that; I'm at Dalesmeet with Sydney Dale."

"Syd's an angel," I say.

"Not a bit of it. If he were, he would be an exceedingly unpleasant host; as it is, being mortal and well endowed with what conduces greatly to mortals' happiness, he's an exceedingly pleasant host. I've been with him ever since I left the Swiss cottage. Didn't you know it?"

"No. I've been wondering where you were, Theo; I've been longing to see you," I reply truthfully.

"Is there a screw loose between Sydney Dale and you?" he asks, disregarding my complimentary remark.

"Indeed, there's not; Syd and I are incapable of getting wrong with each other for an hour even."

"What keeps him from Ravensbourne, then?" he asks, suspiciously pulling himself up erect in his saddle. "Tell me, Tim, if he's had no split with you, what keeps him from Ravensbourne?"

I am so proud of Syd's honour and integrity, I am so awkward at anything like concealment, I am so in the habit of telling Theo exactly what he wants to know, that I blurt out the truth regardless of consequences.

"He won't come because he likes Claire, and Claire's engaged."

"Poaching on my preserves in his heavy fancy, is he?" Theo says savagely. "Look here, Tim; I'm not jealous, I wouldn't do myself the injustice of being jealous of a fellow like Dale, but Claire must have been awfully careless of her own dignity, as well as of mine, for an oaf like your friend to have forgotten himself so far. It seems to me that, whatever I do after hearing this, Claire will have no cause of complaint."

I have shown him the weakest part of the fortress! I have shown him where to put in the thin edge of the wedge! I have injured the cause I would die to serve—the cause of Claire!

"You've no reason and no right to be angry with him, or annoyed with Claire," I begin protesting eagerly. "She can't help being herself—charming! And he's only a man—how can he help being charmed? You wouldn't behave as he does under the circumstances."

"You're right there," Theo says loftily; "I couldn't behave as he does, Tim. I wouldn't hold out my hand in affected friendship, and open my doors with simulated hospitality, to a man I was attempting to rival. Well, I should pity her taste if she could think of him after me."

"And I should pity your taste if you could think of anyone after her," I say as cheerfully and good-temperedly as I can. "Of course you're neither of you going to flutter any more. I must ride on now. When will you come to Ravensbourne?"

His brow clears gradually as I speak, but there is a little temper audible in the tone in which he answers.

“I haven’t called anywhere since my accident, and I think it’s due to the woman who nursed me like a sister that I pay my first *devoirs* to her.”

I picture to myself that agony of jealousy and doubt through which Claire will have to pass when she hears of his paying this open mark of preference to another woman. There will be no comfort to Claire in my knowledge of the very scant encouragement to be false which he will receive from Lady Torrens. It will be Theo’s will and wishes on the subject which will contain the sting for Claire. Lady Torrens’ disregard of them will be like oil on the flames of Claire’s wrath. That her lover should love another in vain is the refinement of torture to the majority of women. Remembering this, I say—

“No, no, Claire first, Theo! You owe it to yourself to pay this girl, who is going to be your wife, the greatest honour—don’t you?”

“By Jove! little Tim, your devotion to Claire makes you worldly wise and eloquent too,” he says, thawing in his old sudden manner. “I do owe it to Claire. I owe a good deal more to Claire, and to you too, than I shall ever pay; but I promise you, Tim, that I *will* pay that first instalment of my debt to her. If it’s any pleasure to her to see me before I have offered my thanks to Lady Torrens, Claire shall have the pleasure.”

I wisely suffer myself to be satisfied with this. I know Theo so well that I turn away from the subject at once before it becomes tiresome, and the remainder of our ride homewards is all peace and pleasantness. It is twilight when we reach our lodge gates, and I give him a quiet invitation to “come in and see us all” in a simple kind of way that is expressly designed not to startle him. But he seems afraid of facing the family just yet, for he mutters something about “Dale’s waiting dinner” for him, and, with a wave of his hat, he gallops off into the fast growing darkness.

I try to catch Claire as I go into the house, but I fail;

they are just filing into the drawing-room, and Claire has only time to smile at me and say, "Late again, Tim." When I come down I find that I can't introduce the subject of Theo without a good deal of awkwardness, for papa knows nothing of his being in the neighbourhood, and so when I am questioned about my ride, I recount it fully, with the exception of mentioning the companion of the latter half of it. Once or twice I try to break the embarrassing bonds of concealment, but they wind themselves about me more and more tightly with every sentence, and when we go into the drawing-room, I feel my face grow hot and red with the difficulty I experience in telling Claire.

"I've seen Theo," I manage to mutter at last, "and he rode home with me. He's coming to see you as _____"

"Why have you made a mystery of it?" Claire interrupts. "Tim, you aid Theo in these fatal complications."





CHAPTER XXVII.

“IT IS KISMET!”

THE little unfavourable breeze has exhausted itself. Claire has listened to my honourable reasons for not proclaiming before papa that I had met Theo, and discovered that he was domiciled with Sydney Dale. Theo has been to Ravensbourne, and in his own essentially airy and graceful way has got over everybody, and persuaded Claire that he owes a deep debt to Lady Torrens, and that it is his bounden duty to seek that lady at the earliest opportunity; and, additionally, he has actually seriously discussed with papa a scheme for maintaining himself and his future wife (as he calls Claire to her parent) comfortably and honourably. He astounds us all by suddenly avowing that he knows a good deal about farming; that he has studied both cattle and crops practically; and that he means to go in for the post of steward or farming agent on the estate of the new baronet, Sir Ralph Torrens.

“Not know anything about it?” he says gaily, when papa questions his ability for the post. “Just ask Aunt Helen if I didn’t grind away down in Cambridge for two years as farming pupil! It’s the only kind of country life I can lead, as I haven’t an estate of my own; and I think you’ll admit that our finances are scarcely suited to the sort of London life you’d like your daughter to lead. I

shall be able to keep a couple of horses, and hunt, if I get it."

"While you are hunting I shall be rather dull up in that house among the hills," Claire protests; and papa adds—

"And while you're hunting, your work will slip behind you, and the land will go to destruction. You're not fit for it."

"What am I fit for, then?" Theo asks brightly, with consummate ease and grace.

"Nothing that I know of," papa answers bluntly; but he smiles as he says it, for he, like the rest of us, is always on Theo's side in his heart and taste in Theo's presence.

"My own opinion of myself, endorsed by an indisputable authority," Theo laughs. "Where is the avenging bull who always tossed the idle naughty boys in the fiction of my childhood. - It's odd that he and I have never met yet." Then he changes from frivolity to fervour in a moment, and adds, "Your father is right, Claire: I am a ne'er-do-well; think well before you go into double harness with me."

"No one can say that Theo has not given Claire an opportunity of getting out of an ill-advised engagement most honourably," Aunt Helen puts in; and at this Claire blushes, papa evidently broils, and Theo scowls and growls out a request to Aunt Helen to be kind enough to leave the management of his own affairs in his own hands; which request of his, being made in real earnest evidently, and not in jest, restores the peace for a time.

It is soon after this that Mr. Murray writes a cheerful, philosophical, interesting letter to me on the subject of "our future," as he terms it—out of politeness, apparently, for it deals entirely with his own. The Government has not kept its word of promise either to his ear or his heart he tells me without any circumlocution. "Another, and very far from a better man" has got the consulate which had been nominally given to him, and until something else "turns up," Mr. Murray has clearly no intention of taking the irrevocable step, from the moment of taking

which we two ill-matched ones will be yoked together so long as we both do live.

I grasp this information glibly and gladly. There is no mortification or humiliation to me in the fact of having been selected, ordered, and not fetched home yet. I don't want to marry him, and I don't want to be the nine days' wonder of our little set, by reason of breaking my engagement. I am very well contented to remain on the shelf, a thing set apart for an owner who is in no hurry to claim it.

But the passive satisfaction I derive from the first few paragraphs of his letter are considerably dashed by what follows. He does not want to assume the sole responsibility of my well-being yet, but he does want to exhibit his choice, and seek his friends' suffrages for me.

"My sister Janet—Mrs. Macpherson, the widow of my good friend and kinsman Allan Macpherson—has travelled down from her home in the north to see me before I go abroad, and I should like to show her the lassie who is going with me. I would bring Janet on to Ravensbourne if I could leave town, but though she's as good a creature as ever lived, she is never quite her happiest self in the home of a stranger. A staunch sensible woman, she carries her own habits with her wherever she goes, and nothing incidental in the way of other people's customs turns her aside from her path. Besides this drawback to my bringing her to your house, my work chains me to town. But the good and graceful thing for you to do will be to come and stay with my sister (whose invitation I enclose) in her lodgings, on the border of the square where I'm living."

"Thank Heaven he hasn't brought his clan here!" papa remarks, when I make public Mr. Murray's wishes. "A female Murray without the learning, and the culture, and the knowledge of the world possessed by your future lord and master, Tim, would be the destruction of all that's humane in me."

"Surely you won't be reckless enough to go and stay with her; you'll be up the family tree so completely that

you'll never get down again. Tim will come back waving the wild claymore, and piping the pibroch, and talking of 'the Macpherson,' and generally conducting herself in a deplorably Gaelic fashion, if we let her go to the excellent lady who carries her own habits about with her, and disregards other people's customs."

Theo is the speaker. He is back staying with us for a few days, devoting himself to Claire in a more fascinating way than ever, and without a back thought of Lady Torrens in his mind, to all appearances.

"I suppose I ought to go," I say hesitatingly, and I look round at the circle in the vain hope that some one will oppose me, and argue against my sense of right.

"I think, if you wish to please Mr. Murray, you won't neglect an opportunity of making the acquaintance of his sister," Claire says. "She's a widow, and she most likely is well off—a woman ought to be who proclaims that she'll have her own way wherever she goes."

"And as she's 'on his border,' you'd see a good deal of Mr. Murray," Theo puts in. "You've been debarred that pleasure lately."

"Girls always have to go through the ordeal of visiting their lovers' families—haven't they, Magdalen?" Mabel asks.

Then the twins proceed to quote numberless instances of the torments of confusion which have been the portions of various Lauras and Kates and Fannys with whom they imbibed knowledge in their youth.

"Go!" Theo takes an opportunity of whispering to me; and I, taking it into my head that he wishes me to go because he sees that Claire desires to get rid of me for some reason or other, declare aloud my readiness to go to Mrs. Macpherson, if papa sees fit to send me.

Once more papa uses the phrase that he used in his letter of consent to Mr. Murray—"If there is to be a sacrifice, let everything be done decently and in order." Then he takes me apart, and says to me alone, "She may be more sensible than her brother, Tim; she may save you both from making fools of yourselves."

I write and accept the invitation, which is for me to start the day after to-morrow, and remain with her a month; and then I ride over to the Hall to say good-bye to Lady Torrens, who has been living in such strict seclusion since her husband's death, that people are beginning to be very bitter about her not having given them anything to cavil at. I find her looking very happy, very pretty, and not at all bored by the dull daily routine of the life she is leading.

"And how are the engaged people?" she asks, without hesitation, as soon as she has welcomed me. "Is it going on well? is your sister satisfied, happy?"

"She's always happy when he is with her. You can't wonder at *that*, can you?" I urge.

"Well, I don't know; I've been very unhappy when he has been with me sometimes. What do you think of his offering himself to Sir Ralph as steward?"

"It's not quite the position he ought to hold. Isn't it dreadful that Fortune deals so unequally with people? Theo ought to be something grand."

"It's not his fault that he isn't," Lady Torrens says laughing; "he only proposed himself as Sir Ralph's steward, after his proposal to do me the honour of becoming my husband had failed. There is no treachery and no vanity in my telling you this, for *you* will not betray him to Claire, and *I* wish you thoroughly to understand that I quite realise that he only wanted my money."

"You know him well, yet you like him still, don't you?" I ask eagerly.

"I know him well, much better than you do, Tim, yet I wouldn't harm him for the world," she says sadly.

"Harm him! Why I'd die for him," I cry, thrown off my balance of caution in an instant at the mere idea of any human being base enough to contemplate the possibility of injuring him.

"If your life would serve him in the least, I've no doubt he would take it," she says, recovering her light, gay tone with a little effort. "As it is, cherish the

fraternal feeling as much as you like, but cherish your life also ; it will certainly be useful to other people, and it may be useful to him too."

I am so grateful to her for letting my idiotic expression of sentiment escape the scathing censure which she, as a woman of the world, must have ready to apply to it, that I pass on hurriedly to another topic, and leave off mopping and mowing over that dear one of Theo, which always tangles me, and keeps me struggling in its meshes, whenever I venture near it.

"I've come to say good-bye to you for a month," I say ; "I'm going up to town to stay with a sister of Mr. Murray's."

"Good gracious ! why go half-way to meet unpleasantnesses ? And the sisters of the men we marry generally are unpleasant."

"He and she wish me to go. I'm ready to go because I think it right, and papa has no objection to my doing it."

"Tell me, what do you know of her ?"

"He says she's a staunch, sensible woman, who never gets on in other people's houses, because she carries her own habits about with her, and never allows them to be interfered with by other people's customs."

"What a darling she must be ! what a pleasant woman to stay with ! Look here, Tim, I'll be more considerate for you than you have been for yourself ; I'll go up and stay in Green Street, and when you find a change desirable, you shall come to me. What do you say ?"

She exercises such a fascination over me by her pretty grace and her cordial warmth, and by the luxurious refinement which surrounds her like an atmosphere, that her invitation seems to offer me a peep into Paradise. I accept it unconditionally, and we then move a step further, and arrange that I shall go to Mrs. Macpherson for a fortnight only, on the definite understanding that at the end of that fortnight I go on to Lady Torrens's in Green Street.

"I've a nutshell of a house of my own there," she

explains to me when I am leaving—"a little bit of a nest, wherein you can fold your wings and rest in comfort, and—that is all I can promise. I can give you no gaiety, for I can't go into it myself. Do you think you like me well enough to stand solitude with me when the murmur of society will be audible, and you'll feel that being with me debars you from it. Dullness in London is very different to dullness in the country, Tim. Will you risk it?"

"Gladly," I tell her; and then she says—

"I shall only admit one friend to our privacy, Tim. I'll tell you who that is when you come to me."

I am half afraid of her feeling insulted by the question, still I must ask it.

"Not Theo—you don't mean Theo?"

"It is not Theo. I have not the least reason to suppose that he will ever wish to come to my house again; but if he does do so, believe me, it will not be to see me. Tim, there is one pleasure we may indulge in while we're up. I'll take up Wildfire, and get a nice mount for you, and we'll ride. That we can do, even while you're staying with Mrs. Macpherson."

There is a certain jubilant air about all things, I fancy, as I ride home. This project of Lady Torrens' to have me as her guest in town has thrown a halo about my visit to London. In imagination I select the prettiest dresses which have been prepared for my *trousseau*, and resolve to wear them; for my marriage is an uncertain evil which may never come upon me, and staying with Lady Torrens is a certain joy which is to be shortly realised. All my youth comes back with a rush, as I turn out of the Hall grounds at a slinging trot, and then, coming down to my saddle, send my horse along the grass-grown road at a stretching gallop that cuts the air and makes it whistle in my ears. At any rate, on horseback I shall supplement Lady Torrens fairly. I have not her beauty, and out of the saddle I have not her stately grace. But in it!—well, I can hold my own against any woman, I feel triumphantly, as my horse

swerves suddenly right across the road, and then bounds and rears with terror in a manner that obliges me to crouch down to his glossy mane, in order to retain my balance.

It is nothing very alarming or unusual, after all, which has demoralised my nervous horse—only the flicker of a gipsy-camp fire that is blazing away a few yards up a by-lane we are passing at the moment. As I restore my horse's confidence, and put him across the road again, two or three tall, picturesque forms come over to me, and falter forth their low-toned, courteous apologies for having frightened me. Then they tell me that a woman of their tribe is lying there, in one of the tents, ill to death nearly; and in an impulse of sympathy with suffering, I jump down from the saddle, and follow the husband of the woman to a spot where, stretched out on a few wretched shawls and rugs, and insufficiently covered by a meagre piece of canvas propped up upon a few low sticks, the dying gipsy lies.

"Our camp took fire the night before last," the man tells me, as he rises up from bending over the suffering woman, whose appearance knocks all my preconceived notions of Romany women and "gay gitanas" on the head. There is no sweet romance about either her or her surroundings. But there are such sorrowful realities about us that my heart aches at my inability to help them.

Evidences of the truth of his statement as to the fire are painfully abundant. Blackened canvas flutters in the breeze; charred children, half clad and wholly miserable, stand and lie about on every side. The sick woman, through the exertions of the whole of the tribe, has been saved from the scorching flame; but the shock has been too much for her weakened, fevered mind, and she lies here now unconscious of all the misery and woe which brings the tears into my eyes as I look upon it. I have very little money with me, and that I give gladly, together with a promise of food and wine, and linen and ointments, as soon as I can get home to send them. At

least, too, I can send clothes to cover the shivering baby limbs that protrude themselves upon my observation from every point. And even if papa is a little hard on the faults of their race, and refuses to administer all the relief I think needful for them, I can apply to Sydney Dale, and get what I like from him.

I receive poetical blessings in abundance as I pass along between the tents back to the spot where my horse is being held by a brace of black-browed, flashing-eyed boys, who cease from grinning and grimacing as I approach, and assume an aspect of fervour and devotion to the well-being of my horse which is, to say the least of it, uncalled for. I steadily ignore the appearance of several steaming flesh-pots which are suspended from sundry tripods. I decline to sniff in the fumes of savoury compounds which are wafted towards me from every side. The grave, handsome, sad-looking gipsy who has been my guide has declared to me that they are all naked and starving, and my interests are fairly aroused.

Suddenly, when I come within a few yards of my horse, a loud, ringing, familiar neigh falls upon my ears; and, regardless of my guide's hastening on towards my own horse to show me the way in the gathering gloom, I turn aside, and go in the direction whence that neigh proceeds. A group of gipsy men are standing about a tent that is stretched out upon higher sticks than any of the others. For a moment they close in, but I am as fearless before these men, who, being *true bred*, are sure to respect a woman, as I am in the hunting field. I just pass through their ranks, and they all move aside at once, careful even that not so much as a rag of their fluttering garments shall touch me. I stoop my head at the entrance of the tent, and a velvety nose nearly knocks my hat off; and a sprightly stamp, expressive of pleasure at seeing me, and inability to get out, tells me I was right. *It is Kismet!*



CHAPTER XXVIII.

“LOVE IS A DEVIL, TIM.”



Y old favourite, the wicked little mare, shines like a star in the midst of her gloomy surroundings. They are treating her to their best. A bucket full of oats is by her side, a bundle of sweet hay protrudes from an impromptu rope rick, and a beautiful brown berry of a boy stands at her head with a fine white loaf in his hand, from which he feeds her with dainty pieces.

I look round at my guide, the husband of the dying woman for whom all my tenderest sympathies have been evoked, and I am delighted to see that he doesn't look the least ashamed of himself. It makes my task so much the easier. Embarrassment on his part would have embarrassed me, but his well-bred indifference to the fact of being “found out” reassures me.

“You must lead this horse home at once,” I say politely; “the gentleman she belongs to is very fond of her, and he won't like her staying with you any longer.”

“She has only been—staying with us since last night,” the man answers; and no one interferes with me as I proceed to unbuckle the rein of her head-stall from the iron ring to which it is fastened.

“You must lead her back to her stable, please,” I say a little tremulously, for the other gipsies are beginning to

look darkly at me, and my faith in their chivalry receives a trifling shock.

"We led her away from a stall in the stable of the Golden Lion at Halsford," my friend tells me; "it's too far for me to take her back there to-night."

I have got Kismet out of the tent by this time, and her skittishness quickly clears a space for me. As, in her liveliness, she prances round me, letting her heels out with a carelessness and grace that is peculiarly her own, I feel as safe from molestation from any one of that lowering band as if I had a dozen men or a dozen dogs with me. Moreover, the gipsy to whose wife I have shown tenderness, to whose children I have promised clothes, is passively on my side already, I feel, and will be actively so if any of the others interfere with me, or attempt to thwart me in my endeavour to carry out my views of justice and equity as regards Kismet. Rendered brave by this feeling, I gather up my habit, and walk quickly up to my own horse, Kismet following me like a lamb, and the lounging, soft-footed, stealthy band (who remind me of tigers in repose) coming after Kismet at a safe distance from her heels.

I am terribly frightened now, for I remind myself that Kismet is a valuable horse—that "they shall take who have the power, and they shall keep who can"—that they are many and strong, unscrupulous, and only acting according to their lights in stealing horses—and that I am a mere girl, and alone. But I won't show the white feather, and so, with a palpitating heart and a steady voice, I say to the gipsy who has been the one to lead me into this difficulty and danger—

"Give me a hand up, please; lift when I say ready; and then send some one who is safe to lead the mare, and I'll show him the way to Dalesmeet, and see her put back into her stable, and your envoy safe off the place unquestioned."

"The mare belongs to a friend of yours, lady?" he asks.

As he speaks he lifts me into my saddle with a subtle

sweeping movement of his hand that no English groom can catch, and as I settle down I bend forward and hold my hand out to him (for he is a gentleman), and say—

“The mare belonged to me; she was *my* pet; and I gave her to Mr. Dale, from whom you’ve—borrowed her for a few hours. Shall we go now?”

Ay, shall we not with due honour! Every ragged bit of head-gear that adorns every picturesquely ragged head in the camp is doffed to me, as I ride through it with a gipsy lad running in step with Kismet by my side. They will not attempt to dispute my possession of the mare that has been a pet of mine, I feel sure, for I have dared to thwart them single-handed in their own stronghold, and at the same time I have treated them like fellow-creatures. For some reason or other I am thoroughly attuned to sympathy with them, and so, as I reach the mouth of the lane, I turn round and wave a parting salutation to the wild troop, who are thrown out in strong relief by the leaping fire-flames, and I feel almost as if I were leaving friends.

We go along the road to Dalesmeet at a sharp pace. I have offered to walk my horse, but the little fleet gipsy boy has declined my offer, and declared in favour of a fast trot. It costs him no effort, evidently, to slip along by Kismet’s side; for he talks glibly enough as he runs, and tells me, among other things, that he is going to marry the daughter of the woman who is sick, in a few weeks, and that he will beat any man who even looks at her or speaks to her after that, until the offender’s bones shall be bruised under his accursed flesh. And I preach patience and toleration to him, and feel intensely delighted the whole time with the glimpse he is giving me of the wild, lawless, loving, revengeful nature of his race.

I dismiss him at the door of Dalesmeet House as soon as, by a vigorous ring at the bell, he has summoned a servant to my aid; and then Sydney comes to me and listens to my adventure, and pets and caresses his recovered mare as tenderly as if she were a woman. As

he stands with one hand on Kismet's neck, and the other on the off pommel of my saddle, I am struck by the careworn, sad look that seems to have settled upon his face. I bend near to him suddenly, and say—

"Syd, you're ill or unhappy? Which is it? Tell me before I go. I'm going away, the day after to-morrow, for a month."

For answer he says—

"I've kept my promise, you see; I haven't been near her, Tim."

"Is it that? Do you still care for Claire? Oh, Syd! how can you be so weak?"

"Shall I tell you? When you wouldn't have the love I'd cherished for you ever since I was a boy, I felt disappointed and miserable, but not at all bitter. There was no dishonour in my failure; you were just the same as you had been all along; and I could bear the consequences of my mistake, because there had been nothing mean in my making it. I told myself that no other woman should ever win from me what I had given to you, and you had not taken. You were so perfect in my eyes, that I believed it to be an impossibility for any less perfect woman to come between me and my right to think of you still as the one love of my life. And so, when Claire began to lead me on at first, I was so confident in the strength of my good love for you, that I never even thought I was in danger from her, until she broke down the barriers herself, and maddened me by such a show of preference as I should have been more—or less—than man if I had withstood. She did it to pass away the time till Theo Bligh came back to her, but she has ruined my life; for she's made me lose my self-respect, and destroyed my right to think of you as the girl to whom I had been true all my life. It's her face that's always rising before my eyes now, it's her voice that is always ringing in my ears; and all the time I know that she never thinks of me, and never has thought of me, except as a birch rod to bring Theo Bligh into order."

"How cross everything is cut in this world!" I say,

with a vivid recollection of the various wrong directions in which the tendrils of affection of everybody with whom I am concerned are turning.

"It's our own loo-kout, in a great measure, that it is so," Syd says.

"No, no, it isn't," I cry eagerly. "We don't hold the scissors of fate. Do you think, if I had been a free agent, I wouldn't have cut out a different pattern for my own life? Do you think that it's my wish and will to go away from every one I love, to spend the rest of my days in a strange land, among people who'll only think of me as an unpleasant, dissatisfied sort of a woman, who's not fit for the position in which she has been placed. You're luckier than I am, Syd: you have yourself to yourself still."

"And no one need envy me the possession," he sighs out; and though there ought to be something infinitely comical to me in the idea of dear old Sydney sighing under any circumstances, I don't feel inclined to smile at him now. His sorrow and remorse are very genuine things, and I can't help feeling that he is not the one who ought to suffer from these things.

"Look here, little lady," he exclaims, as I sit still gazing at him, and pondering over what he has said and what he has implied; "you must wait a few minutes while I have my horse saddled; I shall ride home with you, and, as we go, you must tell me more about this projected trip to town."

I don't know how it is that, as we ride homewards, we are led on to speak of the many, many times we have traversed these lanes together, or what gloomy forethought it is which leads me to say—

"I shall remember our last ride all the days of my life, Syd."

"Why speak of it as our 'last,' Tim dear?" he says, trying to speak cheerily. "I've told you before, mine will always be the bachelor brother's house to which you and yours will come when you want change of air; for I'm more than ever fixed in my purpose never to marry now."

"How wretched that Claire and I should have been the girls to spoil your life!" I say mournfully; and, little vain as I am, Sydney does not raise my spirits by replying—

"It's not your fault, dear; you've nothing whatever to do with it now. It stings me as much as anything else that I can't regret having lost you, who are so much better worth winning, as I do having lost Claire."

"You can't call it having lost Claire," I protest; "she was never yours to lose."

"Never in reality—she only said she was," he says bitterly. "What a blackguard I am to speak about her!" he continues hastily.

"I believe you would die for her," I say, with that unaccountable longing to probe a wound which is common to the majority.

"That's not much for a man to do, to be ready to lay down his life for the woman he loves. I've done more—I've laid down my honour for her; and we're so thoroughly wrong all round, that at the same time I've thought very hardly and badly of Theo Bligh. You're safely home, dear, now. Good-bye."

He holds his hand out, and an instinct of hospitality makes me say—

"Do come in, Syd; it's too sad never to see you here."

"I can't stand the sight of them yet," he says, shaking his head; "by-and-by I shall be less of a fool. Good-bye, my always true little Tim." He leans forward as he speaks, and kisses me; and then, with the words, "My first kiss and my last, Tim," he rides away and I go in, feeling now that it is too late—that there is a great deal more to love in Sydney Dale than I thought there was in my salad days, when I might have had him.

My family pay me the compliment of being very eager, not to say wildly curious, for information on the subject of the way I have been redeeming the time this afternoon. I see Claire's eyes glitter when I tell them that

Lady Torrens is going up to London, and that she has asked me to be her guest; and Theo lifts his head at the sound, and shoots a laughingly interrogatory glance at me. I can't help giving him a resentful glance, and apparently he gathers from it all he wants to know, for he bobs his head backwards and forwards in a way that signifies "I thought so," and as soon as he can do so unheard by the others, he says to me—

"Did Lady Torrens do me the honour of making any inquiries about me?"

"She asked me how you and Claire were getting on."

"And I hope you told her that you considered our case was progressing very favourably?"

"She would hardly have believed me if I had told her so, after her recent experience of you," I say unwarily.

"She's been boasting, has she?" he says, and his eyes emit sparks of light. "There's not one woman in a thousand who understands the point of honour; there's not one of you that a fellow's safe with, when once you begin to gabble to one another. You're all alike under such circumstances; your fancies lead you into making such statements that no fellow is safe."

He is unmistakably angry, and in his anger he lets himself slip back into uncouth school-boy rudeness. Nevertheless, though the rudeness stings me, and though there is nothing so disillusioning, as a rule, to a woman as anything bordering on incivility from a man, however much she may be infatuated with him, I can't even wonder why I like him myself, or look upon it as at all a thing to be marvelled at, that Lady Torrens and Claire should have surrendered their hearts and happiness to him without discretion. His power lies, I am inclined to think now, in his provoking way of concentrating attention on himself, by means of the warm interest he takes in, and the unceasing satisfaction he feels with, himself. Yet that's not it, either; for if another man were half as vain, half as egotistical, half as

conceitedly at ease with himself, and cheerfully certain that he was gaining universal suffrages, we should all recoil from him as something infinitely little. Up to the present time we none of us have evinced anything like a desire to high-mindedly recoil from Theo. It's no use trying to define what it is. Even as he scolds me roughly, and brings bitter, boyish, untrue accusations against my sex, I know that I like him better than all the rest of the world. It is a fascination so subtle that I am conscious that, if he tried to give me some curing shock, however shattered I might be by it, all that was left of me would go on loving him to the end. What a fool I am! And yet this very fidelity which makes me such a fool, is the quality that is most highly prized in woman!

"You wouldn't have thought that she was boasting, Theo, if you had heard her. She doesn't even wish me to suppose that you cared for her, or pretended to care for her. I declare, I should have thought better of you if it had been love of her, and not love of money, which had made you false to Claire."

He laughs contemptuously.

"That just shows that you want a little fuller instruction than you've had yet in the art of love," he says. "Why, Claire would never forgive my loving another woman, and telling her so; but she would sympathise with my tender passion for filthy lucre. My dear Tim, don't you deceive yourself. I'm no Don Quixote; I don't go out and fight wind-mills, nor do I elevate the girl of every-day life into a heroine of romance. I know perfectly well that Claire has provided for the worst contingency in my case; if our engagement comes to smash, she'll settle down very comfortably at Dalesmeet, and Sydney Dale will be a very tractable husband. No one knows better than Claire how to play the game of consequences; *she* has prepared for the worst, and is ready with a clear statement as to 'why she will marry her own love,' whichever he may be. Why blame me for having tried to be equally provident?"

I would like to defend Claire from this mean charge

of interestedness and low policy which Theo is bringing against her, but the words are ringing in my ears which Sydney Dale used when I told him that Claire had "never been his to lose"—"Never in reality—she only said she was;" and the sound of them robs the line of defence I would like to adopt of all its powers.

Before I commit myself to the care of my future husband's family, Claire breaks the ice, and speaks of Sydney.

"I'm afraid I went too close to the border with Sydney, Tim," she says, in a tone in which I strive to detect a penitential cadence. "He might be generous enough to forgive me, though, for our old friendship's sake. Can't he understand that it was Lady Torrens' manner about Theo that upset my balance? You like her and trust her, I know; but, really, even you must confess that Theo is one in a thousand to have withstood her lures, or that I am one in a thousand to have chained him!"

I can't even feel annoyed at my sister's vanity; I pity her too sincerely for the delusion under which she labours, for I know that at any moment, should it suit him to shatter it, that delusion will be shattered ruthlessly by Theo Bligh.

"You should have spared Syd," I say.

"Spared Syd! Nonsense!" Claire says contemptuously. "Do men ever spare us? Tim, it's a horrible thing to say, but all my experience of what is called 'love' goes to prove that it's war to the knife between the sexes. One of the two *must* be hurt in every encounter of the sort—why should it always be the woman? If Kismet had ever thrown you and dragged you in the dust, wouldn't you have taken it out of the next horse you rode?"

"It would have been mere revenge to have done so."

"It would have been—and revenge is sweet to a woman."

"And revenge is ignoble, too. Why should I profess to feel it when I don't?"

Claire bends her face down on my shoulder, and hugs me to her closely.

"I don't know what revenge may be," she says, "but 'love' is a devil, Tim. It's making me try to corrupt you. If *you* turned traitor to your true nature, I *should* believe that there was 'no light in heaven or earth.'"





CHAPTER XXIX.

AUNT HELEN CAN SUFFER.

Tis my last evening at home, and I am wearing away the time as best I can. It flags terribly, in spite of my most earnest endeavours to make it seem the fleeting thing it is. There is a wistful air about papa, whenever he does bestow any attention upon me, which seems to me to bode something evil, or at least, unpleasant. Aunt Helen is steeped in deeper torpor and lethargy than usual; the twins are preparing to go out and do battle in the most respectable way, at various polo matches, and archery meetings, and race balls; and Claire and Theo don't want me.

Pretty April has given up her place to bright green May but she (April) comes back to us constantly in floods of tears so soft and clear, that the children of her successor bathe in them gladly, and are beautified by the process. Our wilderness is a paradise of flowers now; and so, remembering that I have heard that a few blooms and green leaves are a boon to those who dwell in dark London squares, and high-housed, shady streets, which seem specially designed to build out the few sunbeams Nature vouchsafes to shoot down upon this "right little, light little island," I slip out from the house, and run across the lawn, determined to get everything green

and bright which that wilderness can yield to me, as an offering to Mrs. Macpherson.

I am in a gluttonous mood this evening, and I gather such a bouquet of the great pure white, starlike blossoms of the stichwort, as would fit it to be a suitable offering to a bride. Around this I place a border of the germander speedwell, whose heavenly blue requires something delicately clear to tone it down. I find what I want directly in the dainty wood-sorrel, with its bright trefoil leaves, and its transparent, white-veined, slightly drooping bells. The genuine shamrock of old Ireland! Surely no penalties are so heavy, no pain so severe, as to make us give up "the wearin'" of such green as this?

I don't "think" these sentiments, as I stand here gathering my flowers "eagerly," but still with such loving care that I don't bruise a single petal or stamen. All my thoughts are concentrated on this one object, namely, that of arranging them to the best of my ability, as a propitiatory offering to Mrs. Macpherson. As I kneel down to tear away a piece of waving, succulent-looking moss from a boulder, every other consideration is knocked out of my head by the sight of Aunt Helen surging round the trunk of a tree to meet me.

I get up and shake the dirt off my hands, and feel that either Aunt Helen or myself will go out of this wilderness to-night having got "the worst of it."

"Tim," she begins panting, "I have come to say a few words to you that will be very unpleasant for me to speak, but I think it's well you should hear them; for I want your help, and when I've told you something I'm going to tell you, I think you will give it to me gladly."

She pauses, not for want of words evidently, but for want of breath; and I stand quietly and silently before her, arranging and rearranging my bouquet.

"You've never liked me, Tim—I'm well aware of that," she resumes presently, and her big face flushes at some recollection (perhaps it is of that scene in papa's study, which took place when I was a child)—"and I've never liked you; but I'm going to trust you now as I wouldn't

trust one of the others, for I know you've a good head, and I think you have a good heart."

I'm not a bit carried by the flattery ; it only makes me keenly conscious that Aunt Helen has some great point to gain.

"I know what your feelings are about Theo," she goes on coarsely. "No need to redden about it, child ; a girl can no more help falling in love than she can help growing. I saw from the first of his coming here how it was with you, and if I hadn't fancied that you were the one from whom danger was to be apprehended, I should have seen and put a stop to the nonsense with Claire before it came to an engagement."

"It's too late to talk of that now," I say ; "it has come to an engagement, and it will come to a marriage, in spite of you."

I delight in defying her, and I am quite justified in doing so, I think, on the good and loyal ground of fidelity to Claire.

It costs her an effort to keep her temper under, I can see ; but she achieves the difficult task, and answers me very calmly.

"You are fond of Theo ; what will you say when I tell you that if he marries one of your father's daughters, such disgrace will fall upon him, as he will never be able to throw off—never be able to hold his head up under. Poor boy ! poor dear, innocent, unhappy boy !"

She is crying bitterly, and her tears are genuine. I am touched in spite of my aversion to and distrust of her. She is in earnest now. Whatever the feeling may be that actuates her, of this I am sure—it is a real one.

"Why should disgrace fall upon him, if he marries one of us, more than if he marries any one else ?" I argue.

"Because I am pledged to reveal a secret about him, which I have kept all the boy's life, before he becomes your father's son-in-law ; and when he knows it, your father would break it off if they stood at the altar, and Theo would learn the cause, and would be—and feel—dis-

honoured—and might come to hate me,” she adds, with a shudder of heart-felt pain.

I look into her eyes and strive to read her thoughts, and the secret which concerns Theo ; but she dazzles me with her tears, and bewilders me by shaking her head.

“Why have you come to tell me this?” I ask sulkily.

“Because I know you love Theo well enough to try and serve him,” she answers quickly. “Don’t injure him with Lady Torrens, and don’t thwart me in every attempt I make to break the chain between him and Claire.”

“You’ve always been unjust and unkind to me,” I say, “but you’ve never been absolutely cruel to me till now. How can you ask me to be the one to help you to hurt Claire?”

“What’s Claire to me compared to him?” she cries. “Disgrace will fall upon him, I tell you, if they persist in this engagement. Can you bear that for him? *You*, I thought, at least, loved him unselfishly.”

“So I do,” I say boldly ; “that’s the very reason why I don’t want to see him perjure himself to Claire, and go with false vows of love to Lady Torrens, when he only wants her money. Moreover, Aunt Helen, it’s too late ; Lady Torrens has seen through him, and refused him.”

“Because of his engagement to Claire. If he went to her free, she would tell another story—she couldn’t wring her own heart then by refusing him.”

“Why should he marry Lady Torrens more than Claire?” I ask impatiently. “If something disgraceful about him must come out before he marries Claire, it ought to come out before he marries any other lady. No, Aunt Helen, your appeal to me is useless ; I won’t be tricked into the certain evil of being false to my sister for the sake of doing a very uncertain good to Theo. Keep your secret from me still ; I won’t be your ally.”

“Not when I tell you that Theo is illegitimate, and that if this marriage with Claire is persisted in, he must learn that there is a stain on his birth, and the knowledge will crush him?”

She speaks tremulously, excitedly ; but it is borne in

upon me that she speaks truly, and my hearts sinks low, and my head whirls, as a vision of the agony and shame that will be Theo's portion, should this bitter secret ever be divulged, flashes itself before me. My father's strongest feeling, next to his love of letters, is his honest pride in the purity of his race. He has no sons to carry on his name ; and if his daughters marry men who have no fathers' names to bear, there will indeed be no balm in Gilead for him. I know all this ! I realise it with vivid force. At the same time, Theo himself, the first and last god of my imagination, is still enshrined there, untainted by the terrible accident of his birth.

"The sin of his father and the shame of his mother will crush him when he comes to know of it," Aunt Helen goes on in a voice that is very terrible to me in its newly acquired intensity of purpose and feeling. "Won't you help me to spare him the knowledge, Tim ? Is your love for him so poor and mean that, because he does not love you in return, you'll stab him to the heart with such a poisoned blade as this secret of his birth will be when it's flashed before the eyes of the world."

I writhe in my innermost spirit under the influence of her goading words. That I should be suspected even of a desire to humiliate the man I have loved so desperately ever since I have knowwhat love is, is too cruel, too unjust ; On the other hand, how can I even consent to remain neutral, while Claire's adversaries are trying to undermine her happiness ? I am in a cleft stick : act as I will, I must seem to act badly. I have smarted under the consciousness of being unattractive all my life ; but I never before felt hopelessly awkward, as I do now. In this extremity I do what a woman almost invariably does, when her heart and interests are at war with equity and justice, wisdom and discretion—I endeavour to temporise.

"Supposing we let things drift ?" I say, suggestively. "Why can't we go on just as we are now ? There is no immediate call made upon you to denounce Theo as something too-degraded, through no fault of his own, to papa. Papa may never inquire into his parentage ; and even if

papa does come to know it, he may say like the man who tells the tale of the painter's shame in the American poem—

““Not thine,” I cried, “another's guilt.
I'll break no hearts for silly pride;
So kiss yon weeper if thou wilt,””

“When you indulge in high-flown bursts, and quote poetry, and cease to take a commonplace and sensible view of a commonplace misery, I feel indeed that I have made a mistake in relying upon your aid, Tim,” she says, wagging her large head at me mournfully. “Well, I've done my best to spare Theo. If you had joined me in trying to stave off disgrace from him, disgrace *would* have been staved off; as it is —— My poor boy; my poor boy!”

She buries her face in her hands, and her fat frame is convulsed with sobs. What a twist there must be in my moral vision, that even in this supreme moment of genuine distress, my physical one can't help seeing how bovine she is; and the sight paralyzes all the sympathy I should otherwise feel for her, as a woman who may be compelled to deal a death-blow to one whom she evidently dearly loves. I steel my heart, and ice my accents and say—

“Aunt Helen, all you have said this evening seems to me so artificial and hysterical that I shouldn't be justified in acting upon it at all, even if I were inclined to do so. As it is, I'm not inclined to do so, and I'm happy to say that I'm going out of the reach of the temptation to be a snake in the grass to Claire, under the guise of being a real friend to Theo.”

She looks at me vaguely and vacantly for a moment or two; then a spasm of pain contracts her usually creaseless face, as she says—

“I try to do what is best for him now, but consequences are pitiless. My best efforts will do him so little good, poor boy, unless they're assisted by others,

who have the power but not the will to serve him. It is only fair to tell you, Tim, that Claire will suffer as much as he will when the climax comes. Does that move you?"

"She'll cling to him more closely when he's in trouble and unmerited disgrace," I say vehemently. "Claire won't love him the less when she hears that he is ——"

"A child of shame!" she says sternly. "It's hard for me to say it of him, Tim, but I will say it broadly to you, in the hope that you may be touched to pity for him, that you may be won to help me to try to spare him the hearing of the horrible words. As for Claire clinging to him in his downfall! Ask yourself. Is Claire a girl to bear the sneers of the world? Is Claire a girl to be happy in obscurity with a man who can't even give her a name?"

She asks her questions with scathing force, and I acknowledge that they are unanswerable. In the bottom of my heart there lurks a doubt of Claire's staunchness under circumstances that are not only adverse, but disgraceful. I should deem myself only too well favoured if I were permitted to have the right, and allowed to exercise it openly, of clinging to Theo in the face of the whole world, however degraded he might be socially. But Claire, from her earliest childhood, has had a habit of looking at things from a society point of view. She has a strongly marked aversion to ignominy, and obscurity, and poverty. Perhaps, when she learns that she will have to taste freely of all these in marrying Theo Bligh, her spirit will faint, and her steps will falter away from him, and of her own accord she will leave him free to choose another wife.

For a moment there is a possibility of happiness to me in this thought; then I remember Mr. Murray, and all the little fetters which are being fastened about my feet; and then I can only see possibilities of fresh forms of misery in Theo's freedom, and feel prophetically sure that they will shape themselves.

Aunt Helen says no more, but stumps away through

the wilderness and across the lawn as quickly as she can; and I saunter moodily behind her, all the vitality and hope of brighter days dawning for us crushed out of me by the knowledge I have of this woeful secret about Theo. Illegitimate! illegitimate! The word has an awful sound to me. It is only associated in my mind with some poor village girl's downfall and disgrace. But Theo's mother *must* have been a lady. He being what he is, his mother must have been a lady as gently born and bred and as beautiful as Claire. "How could a mother do such a son so great an injury?" I ask myself indignantly, forgetting, in my wrathful sorrow, that the evil was wrought before. Theo was a grown-up and irresistibly handsome and fascinating man.

I look at him anxiously when I get back into the drawing-room, and I tell myself that Aunt Helen's disclosure is a mere trap to catch me. He is singing to Claire's accompaniment—singing very badly indeed, as far as science and management of his uncultivated voice goes, but with a degree of fervour and taste that makes me prefer him infinitely to Sims Reeves. The song is not one of the idiotic, ephemeral trifles of the day. They are grand words, full of pride and glory, and they are set in a way that is worthy of them.

"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more,"

he is bellowing out as I go in, and I ache with pity for him at the thought of the bitter draught of dishonour that is being prepared for him, and envy Claire her right to cling to and comfort him as only the woman he loves can.

He looks gaily, blithely proud and happy, so infinitely superior to the bluest-blooded men I know, that, as I sit looking at him, I doubt Aunt Helen's veracity more and more. Suddenly my eyes fix themselves on her face, and I doubt her veracity no longer. I never saw such yearning, hopeless, apologetic love expressed in any

living face before. Somewhere on canvas I have seen it, and sympathised with it intensely; but this breathing picture of loving remorse stirs some depths in my nature that have not been fathomed yet. Aunt Helen can suffer on account of a fellow-creature! Aunt Helen can suffer for somebody besides herself!





CHAPTER XXX.

NEW FRIENDS!

FORGIVE Aunt Helen a good many of her sins against me the morning after she has made her sad disclosure to me concerning Theo, for the look of unhappiness on her face has intensified itself into one of stolid despair. I have never realised till now that any one with such a consistently good appetite and lethargic temperament as are the portions of Aunt Helen can be oppressed by any mental pain, or be the repository of such a secret as this which she is guarding. But, for all my pity for her, for all my tender sympathy with the sorrow and the shame she feels at the prospect of sorrow and shame overtaking Theo, it is an infinite relief to me to see that she has no intention of burdening me with any further confidence on the subject. When her eyes do meet mine they are full of sullen resentment, and against the dictates of conscience and common sense I can't help feeling, every now and again, that I am arraying myself with the oppressors against Theo.

Theo himself is in extravagantly high spirits ; and as I am unconscious of the cause of them, and also as they are not displayed for my benefit and amusement, I feel them to be out of place. They jar against my recently acquired knowledge of the gloomy truth about him, and

somehow or other they don't seem to please Claire. I discover the reason of this just before I go. Claire draws me aside and says—

“Has Theo said anything to you about going up to town in a week or two?”

“No. Is he going?” I ask, and I can't help my eyes lightening a little with pleasure at the prospect of seeing him again, sooner than I had anticipated when my sentence of banishment to the hold of the Macpherson was first pronounced.

“Yes. Suddenly this morning he discovers that business will take him up in a week or ten days,” Claire says discontentedly. “It is so miserable! I can't help distrusting Theo's business engagements, and yet if I make any difficulty about it, or even show that I don't like it, he declares that I thwart him in his efforts to make a career for himself, and that I'm a hindrance instead of an incentive to him.”

“That's unjust, but like him too, isn't it?” I say. “He does delight in being encouraged and applauded at every fresh step he takes, doesn't he, Claire? I think you may be sure that he wouldn't go away from you and Ravensbourne for anything but business now.”

“Yes, he would—for pleasure and Lady Torrens,” Claire says bitterly. “I can't blind myself—he's been in a state of almost boisterous elation ever since he heard you were going to stay with her in Green Street. I know what he will do; he will make you his cat's-paw. You will be his excuse for going to her house and being her companion, and you're such a blind bat that she'll win him before your eyes, and you won't see it.”

“I shall not see it, because she won't do it,” I say confidently.

“Nonsense! She's only a woman, and she loves him. Why should she make a sacrifice for me any more than I would for her? What forces she can bring to bear upon him—beauty, money, position, breeding! You see I do her justice. She *will* turn his head. She has knowledge of the world—she has tact. If a Venus

endowed with the wealth of Croesus had entered the lists against me, and there had been the tiniest taint of vulgarity about her, I could have put it before him in a light that would have disgusted him. But she can defy my criticism at all points—I can only hate her.”

“Perhaps he will change his mind before my visit to Mrs. Macpherson is over,” I say reassuringly. I find myself drifting rapidly into the confirmed habit of buoying myself up with the hope that something will turn up to obviate impending unpleasantness.

“At any rate, discourage his visits, and let Lady Torrens see that you disapprove of them,” Claire goes on, disregarding my suggestion, which, I admit to myself, has but little sinew and strength in it. “Think of me, Tim, down here, while he’s disporting up there. I’m getting suspicious and soured, for I love him more than ever; and if I lose him, I shall marry in despair, and go to the dogs as fast as I can. So think well before you fall in quietly with any one’s plans to separate us.”

I give a solemn promise that I will do anything or nothing, as the case may be; and, after the final leave-taking, I go off weighted with so many contradictory pledges to Claire and my conscience that I feel quite old and world-worn, and heartily tired of everything. Theo is the last to say good-bye, and as he comes down the steps to the carriage, he looks so grave, so thoughtful, such a gallant young prince under a cloud, that all feeling for everybody else is merged in one of passionate compassion for him. But he rather shatters this sentiment when he says—

“Shake off the Macpherson’s relict as soon as you can, Tim, for I shall be up very soon, and mine shall be the pleasant task to show you the ‘wonders of our great metropolis.’ We’ll not make spectacles of ourselves by taking the Murray and Macpherson in tow, will we?”

“I shall be more sorry than I can say to see you come near them,” I say coldly. “I should be afraid the whole

time that you would forget what is due to them, and to yourself as a gentleman."

"Ah, well," he says, carelessly leaning in at the carriage window, while Claire watches him anxiously from the hall-door, "perhaps I had better wait to commence my fraternal duties till you're with Lady Torrens. Say you'll be glad to see me then, Tim. Won't you?—won't you, dear?"

He utters the last words in his own peculiar coaxing whisper, seeming to fondle the syllables with his lips as he speaks them. I can't help being thrilled by the thrilling tones. I can't help looking back into the depths of the eyes that, half veiled by their lashes, look so absorbingly into mine. I see a half smile flicker over his face, and I feel that it is one of triumph at the ease with which he can gain a victory over me whenever he pleases. Stung by this I exclaim—

"You can't possibly come to Lady Torrens' house unless she invites you, Theo. I won't be your excuse for coming to see her when she doesn't want you."

He merely laughs in reply, draws back from the carriage, and as I drive off without further let or hindrance, I see him run back to Claire and draw her hand within his arm. How many women can this versatile genius make love to simultaneously, I wonder?

I let romance reign over me during the first portion of my journey; that is to say, I allow my thoughts to dwell wholly on Theo, without snapping them off or rudely crushing them, as I have felt it to be my duty to do lately. But as I near the terminus I feel that I had better banish romance, for I shall have to face the reality of Mr. Murray's presence at the station, where he has promised to meet me.

I am neither astonished or annoyed when I get out at my journey's end and look up and down the platform in vain for Mr. Murray. I understand at once that probably he is talking to some one who listens to him suggestively, answering and interesting himself, and that I have slipped out of his memory for the time being. When he calls me

to mind he will be sorry for the omission, which savours slightly of neglect, and I shall accept his apologies with the toleration and gentleness which is born of perfect indifference and —— What is this?

I am disturbed in my musings by the sudden apparition close in front of me of a little stout woman with a round, rosy face, which seems to grow rounder and rosier as I look at it, under the influence of a smile. For an instant I fancy the smile must be for me, but I am quickly undeceived. It is an unconscious expression of the genial interest she is taking in all things that have life upon the platform, from the first-class passengers down to a crateful of cackling hens, all fuss and feathers, who are nearly maddening me. Finding that she can do nothing to assuage the paroxysms of nervousness from which the fowls are suffering, she ambles after a refractory retriever, who is being lugged along towards the dog-box by an impatient guard; and, as I watch her luring him on with bits of cake, which she produces from the bowels of a plump black satin bag that hangs on her arm, my prophetic soul tells me that this is my future sister-in law, Mrs. Macpherson.

She is dressed in woollen materials that are too warm and heavy for the time of year, and the form of her dress is old-fashioned, but there is nothing *outré* or ridiculously national in her appearance, as I had foolishly led myself to suppose there would be. She is not covered from head to foot with the plaid of her clan; she is the reverse of puritanically severe in her aspect. As she looks rapidly about her—in search of something that she may assist, it seems to me—with bright, intelligent eyes, I feel that the kindness so freely rendered to the cackling hens and the crouching dog will not be withheld from me, however culpable I may have been concerning her brother.

Having coaxed the retriever into a better frame of mind and the dog-van, she comes quickly back to where I am standing, looks at my boxes and me, and says—

"You're the young lady my brother, Robert Murray has asked me to meet? I knew you by your hair when you stepped from the carriage, but I thought I'd wait one while before I spoke to you, to see if you're sorry or angry that he didn't come himself."

She has taken my hand as she speaks, and is giving it a hearty, cordial clasp, that presses my engagement ring into my finger, and counsels me not to attempt to deceive her.

"I'm neither sorry nor angry, and I'm very glad you came instead of him," I say, without hesitation; and she nods her head approvingly at me, though her smile fades.

"Come out now to the coach," she says, leading me along; "we'll have our tell when we get home out of the din and rattle."

So we march off the platform in procession with my boxes, which are delivered up to "my Mrs. Burnie," as Mrs. Macpherson calls a woman who, dressed very much like her mistress, takes them off in a cab, while we follow in a little brougham.

Our progress through the streets is not a rapid one, for Mrs. Macpherson sees everything evil that happens to everybody and everything on every side, and generally insists upon getting out to see if she can do anything to remedy the evil. The fall of an omnibus horse delays us for some time, and we are hardly clear off from the scene of that accident, when she insists upon stepping out of her "coach" again, like a beneficent, fat old fairy, and risking hydrophobia in the attempt to separate a couple of fighting kennel curs. She aids a sobbing woman to draw a drunken husband from a pot-house by the gift of a few silver coins, and she causes contrition to reign in the heart of a frivolous-minded nursemaid, by trotting to restore two lop-sided babies to their perpendicular in a perambulator. I confess to myself that existence might become intolerably spasmodic if passed with one addicted to making these charitable raids; at the same time I recognise fully that such a nature as hers will be a valuable prop and stay to me. She is full of pity, and love, and

tender leniency for her fellow-creatures, and while she serves the sinned against, she is not severe on the sinner.

Her rooms in the house in which she is lodging look to me as if they must be portions of her Scotch home brought over bodily, and fitted in cosily to a grim London house. Every trace of the crude, garish vulgarity of lodging-house furniture is done away with. Soft rugs of wool, lined with white and grey furs, cover the sofas, and Shetland shawls, fine as cobwebs, some scarlet and some white, hang about ready for use from the backs of chairs. A silken-haired, brown-eyed collie, with a big feathered tail tipped with white, lies on a huge deerskin before the fire. A big grey tabby cat, who purrs as loudly as a thrashing machine the moment he catches sight of his mistress, occupies the most comfortable chair in the room; and a blue-faced monkey, perched upon a stand, makes unceasing grimaces that would be grotesquely mirthful, if they were not so intensely melancholy.

"I've brought my own bits of things with me; sit ye down among them," she says, planting me on a chair between the monkey and the cat. "Give her a greeting, Laird," she adds casually to the collie, who rises at once, with a deprecating smile on his sweet, sagacious face, and a conciliatory wag of his big feathered tail. When he lays his head on my hand, and Mrs. Macpherson plies me with short-bread, in order that I may give him wee bits and so cement my intimacy with him at once, I feel so much at home with them all, and so thoroughly at peace, that I begin to regret my promise to Lady Torrens to leave them all for her, and the feverish excitement I shall feel in an atmosphere that may be permeated by Theo at the end of a fortnight.

Mrs. Burnie, my hostess's waiting-woman, comes and takes away my travelling wraps, and a grim old manservant brings us in fragrant and refreshing tea.

"We'll dine at six o'clock, and we'll not wait a minute after the clock strikes for Mr. Robbie," Mrs. Macpherson says, and I don't realise for a few moments

that the affectionate diminutive is applied to Mr. Murray. The thought of him introduces discord into the harmony of my feelings with all around me, and it is with something like petulance that I say—

“Does Mr. Murray often forget to be in time? Does he break his appointments with you, and keep dinner waiting?”

“It’s been his way all his life, and a harmless way enough it is if one’s not put out by it,” she answers. “And now tell me, my dear, what has brought you all this way to stay with an old woman you didn’t know, because she’s his sister, when you care so little about seeing him? Tell now, poor child!”

She calls me “poor child” so softly and genially, that if it were not for the vivid remembrance I have of Claire’s anxiety to see me married and out of the way, I should make a clean breast of it at once. As it is, I defer the hour of explanation, and say—

“He wanted me to come, and I wanted to please him.”

She gives a little unsatisfied shake of the head, as she looks at me searchingly, but there is no displeasure in her face. Presently she says—

“His first wife loved him well, *puir lad*. It’s just a pity that he’s forgotten he’s not the same he was when he married her; he might have made you forget the one who has gone before him with *you* if he had been. As it is, you’ve not forgotten, and ye must tell me. Tell me who ’tis ye remember, and all about it? *Puir child! puir lassie!*”

The Scotch accent grows stronger as she grows more earnest; it appeals to me so strongly, that I believe I should tell her all my trouble, all my doubts, all my foolish fatal fears of being misunderstood, if, by a new exercise of the virtue of punctuality, Mr. Murray himself did not appear to interrupt our *tête-à-tête*.

“The flower I’m going to transplant,” he says, calling his sister’s attention to me as if he had planted, and trained, and cultivated me; and I perceive at once that

he regards his sister's opinion of me as of infinitely more importance than my opinion of his sister.

"See and have your coat brushed for dinner, Robbie," she says. "And when did you have your bit luncheon? And have you taken care of yourself to-day, man?"

Evidently he requires to be taken care of !





CHAPTER XXXI.

“HE’S NOT THE ONE.”

IF I had been married to him a year, or a dozen years, Mr. Murray could not take me more completely for granted than he does. It is just tolerable during dinner, tolerable, though tedious, for he discourses to me about the epicurean tastes and the splendour generally of the old Romans and Greeks. In fact, he talks to me as if I were a youth whom it were his pride and pleasure to instruct; and though I am rather bored, I am just enough to acknowledge that it is I who am to blame, and not he. But, after dinner, middle-aged drowsiness overcomes him as he sits before the fire, and I tingle all over with disgust at the prospect of having to watch his unbecoming slumbers through all the evenings of my future life.

Mrs. Macpherson plants herself on the sofa, with Laird at her feet, and Nannie, the cat, on her lap, and with bright, wakeful eyes watches her brother and me observantly. For a time I feign to be unconscious of her observation, as I lounge back in a chair by the side of the hearth. I concentrate all my attention on Mr. Murray’s half-recumbent form and sleep-obscured face, and question myself as to how I shall endure it when endurance becomes my duty.

I look at him until all recollection of all that is cul-

tivated, refined, and intellectual in the man's soul and mind vanishes from my memory, and I see him and think of him only as he is externally—stout, short, and ungraceful, with every trace of the glory of youth gone from him.

He wakes himself suddenly with a little snort, and opens his eyes and smiles at me, not in an apologetic, but merely in an explanatory way. "After a long day's writing, I like my after-dinner nap," he says, settling himself into a still more comfortable position, and going off into balmy slumber with a sigh of satisfaction that is prolonged into a wheeze.

All the elastic young muscles in my body, all the rapidly circulating blood in my veins, all the youth and love of change and action in my heart, rise up in revolt and protest against being fettered down to the continual contemplation of this physical inactivity. I feel so strong and supple, so eager for change and novelty and excitement, so full of desire to exercise these qualities and inclinations, that the contemplation of his middle age, and the monotony to which his slackened zest for all things will condemn me, rouses me, and I spring from my low seat with an exclamation of aversion on my lips, and an expression of it on my face.

"Come here, lassie," Mrs. Macpherson's quiet voice says; and I go and sit myself down on the soft mat by the side of the sagacious, silken haired collie at her feet.

"We may speak now as if Robert were not in the room," she begins without lowering her voice in the least. "He's a heavy sleeper after his work—and his whisky toddy, *puir Robbie!*"

I wince as I listen to her, but I reply steadily enough—"I can't help 'hushing' in a room where a person's sleeping. I'm not used to it. However hard papa works all day, he's never tired, like this, at night."

She nods her head assentingly.

"It's just one of Robert's bad habits, dear. He's many of them, and no one will tell you of them more frankly than he will—if he thinks of it. Anyway, he'll

let you see them, for he's as open as the day, and never deceived man, woman, nor child, nor one of the dear dumb brutes that have crossed his path, from the day he was born up to this day."

She pauses, and if Mr. Murray did not punctuate the sentence with a half-stifled snore, I should be more touched than I am by the noble and honourable qualities to which she pays such high tribute. As it is, the snore distracts my attention, and I gaze unwillingly at the snorer instead of replying to Mrs. Macpherson.

"His carelessness, now," she goes on good-naturedly. "Robbie can tell you stories by the hour, that will make you die with laughing; but it used to go hard with his wife—poor Helen!—to make amends for it. The money he'll lose out of his pocket, and no one be better for the loss—for he drops it through holes generally—would keep a decent family. We used to say, when he was a boy at home, that we had to follow him about with a needle and thread."

I understand her motive thoroughly. I see that, out of her great pity for me, she is giving herself the pain of putting her brother before me in his most unattractive colours, in order that I may be driven into freeing myself before it is too late. But all the little home counter-plots rise up in my mind and hamper my actions, and prevent my bringing about the grand *dénouement* which would make me a free and a comparatively happy girl again.

"I'm glad of one thing," I say inconsequently, taking in mine the kind, firm, warm hand of the sympathetic old Scotch lady; "I'm glad that anything—no matter what it is—has made me know you."

"See here, child?" she answers, calling my attention to the buxom cat. "I found this when 'twas a kitten, on the hearthstone among the cinders, with a great log just ready to fall out of the fire upon it. The log was a big, beautiful burning log, my dear, but it would have killed the kitten; so I snatched her out, and—Nannie's a happy, contented cat, ye see."

I see ; I understand everything, all she says and all she implies. But she knows nothing of Theo Bligh ! It is altogether outside her knowledge of me that I carry within me a smouldering grief that must consume me sooner or later. Oh, my bright, beautiful love!—who can never be my lover—why has the manager Nature cast me for such a suffering part as this, that I can never forget you, and that your worst faults and follies have a greater interest and charm for me than other men's virtues and merits ? So cries out the sentimental portion of me, as I look at Mr. Murray and contrast him with the man whom I am idolising. Happily, the common-place portion will have its sway also ; and this reminds me that Theo is a being with whom to be identified entirely is a little bit of a failure too, for his braggadocio breaks down occasionally under cross-examination, and then confusion is socially the portion of all those who have believed in him and it.

"Tell me about the home in which you were brought up, and the life you led there," I say ; and Mrs. Macpherson shakes her head, and answers—

"No, no, child ; an old woman's garrulity is harmless enough when it doesn't stop the discussion of weightier matters. *You tell me* a little about your home and friends, and the life *you've* led ; and then I shall be able to tell you a little more of the life I think you ought to lead."

I lean my head back on her lap, and cosset my hand down on Laird's soft, friendly head, and begin to gabble about Ravensbourne, and Claire, and our childhood. I tell her about the old thriftless life we have led between the dear old home rooms, and the wilderness, and the otter-pool and hunting-field : and I warm to my theme as I speak of Sydney Dale and all that he has been to me.

"But he's not the one, my child," she says, when I have finished my story.

"Not the one what ?" I ask, foreshadowing in my mind the answer, although I ask the question in seeming sincerity.

"Not the one you're grieving for ; not the one you

wanted to forget when you thought you'd take my brother; not the one you're remembering so sadly still, puir child!"

"I do remember Syd sadly enough, though," I say, trying to evade the point at which she is driving. "I saw him two nights ago, and he was depressed and melancholy to a degree that depressed me. We ought both of us to have been in high spirits, too, for I had just had an adventure, and rescued a horse of his from a gang of gipsy thieves;" and by way of diversion I proceed to recount the story of the way I carried off Kismet from the aggressors.

She listens patiently to my narration, but it does not cause her to deviate a bit from the straight path she is taking to my real feelings. As soon as I pause, she says—

"I'm sure he is what you say, just a brother to you. The one who has driven you to take up with 'Auld Robin Grey'" (she looks toward her brother as she speaks) "will never take that place with you."

"Yes, he will; not only in fancy, but in reality," I say unguardedly. "He's going to be married to my sister."

"Oh! then he's the feckless lad my brother has told me about, the handsome, graceless fellow who thinks that less well-favoured folk ought to work for him? So your sister took him from you, and though he's not worth having, from what Robbie tells me, still that's not what a sister should have done."

"He was never mine to take," I say, eager to vindicate Claire.

"But he must have made you think he was yours, or you wouldn't have let all your heart go out to him as it has," she says, shaking her head. "We old ones don't always forget the lessons of our youth, child; we don't always forget the lessons of our youth."

I look up at her in amazement. Her dear old round, rosy face is stained and blurred with tears. She has suffered as I am suffering now, and though the days of

her youth are long past, though she has been wedded wife and is now faithful widow to the Macpherson, "still the memory rankles" of that love-lit, long-lost time, the thought of which teaches her to sympathise with miserable, bewitched me. Shall I smart under memory's lash as keenly as she does, I wonder, when I am as old as she is; or will age and fate have kindly deadened my faculties of feeling by that time, and nearly effaced the strongly marked lines and vivid colours in which Theo is now limned forth before my mind's eye?


I ponder over this problem so long that, when I at length wrest my consideration away from it, Mrs. Macpherson is once more the cheery, bright woman who met me on the platform, and Mr. Murray is shaking himself free from soporific fetters, and declaring that it's eleven o'clock, and time for him to tear himself away from the rejuvenating influence of my society!





CHAPTER XXXII.

A FEMININE FOOL.

66 E must give the child as much pleasure as we can; we can't expect her to be contented with the quiet, jog-trot round that is enough for us old people," Mrs. Macpherson says to her brother, when he drops in to luncheon the day after my arrival, and asks, "What we're going to do?"

"I shall be free after five this evening," he says; "we might take her to the theatre, Janet."

He makes his suggestion rather timidly, but Mrs. Macpherson does not utterly scout it, as he evidently expected her to do. On the contrary, she treats it with so much consideration that I am wearied out of all patience by the verbose discussions which she and her brother engage in concerning the relative merits of every theatre in London.

The treat is projected for my amusement solely, and I am grateful for the intention, but I would rather be left quietly at home to suffer the most excruciating dulness, than have to listen to Mrs. Macpherson's fears and doubts as to the propriety of every piece that is proposed, and the purity of every person who takes part in it. She knows less about all matters theatrical than Laird does, and Mr. Murray knows less still. But he has Shakespeare

at his fingers' ends, and rolls out passages of great beauty and length, at intervals, while the debate is going on. I feel that, in their society, I shall probably cry at a comedy and laugh at a tragedy, and so I am rather pleased than otherwise when it is decided that, until she can possess herself of some more authentic information on the subject, she will not take the onus on herself of introducing me to a haunt of frivolity and vice.

Five or six days slip away very quietly, and rather happily, I must confess, in spite of my anomalous position. Mr. Murray says nothing to me, but from the time when I stood like an iceberg before him, as he began to kiss me and say good-bye, he has let me feel that he has relinquished me. My spirits rise under the influence of this conviction, and I find myself growing as glad a girl almost as I was before I knew Theo Bligh.

Almost, but not quite, for the bloom has been brushed off my heart, and the halo that surrounds the head of the man I love is dimmed by the knowledge I have of his unhappy birth, and of the rage and shame that will be his portion should he ever come to know it.

It is the afternoon of the day before I am to go to Lady Torrens, in Green Street. A letter from her has reached me, bidding me be ready to be taken away by her to-morrow at four o'clock, and fond as I am of her, and much as I shall like the sunny, silken life I shall lead with her, I am feeling very sorry to leave my present hostess. Moreover, I am feeling very sorry that I can't evade the explanation which she tells me we three must offer to each other this evening. "My brother sees the folly of what he wanted, and you feel the misery of it, and I know the wickedness of it," she says to me; "and when we've said this fairly to one another, we'll all be happier, Tim."

"How little you thought this would be the end when you asked me to visit you, and treated me as your brother's future wife," I say humbly.

"Nonsense, child! I wouldn't have made myself ridiculous by treating you as anything of the kind; and

it's just the end I prayed God to bring about, when He put it into my heart to ask you here. Robert will say a word or two to-night that will make your conscience free, and show you he's not the foolish man he was when he fancied you were the wife for him."

That habit he has of treating me more like a quick and appreciative boy than a girl whom he has thought of marrying, renders the parting a comparatively easy process.

"Janet has told us—at least, her manner more than her words have shown us—the folly of that dream of mine, Tim," he says to me genially. "You mustn't let the thought of it weigh upon your spirits any more. I shall write to your father and make him understand that the only amends I can make to you for the blind vanity which you were too true a gentlewoman and too sweet-natured a girl to wound as it deserved to be wounded, is to give you back your freedom. And now we'll say no more about it."

A little demon of perversity goads me into saying—

"After all, you give me up very readily."

"We'll say no more about *that* either," he says. "Janet's very fond of you, Tim: you must come back to her when your visit to Lady Torrens is over, and till your sister and that lad Bligh are man and wife, you're better with Janet than you'll be at Ravensbourne."

"Better, perhaps, but not happier."

However, I don't argue the point with my late lover and now, really, highly esteemed friend, who reads the evening papers, and eats his dinner afterwards, precisely as if nothing had happened. I don't feel in the least as if I have had a blight or a disappointment. I can hardly imagine that I am that most pitiable of all social misfortunes—the victim of a broken engagement. I enjoy my dinner too, and drink the wine and eat the olives which Mr. Murray specially commends to me. And now that it is no longer in the order of things that I am to have a great deal of them, I begin to feel that I shall

miss his society, and his sympathy, and his conversation in a way that will forbid me ever to forget him. He has had the good taste to make himself desirable, by rendering himself unattainable. The same feeling of vague regret assailed me when first I achieved the long-coveted dignity of "long dresses," and was debarred by them, and the consciousness of all they implied, from riding bare-backed ponies, "fielding" for Sydney Dale, and running the unbecoming but innocent career of a tom-boy generally.

About eight o'clock a card is brought in and handed to Mrs. Macpherson, who looks at it first through her spectacles, and then over them, and then under them for several moments without speaking. Finally she hands the card to me, with the words, "What brings the young man here at this hour of the night?" and I see with very mixed feelings that it is inscribed with the name of Theo Bligh. My first fear is that Mrs. Macpherson, having fathomed my feelings for him, may refuse to admit him; my second, that he may have brought me bad news from home.

"Let him come in," I cry eagerly. "It must be something important to make him call on a stranger at this hour. Do let him come in."

In my impatience I move nearer to the door, and Mrs. Macpherson looks at me rebukingly for the first time.

"The young man can come up the stairs without your aid, my dear—if indeed Robert thinks he had better come up at all. He may stay on and spoil your nap, since he's been inconsiderate enough to come at all," she adds kindly to her brother; while I stand by absolutely quivering with the keen desire I have to look upon the bright, beautiful face, and hear the light, heartless voice, of the man I love.

"We'll make him welcome for the sake of Claire," Mr. Murray says mercifully, and I dart a grateful glance at him; and in another minute Theo is in our midst.

His opening speech carries Mrs. Macpherson, as of course he intends it to do; and dearly as I love him, I feel sure that he has some motive besides the desire to see me in coming here. What the other motive may be I don't discover yet, but I distrust it unhesitatingly.

"It required a strong effort of assurance to bring me here to-night," he begins, with an air of deferential courtesy that is a new bit of "business" to me, and that evidently impresses Mrs. Macpherson very favourably. "Inclination led me here, conventionality counselled me to keep away, and despairing loneliness nearly drove me to a fancy dress ball."

"You did well in following inclination for once," Mrs. Macpherson tells him heartily. And then Theo proceeds to paint a pathetic picture of the aching void which life is to a young man of virtuous tendencies, and a thoughtful but still gregarious turn of mind, when condemned to the barren solitude of lodgings.

"To be sure, you will say there are plenty of theatres and billiard-rooms and clubs, to say nothing of other places, open to young fellows like me," he pleads. "But I've been given a taste for something better than these down at Ravensbourne, haven't I, Tim?" he asks suddenly, in an affectionate tone, turning to me.

And I, forgetting how little real stuff there is in the matter, am so entirely carried by his manner for the moment, that I say, "Yes, Theo," effusively, and feel myself to be a fool for saying it.

"Let the lad feel that he's having a warm welcome home every time he comes here, Janet," Mr. Murray says to his sister before he departs this night. "We must try to keep him straight for *her* sake, for she's rarely fond of her sister Claire."

"You're so wise and so good at keeping every man but yourself straight, Robbie," his sister answers tenderly. "It's all your unselfishness, I know well, man. If you haven't a sorrow of your own to drown, you'll try to drown a fellow-creature's."

“Don’t give us a sermon, Janet,” her brother replies, with equal good-nature, “but just order up the lemons; it’s the time for whisky toddy.”

“It’s like Robbie, to forget that there’s anything stronger and wickeder than the lemons in toddy,” Mrs. Macpherson whispers to me, as she rings to order in the fierce, smoky liquid, whose fumes presently fill the room and mount to Theo’s brain.

I hardly recognise him as he becomes momentarily more and more truthful under the influence of the most subtle—the *only* subtle—Gaelic foe we have. He seems to me to be so real and earnest, as he bemoans himself to Mrs. Macpherson, that I can’t help believing for a few infatuated minutes that he has a great future before him, if only he will put his shoulder to the wheel. That Mrs. Macpherson, with all her Scotch shrewdness, is of my opinion also is patent to me before this evening closes.

“The old lady will bleed freely,” is Theo’s whispered, laughing, farewell speech to me to-night.

Mrs. Macpherson’s sweet, sober, sympathetic utterance is—“All that money can do to make the lad worthy of your sister shall be done, dear. If I could give a daughter to him, I’d be a happy woman this day.”

Not even the widow’s sombre dress can do away with the intensely warm and sunny brightness of Lady Torrens. She sparkles up to the door in a little victoria, and as her eyes gleam, and her face flushes with pleasure at sight of me, she looks so bewitchingly womanly and attractive, that for Claire’s sake I am glad that Theo is not here to see her.

“I feared I should have a fight before I got you out of the fastness,” she says, as we drive off, leaving Mr. Murray bowing, hat in hand, on the pavement. “Why didn’t you endorse my invitation to Mr. Murray, Tim? He was waiting for his little lady-love to tell him she too would be glad to see him.”

“I’m not that any longer,” I say.

“Not what any longer—not glad to see him, or not his little lady-love? My dear Tim, don’t be foolish! I had my young lovers too, Tim, in the days when I was free and pretty with the prettiness of freshness and youth, but I married a much older man than Mr. Murray, and I was happy; for I was safe and cared for, prized and *loved*. It’s the safer plan, dear—marry the lover, not the loved. No woman is a queen to the man *she* crowns; we are always ‘beggar-maids’ to the monarchs whom we ourselves elect to reign over us.”

“It’s all come to an end between Mr. Murray and myself,” I say, with girlish pomposity; and she draws the whole story from me, and hears that Theo is to the fore again.

“How specious he is,” she says, shaking her head, as I tell her of the way in which he has traded on his loneliness, and created an interest for himself in Mrs. Macpherson’s essentially humane nature. “I wish now that I had gone in and been introduced to your Highland dame; I should have known then to what extent she is likely to become immeshed in his net. That speech about giving him a daughter gladly, if she had one, is suspicious. One never knows what these matured ladies, who begin by playing the maternal part, will be at—and Theo will sell his soul for money.”

“She’s much too old and too good ——” I am beginning, but she checks.

“Hush! Don’t word anything you may fear or disbelieve, but trust me. A woman is never too old to make a fool of herself, and very rarely ‘too good’ to be driven into a dubious course by a man in whom she has faith. She must be a rabid philanthropist to lay her fortune at his feet the first time she sees him.”

“How you exaggerate,” I protest. “It’s her nature to be kind to everything that’s in want of kindness. She would settle an annuity on a decayed cat, and ——”

“Offer a premium for the vice and idleness of a well-

bred, good-looking puppy," Lady Torrens says. "My dear Tim, I'm not harsh generally in my judgment of my own sex, am I? but, according to your own showing, Mrs. Macpherson is a fair specimen of the feminine fool."

"The only side of her that I've shown to you is her liking for Theo," I can't help saying.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

“YOU ARE A GOOSE, TIM.”



WEEK slips away rapidly in Lady Torrens' society, and at the expiration of it I am able to report conscientiously to Claire that Theo has not been running into temptation, by seeking to effect an entrance into her ladyship's presence. We ride in the Row every morning, and though a hundred hats are raised to Lady Torrens, not one of them covers the head of Theo Bligh. We drive every afternoon, and still he is not one of the herd of acquaintances who crowd about my bewitching hostess. Whatever he may be doing, it is clear that he is not wasting his time by frequenting haunts of fashion. I hope fervently, and try to believe, that he is at work in earnest at last; and this thought consoles me for his absence, and enables me to be patient, though the burden laid upon me of never even hearing of him, is almost greater than I can bear.

Meantime I have received the warmest congratulations from my father on Mr. Murray and myself having recovered our senses; and from Sydney Dale I hear that Claire is annoyed about my engagement being broken off, and unhappy about Theo, who rarely writes to her, and leaves her in utter ignorance of his plans and pursuits. Altogether, severely as I struggle to

retain a remnant of faith in Theo's honour, his conduct to Claire, and Sydney's comments upon it, compel me to condemn him entirely, and distrust his fidelity to everything but his own selfish ends.

"I mustn't let Mrs. Macpherson think that I'm forgetting her; I'll go and see her this morning, while you're riding," I say to Lady Torrens, as we meet in her boudoir for our morning coffee.

"And you mustn't let Mr. Murray think that you're ungrateful for his having released you so sagaciously," she answers.

"Ungrateful! Far from that; my gratitude, my admiration, my friendship, my sympathy—they are all his."

"And he would give them all for your love, you funny little thing," she says meditatively; "and you give your love to Theo, though you've no feeling of gratitude, or friendship, or sympathy for him, I hope. How one-sided and badly designed everything is!"

"Don't say I've no friendship for him," I protest. "I'd make any sacrifice I could that would secure his happiness. If I had a fortune I'd make it over to Claire, that she might marry him. Isn't *that* friendship for him?"

"It's transcendental imbecility," Lady Torrens laughed. "My dear Tim, you'll be a much happier woman when you can feel as I do, that the man isn't born yet who can appreciate a woman's sacrifice, or repay her for making it. I wish you could see Theo Bligh as I see him. I wish you could realise that he's about as ignoble a creature as was ever born to be the bane of every woman he meets, from his mother down to the worst feminine toy he ever played with. He's unutterably mean and selfish, Tim! Forget that glorious young figure and face, and think a little of the qualities they clothe. I wonder what sort of a woman his mother was?"

"She died when he was a baby," I say in an extenuating tone, as if in that fact were to be found countless excuses for all his shortcomings; and then I

remember the blot on his birth, and pity him more than ever.

"You are a goose, Tim," she says, shaking her head at me. "I'm getting hopeless about you; you're such a faithful goose. There's many a love in a life, dear, 'ere we learn to love wisely and well.' The women who can't forget are more to be pitied, I think, than any other of God's creatures, for they're always sure to remember the wrong man."

"There can be no harm in remembering the man who's going to marry my sister," I expostulate. "How can one forget a member of one's own family who is always being discussed?"

"Don't advance specious arguments," she says gaily; "and take me for your model in one respect, at least. I confess that I was infatuated with Theo Bligh, but when he let me find out how much smaller he was than myself, I cured myself of him as I would of a fever or any other disease. Go home and marry Sydney Dale, if you don't meet with any one you like better who is as well off as Sydney, under my auspices: with health, horses, and wealth, any woman may be happy if she likes."

She stands before me, glowing with beauty, spirit and satisfaction, a living example of the truth of her words. Why can't I take her for my model? Why can't I do as she has done, marry for money, and reap the reward of having everything about me that money can procure to make life smooth and pleasant?

"I'll try to follow your advice," I say; "I'll try and turn worldly; but just this morning I'll go and be good, and uncalculating, and unselfish, and unworldly in Mrs. Macpherson's company. *Her* only weakness is humanity: she's a true Sister of Mercy unprofessed."

"I hope she isn't wasting her time in trying to do good to Theo Bligh," Lady Torrens says contemptuously. "She has money, and he has wit enough to get it out of her, if she gives him the opportunity of seeing much of her. Don't look incredulous, Tim. I

read Theo Bligh as easily as I do many another well-bound, well-lettered, perfectly worthless work of fiction."

"I'll go to Mrs. Macpherson, and take a fresh lesson on the theme, 'Greater than all is charity,'" I cry, stopping up my ears; and Lady Torrens shrugs her shapely shoulders, and says—

"For 'charity,' read 'credulity,' where Theo Bligh is the object that excites it. I shouldn't be in the least surprised to hear of him arrayed in the plaid of her clan, and accepted as the heir to her property."

These words fall almost meaninglessly on my ears at the time they are spoken. I do not attempt either to refute the implication, or to deride it. It is meaningless, unjust, and above all absurd, I tell myself; and being these things, it is utterly unworthy of generous, sensible, bright Lady Torrens.

I reach Mrs. Macpherson's lodgings, and find everything unaltered—save my dear old friend's manner to me. She greets me kindly, but there is a want of heart and force in her salutation that jars upon and distresses me. The cat, the collie, and the comfort of the room are the same as ever. But a chill has fallen upon Mrs. Macpherson, and my spirits sink to a very low ebb in prompt response to the change in her.

"You're very happy and very gay with Lady Torrens, I suppose, Tim?" she says. And I tell her truly that I am as happy with Lady Torrens as I can be with anyone; and then my voice falters, and the foolish tears fill my eyes, as I add—

"I get depressing letters from my sister Claire. It's all uncertainty still about Theo Bligh, and Claire isn't a girl to bear uncertainty well."

"She judges him by herself, and has no trust in him, perhaps," she says severely.

"Ah, Mrs. Macpherson, that's unfair. Claire has borne more from him and for him than I thought it possible she could have borne from and for any man. He has neglected her, he has kept her in the dark about his doings and plans, and he has professed love for

another woman, and tried to hide his engagement to Claire—all this I know.”

I speak steadily, but very, very sadly. It is painful to the last degree to me to be compelled, in justice to my sister, to complain of Theo, and to point out flaws in his conduct. But there is little sympathy for me in either the words or the tone of Mrs. Macpherson’s reply.

“You’re ready enough to blame him, but what can you say for your sister’s behaviour when he was at death’s door, and was watched over and nursed by a woman whose wiles and lures were enough to tempt a saint? Did Claire ever go near him? Did her anxiety for him even keep her modesty quiet? On the contrary, didn’t she make herself conspicuous by riding about with a young man of large property, who, if she had succeeded in catching him, could have put Claire in the position her mercenary soul covets? While the poor lover was thought to be dying, she angled openly for the rich one, and it was only when he drew back that she remembered that engaged people have certain claims on one another.”

“What a garbled story you must have heard!” I say indignantly, and Mrs. Macpherson merely shakes her head and smiles, and by so doing goads me into using ill-advised language. “Mrs. Macpherson, do listen to me, and believe me. You have had your judgment warped by Theo himself—no one else could be base enough to find fault with Claire; no one else could be ingenious enough to twist and distort facts in such a way as to make him seem the aggrieved, and poor Claire the aggressor; and as for Lady Torrens having used wiles and lures to wile him from my sister, she scorns him too much for his fickleness and falsity to take him even if he were free.”

“You can say all this of the lad you professed to love so well that his coldness to you drove you to take the desperate step of promising to marry my brother?” she answers sternly. “Tim, pray for a better heart and a juster mind towards the poor harrassed boy. He’s none

but good words to say of you! indeed, there's no bitterness in the boy towards anyone."

"No one knows better than I do how winning he is," I cry eagerly, "but when I hear of his trying to poison your mind against poor Claire, I must try to make you understand how insincere he is, though it hurts me to do it. Why should he influence you against Claire, who loves him so—who is going to be his wife?"

"I'm not so sure of that," Mrs. Macpherson says, drawing up her head. "She has written him such a letter as no girl who is going to be a man's wife ought to have brought herself to write. Her pride is in arms evidently, however it may be with her love, and she insults him by casting doubts on his veracity, and threatens him with a rival ——"

"And he has been mean enough to show her letter to you!" I exclaim.

"He has told me its contents, not shown it. He came to me smarting under her false accusations, with his faith in her shaken, and he poured out his heart to me as he would to ——"

"A mother," I suggest, finding that she hesitates for a word.

"An elder sister," she goes on, waxing rosier and more excited; and I begin to look at her curiously, and to ask myself if it be possible that the wild, unaccountable god can have lodged a shaft in the heart that beats within that matured, rotund little form. It is too ridiculous, too utterly unreasonable a conjecture to be seriously entertained. And yet what other influence can have been used to have made her wax to receive any impression Theo Bligh desires to make upon her? I am so astounded that I am on the brink of charging her with the folly. Then I call to mind her extreme sagacity in the matter of her brother and myself, and I see her wrinkles and grey hairs, and feel that it would be an unwarrantable insult to her to suggest it.

"Don't let us talk any more about Claire," I plead. "I can't put the crooked matter straight, and I shall

only say things that vex you ; and you've been too good a friend to me for me to care to do that. How's Mr. Murray ? ”

“ Well in health, but ill in spirit,” she answers, and I feel that I am blushing with remorse. “ It's not to do with you, child,” she goes on. “ He's a strange mixture, is Robert. If you could have been happy with him, he would have loved you very truly, and thought of no other woman while you lived ; but as your heart wandered, why, he just did the wise thing and released you, and will make the best of it. It's a good heart, is Robert's, and it's governed by a sensible head.”

“ No one knows that better than I do,” I say enthusiastically. “ If I had been older or he had been younger, I know I should have been happy with him ; but you yourself thought it unwise and wrong to think of marriage, as there was such a disparity of age, didn't you ? ”

“ The difference of age was the least drawback in my opinion,” she says emphatically ; “ it was the want of will on your part and the want of money on both sides that rendered it so unadvisable. A few years more or less on either side are just immaterial.”

I am convinced against my will that there is some solid foundation for the fear I tried to strangle in the birth as too monstrous a thing. Mrs. Macpherson is preparing a line of defence in case she is accused of making a fool of herself.

The rest of my visit to her this day is a pitiable failure. Mr. Murray comes in, but though he is kind and gentle as ever to me, there is such evident estrangement between him and his sister that his presence does not improve the aspect of affairs. Can this be Theo's work ? Is it necessary for the perfecting of any scheme he may have with regard to Mrs. Macpherson that he should alienate her from her brother ? I weary myself with asking these questions, and failing to find answers for them, I begin to distrust and dislike and despise everything and everybody, my-

self included. I want to get away from Mrs. Macpherson, whose common sense has broken down, thereby setting me all adrift in my calculations concerning her, and yet I don't want to face Lady Torrens just yet, with the confession that I have been wanting in foresight and penetration, and that Mrs. Macpherson is verifying the adage that "there's no fool like an old one." Before I can make up my mind to go boldly back and bear the pangs of detection, a pealing knock is followed by a springing footstep and a light-hearted whistle on the stairs, and Theo Bligh comes in with an air of being quite at home, that makes my position a very perplexing one.

Mr. Murray responds coldly to his greeting, but Theo is far too good an actor to show even that he marks the coldness. The collie wags his well-fringed tail in welcome, the cat purrs out a sleepy salute as he brushes past her, and Mrs. Macpherson radiates pleasure at sight of him from every square inch of her broad, beaming face. He is a time-server—he is an arch-deceiver and hypocrite—he is a humbug, I can't help feeling and acknowledging, as he bends his animated, Apollo-like young head down towards her, and says—

"I've been dodging the performing cats about the whole morning ; at last I saw the fellow strike the tabby cat several times with a strap till the poor brute howled, but had to fence again ; then I was down upon him at once with a policeman."

"Did you succeed in getting the cats from him?" Mrs. Macpherson breaks in eagerly ; and Theo deliberately helps himself to sherry and bitters before he answers—

"I succeeded in getting the cats, but not in keeping them. I put them into a cab and was driving here with them, but just down by Mudie's there was a crowd and a noise, and the beggars got frightened and bolted through the window. I'd paid a hundred pounds for the pair, too, as you'd made up your mind to redeem them from slavery. You'll never make me your agent again."

"May the Lord restore her senses!" Mr. Murray mutters to me, as he gets up and shuffles out of the room; and, feeling sick, sore, and disgusted, I ask at once for a cab to be sent for. When it comes, much against my desire, and not quite in accordance with Mrs. Macpherson's design, Theo insists on taking me down to it. Rapidly as I walk, he finds time to say—

"Tim, don't 'scorn and let me go' in this way. Poverty's a hard task-master. Do you think it's pleasant and congenial to me to go about avenging outraged cats, and pandering to an old woman's mania for mercy? But what can I do? I've no profession; I've no prospects; 'all the markets overflow,' at any rate I can't supply a single thing that there is any demand for, excepting the flattery and the fooling that all women, old and young alike, crave for."

"And you supply that flattery and fooling for—what?" I ask.

"There's no price fixed yet," he answers, recovering his gaiety in his old spasmodic manner. "Let me come and see you, Tim. Lady Torrens can't be spiteful enough to want to come between us; she doesn't know that I have been in love with you."

He says the last words in a whisper, as he hands me into the cab; and all I can bring myself to say is—

"You are false, Theo!"

"Though you fancy that, how true you are to me!" he murmurs tenderly.





CHAPTER XXXIV.

AT THE RINK.

FIND Lady Torrens ready dressed for the rink when I get back, and she follows me into my room, nominally to assist and hasten me at my toilet, in reality to find out what I have heard and suffered at Mrs. Macpherson's.

"You look positively haggard, Tim. Has Mr. Murray done anything desperate in the way of lemons—and their accompaniments—on account of his disappointment, or does he bear it in such a philosophical way that your vanity is nettled? No; it's something nearer to you and harder to bear than either of these. Poor Tim!" she adds heartily; "it's something fresh and disagreeable about that man on whom you've wasted so much genuine feeling already that I wonder you have any left to expend. Tell me—what is it?"

"I wish I knew," I reply; and then I tell her as nearly as I can recollect all that has taken place.

She gives an unaffected shudder as I strive to reproduce as vividly as I can his manner to Mrs. Macpherson, and Mrs. Macpherson's manner to him.

"Oh dear, dear! Isn't it awful? What won't men do for 'red, red gold'? And *we* have loved that man who turns himself into a cat-catcher for the sake of getting lucre and an old woman's unwholesome regard!

That's the bitterest thing of all: *we* have loved that man !”

“And Claire loves him still,” I splutter out.

“And so do you, you goose !” she says, taking up my rinking hat and readjusting its band of feathers with un-called-for vigour. “You little moping, infatuated booby! what is the use of my setting myself as a model before you, when you don't even attempt to copy me? Now, just bind your hair a little more closely about your head, or it will come down and disgrace you if emotion causes you to rink unsteadily. And come away with me, and look and be at your best, and thank Providence that you have no responsibilities of wife and mother upon you, but that you're a free girl still, justified in enjoying the hour to the utmost.”

Her vivacity is infectious, and the costume to which the hat is an accompaniment is becoming. I revive as I look at myself in the glass. I feel somewhat as I did on that day when I borrowed Claire's dress and nearly robbed her of her lover. In spite of my stupid doubts and fears and dejection, I am keenly alive to the fact that I am anything but unattractive in appearance, as I take my place by Lady Torrens in the victoria, and we drive off to a big enclosed space of ground with an asphalt floor, that is sufficiently well supervised to be respectable, and not too select to be amusing.

Two or three well-authenticated and deadly uninteresting British matrons meet us at the entrance, and I am drawn into the skating vortex under the most exceptional auspices. I become meek, awkward, nervous, and demoralised generally the instant I find myself upon the ungovernable rollers ; but after a purposeless plunge or two backwards and forwards, I settle myself into a stolid, upright position, and try to look as if I liked remaining motionless without a motive.

Lady Torrens has skated off with a swaying, easy grace that I would peril much to emulate, leaving me under the charge of a lady who thinks it a pretty exercise, but who, at the same time, has a dishearteningly good memory for

every accident that has happened upon every rink since the roller-skates were first introduced into England. As I stand there helplessly, she tells me of girlish spines and skulls and legs that have been dislocated and fractured and broken in the pursuit of the seductive amusement. And I dare not even totter to a seat and take the rest of the tale of horrors sitting.

A moderately good band is clanging out a remarkably good waltz, and at least a couple of hundred of my fellow-creatures are swaying rapidly by in time to the music. A hundred more are staggering, stumbling, plodding, and tumbling round, according to their respective degrees of security, on their slippery stand-points. Altogether the scene is bewildering, and I feel giddy, and wish with all my heart that I dared move towards a seat without having the dread alternative before me of prostrating myself on my forehead and front teeth, or of performing a sort of magic measure on the back of my head.

It occurs presently to my temporary guardian that the skates have not been put upon my feet for the sole purpose of chaining me to one spot, fettered by terror and inability to move. She recalls to her mind that her son is there. She impresses upon me that he is careful, and not given to foolish, fanciful flights upon the "outside edge" (whatever that may mean); and finally she sends me off with crossed arms under the guidance of a gentleman who undulates about like a willow wand for a few miserable moments, and then suddenly lets me drop with crushing force upon my knees in front of him, while he wildly paws the asphalt floor in vain attempt to recover his equilibrium.

We are stepped upon, grinned at, kicked, and eventually shoved upon our legs again; and with a face hot with discomfiture, and a hat knocked off its balance by the shock of the fall, I take my place by his side again, and prepare to let my skates carry me whithersoever their eccentric fancy may lead them.

"Don't think about what you're doing, and you'll

do remarkably well," he says encouragingly. "That's right, bend well forward, and strike out boldly."

I obey his directions, and bend so well forward that my figure must resemble a note of interrogation, and strike out so boldly that my feet execute a clattering and novel figure entirely on their own account. But my partner in affliction and humiliation props me up this time, and we hobble round the rink without a tumble.

Breathlessness, deadly fear, and the concentration of my faculties on the one object of keeping my head off the floor and my heels on it, combine to render my efforts to emulate the lissom and supple grace of the adepts in skating fruitless. Thin young girls cut through the air like swallows; gracious figured women revolve and twirl and bend about with an air of ease and security that makes my attempts to conquer the mere rudiments of rinking seem elephantine. My gallant escort—he has been introduced to me as "Captain" something or other, and I gather from some of his remarks that he is one of the military defenders of my beloved country—has saved himself from downfall by clutching wildly at the wall, and has at the same time suffered me to slip into safety on a seat by his mother. I feel in a bright red glow from exercise and mortification, and at this very moment Theo Bligh skims past, holding a slender, graceful woman by the hands, and swaying from side to side with her in a way that commands admiring attention from everybody on the rink.

He lifts his hat in recognition, and before I have time to worry myself much as to whom his new friend may be, he is round with me again, alone this time.

"You didn't seem to derive that pure and perfect pleasure from your first tour that I should wish you to feel, Tim," he says, holding out his hands to me; "come with me, you'll think better of it after a turn with me."

I mutter a brief statement to the lady in whose charge Lady Torrens has left me, relative to Theo's position in our family and fraternal claim upon my obedience, and

then I stagger on to my feet, and feel absurdly happy because the exigencies of rinking compel me to cling to him, and rely upon him, and swing along hand in hand with him for a time.

"I wish you could have had a back view of your companion and yourself as you appeared before my delighted eyes just now," he says, with a cheerful laugh, as he swings me along, utterly regardless of my frantic efforts to fall. "Where did you pick him up?"

"I didn't pick him up at all," I say, my feet seeming to slip away yards in front of me, as annoyance causes me to lose the little control I have had over them hitherto; "he's a friend of Lady Torrens?"

"Where did she pick him up?" he interrupts.

"From his mother," I answer curtly.

"I see—his mother's the old lady to whom you thought it necessary to explain me just now. Hold up; that's right! What is he?"

"A captain in some line regiment," I answer indifferently. I want to question Theo about the pretty woman with whom he has been rinking, but he won't give me the opportunity.

"Really," he laughs, "may I ask what is the affinity between this special branch of the British army and yourself? Is it sentimental or intellectual?"

"It's certainly not sentimental," I reply decidedly.

"And I'm shot if it's intellectual," he retorts; and, in spite of everything, I can't help feeling a little pleased that he takes sufficient interest in me to dislike seeing me on terms of the most superficial intimacy with any other man.

We go along in silence for a few minutes. I know that there is a great deal of bitter-sweetness in being with him in this way, and I dare not endeavour to analyse the feeling. I know that a dozen topics have a common interest for us, but I dare not touch upon one. So I just gather those perishable roses of pleasure, and let myself go on with him for as long as it may be his pleasure to take me.

"Do you like it better now, Tim [dear?" he asks presently.

"Much better; only directly I begin to think about it, I shall do something that will exceed in awkwardness every one of my former performances."

"I hope not; for, without wishing to flatter you, I must say that you deserve the prize for hopeless incapability and awkwardness. There's your friend again, waiting for you. I'll drop you with him. I don't question his being a very nice fellow, of course, but how on earth has he fetched you?"

"He hasn't fetched me," I say earnestly.

"Oh yes, he has; if he hadn't, your sense of humour would have prevented your making a spectacle of yourself with him. Love is proverbially blind; but after having liked me, I wonder at your being able to like any one else."

"I never have, and I never shall—in that way," I say, with foolish vehemence. And having received this tribute, Theo feels that he has had enough of me for a time; so he puts me back into my seat and skates off rapidly with an object—for I see him again in a minute, reeling along in time to the waltz music, with the same pretty woman who had excited a little of my animus and a great deal of my curiosity before.

"Look at Theo!" Lady Torrens says, pausing before me. "There's something fitting in his present occupation and companion. They're gradually effacing that horrible impression I got of him from your report this morning. Why are you not trying to learn to skate? Get up and come with me."

"I can't," I protest. "Theo has taken me round several times, and I felt safe with him. I'd rather sit still than try it with any one else."

"Of course you would, but that is just an exhibition of affectionate idiotcy that I don't want you to offer to the world at large, or to him in particular. Tim, though I laugh at you, dear, I would give a great deal to be able to feel and suffer as truly as you do. I've forgotten what

it is to be anxious and jealous, despairing or hopeful ——”

“You hadn’t forgotten how to be any one of these things that day I rode home with you from Dogberry Gorse,” I say quietly ; and she answers frankly—

“No, I hadn’t. I was trying hard then to nurse a weak, spurious sentiment into a strong, real feeling. My bantling died soon afterwards, and was buried in the same grave with my belief in Theo’s honour. Look at him now, feeling sure as he smiles at us that we are both pining for more of that audacious insolently beautiful presence of his.”

“I don’t pine for more of it ; I only want not to care whether I have it or not,” I reply, as Lady Torrens goes off, saying—

““ Oh ! love for a year, a month, or a day ;
But, alas ! for the love that loves always ! ” ”

“When you’re tired of sporting with Amaryllis in the shade, I shall be happy to give you some further schooling,” Theo whispers, coming close to me at once, as Lady Torrens goes off. “What was her sweet ladyship saying about me ? Was she keen on the subject of the pretty woman I was rinking with ? ”

“Not a bit ; she’s not keen about anything you do or leave undone.”

“Isn’t she, really ? Well, Mrs. Macpherson doesn’t resemble her in that respect, so, while I think of it, I’ll ask you not to mention to her that you’ve seen me on the rink. She thinks that it’s flying in the face of Providence to skate on anything that can’t crack away under your feet and leave you to be drowned. I’ve listened to her precepts and agreed with them. She mightn’t like it if she knew that my practice was considerably less rigorous.”

“You like deceiving ; it comes like breathing to you, Theo,” I say ; and though I mean what I am saying thoroughly, and loathe the sin of which I am speaking,

honestly, I do love the sinner so much the whole time. "Why are you deceiving Mrs. Macpherson? What do you want of her?"

He has grace enough left to colour and look confused for once in his unembarrassed life, as he answers—

"She talks of adopting me or something of that sort, and wants me to take her name. She's no children, you see, and no one has any claim on her; and finding me a poor friendless, fortuneless devil, she seems to think we may as well turn ourselves into a firm."

"Have you forgotten Claire?" is all I can say; and he replies—

"By Jove, no! But what is a fellow to do? Remembering her won't bring us any nearer each other. It's no use your trying to jog my memory; try and believe that I'm a worthless fellow altogether, and let me slip as your friend Lady Torrens does. She would see me break my neck at this moment without losing her balance, yet I've said a good deal more to her than I ever have to you, little Tim."

"I do believe that you're utterly worthless," I answer; but I don't go on and tell him the truth, that I can no more forget him than I can forget myself.

"I don't ask you not to tell Claire anything you may have seen—or suspected," he resumes, as he circles about with me, with safety and celerity, for I abandon myself entirely to his guidance; "I leave that quite to your discretion. If you think it kinder to your sister to make her savage before there's any definite reason for her being so, tell her by all means; if you think you'll do more harm than good, maintain a masterly inactivity."

"I have been doing more harm than good ever since I knew you," I say in a spasm of angry truthfulness.

And he calmly tells me that he knows it, and that it's very odd, but most of the women he meets do go mad about him without his going very much out of his way to dazzle their senses.

"They stick to me, as a rule, just as you do, little woman. Lady Torrens is the only exception to the rule,

and I've known all along about her, that she's blessed with a plethora of brain and a paucity of heart. Holloa! there's 'God save the Queen.' Time's up, and we must part, Tim!"

It sounds so like a final farewell, that in my agony of fear lest it may be so, lest I may never again see my bright bane, I forget Claire's injunctions, and Lady Torrens' aversion to receiving him, and say—

"Call on me to-morrow afternoon—I must see you once again."

He raises his hat, and promises me that he will come, and I know that he will keep his promise if nothing pleasanter intervenes.





CHAPTER XXXV.

CAT AND MOUSE.

SURPRISES assail and shatter me on every side the morning after my first experience on the rink. Lady Torrens receives a letter while we are at breakfast, which she reads through twice attentively. When she has finished it she looks at me searchingly, and I say at once, though I can't see a character in it—

“That's from Theo Bligh?”

“Yes, it is; and if there had ever been a particle of love in his protestations to me—if he had not deceived me from the beginning, deceived numbers of others in the mean time, and were not trying to deceive me again now—that is all I would say. I would never betray the confidence of a man who had given me one spark of real love; but Theo simply gambles and speculates with affection. See; he would still prefer riches and me to riches and Mrs. Macpherson—at least, I take it that he would, for he tells me that his engagement with Miss Vincent is broken off by mutual consent, and that he is free now to offer me a hand as indisputably my own as is his heart. The young wretch is amusing! He thinks I may believe him.”

“And why shouldn't you believe that he loves you? Any man might do it,” I constrain myself to say. I try

to feel generously towards the charming woman who takes and lets go the liking of the man whom Claire and I cherish, with an easy facility that I would emulate if I could ; and she answers—

“And many men do it, my dear Tim : in that fact there is the real panacea. Now, you see, I’m neither angry nor pleased with Theo for thinking that his latest vows would go down with me. I meet him on his own ground ; I say—

‘Love for a year, a month, or a day ;
But, alas ! for the love that loves always.’”

“As I do,” I sigh out, and Lady Torrens laughs and frowns at me for my impracticable fidelity.

“Broken off with Claire !” I go on. “He tells you of it as if it were a mere nothing, and it will spoil her life. Even if she gets over it enough to marry anybody else, she’ll not care for him, and not take the trouble to do her duty by him ——”

“Don’t nurse such sick sentimentalism,” Lady Torrens interrupts. “Claire is not the girl to let her life be spoilt by him. If he’s needful to her happiness she will recall him ; if he is not as essential as you in your misplaced devotion think he is, she will turn down the page whereon his story is inscribed, and find balm in Gilead. Whatever Claire does, she won’t let unhappiness sit upon her and crush her as you do, Tim. You *are* a generous goose ! In addition to your unhappiness about yourself in relation to him, you are ready to take up your sister’s burden before you’ve ascertained that it is one. Oh dear ! how I wish that I had freshness of feeling enough left to care to retain anything that is pleasant and agreeable to me without being valuable ! I should accept Theo’s shallow offering in that case, and so spare your sister the misery of marrying him.”

“But as it is, you will ——”

“As it is, I will answer him according to the dictates of matured experience and common sense—and you shall

see my letter," she interrupts ; and with an unconcerned air that I would give worlds to emulate, she sits down to write her refusal to the man who won her heart at one time, and lost it through trifling with her pride. "There it is," she says, handing it to me presently ; and I read :

"DEAR MR. BLIGH,

"I will not go through the empty form of thanking you for the honour you have done me, as, conscientiously, I do not consider that you have done me any honour at all. A forsworn hand and a perjured heart, would, in my estimation, be a poor exchange for the loss of my liberty and self-respect. I remain truly your friend,

"LILY TORRENS."

"It's harsh," I say concisely, and I cannot with anything like truthfulness bring myself to add that it's unjust.

She laughs. "Tim," she says, "you're painting a mental picture of the way in which he will receive it. You fancy that he will feel hurt and cast down—that he will be sorry to find that a woman whom he has asked to be his wife should have such a contemptible opinion of him ; in fact, you picture your idol discomposed at being found out and exposed to himself by a woman. Shall I tell you how I picture him ?"

I nod assent.

"I paint him discomfited at the consequences of being found out. If I had gone on being as credulous as—some other women would be about him, he might have secured my fortune and got rid of me at the earliest convenient opportunity after our marriage. Detection at my hands means failure to him, and failure is what he hates, not moral disgrace. Theo will always laugh off the latter, unless it affects either his position or his fortunes. See him as he is, Tim ; this is the burden of my song to you. Until you succeed in doing this, you'll fancy that he is suffering a variety of things that are quite outside

his comprehension. Mendacious, vain-glorious egotist that he is, it's beyond him altogether to think or fear that he may sink in the opinion of women like ourselves, whose good opinion is worth having. See him as he is, and ask yourself, is *his* a portrait that it is worth your while to hang in the gallery of your memory?"

She folds and seals her letter as she speaks, and before I have made up my mind what to say in reply, she rings for the servant, and sends it off direct to him. It is a horrible, wholesome dose for him, and she is right, of course, in making him drink it. Still I am glad that, having once loved him, I feel that I would suffer anything myself rather than rebuke him as she has done. It is agonising to me to know that another woman has it in her power to inflict a sense of shame upon Theo Bligh.

"He will probably light the first cigar he smokes after the receipt of it with my note: he won't keep it to show, because it's not flattering to him, you see, Tim; and as soon as he has puffed away his sense of chagrin he will go to Mrs. Macpherson. Blot him out from this day, Tim!"

She speaks earnestly, and I know that she speaks wisely. But, in spite of this knowledge, I merely shake my foolish head in negative and say—

"He's written in indelible ink, I'm afraid. If I only liked him for good qualities, I might forget him in time; but I like him in spite of all his bad qualities, and I'm sure to be continually reminded of them."

"Yes, you are," Lady Torrens says. "Unfortunately, he hasn't the exclusive right to the use of the arts of braggadocio and lying. You may match his 'inner man' any day; it's only the case that is unique."

I wonder if she is quite as indifferent, quite as scornful of him as she seems to be. If she is, she

"Never loved him truly.
Love is love for evermore;"

and if she never loved him truly, she can never judge him

justly. So I try to comfort myself, and prop up my tottering idol on his shaken pedestal still.

I am a little surprised, when we reach the rink this afternoon, to see Theo giving a great amount of bright, energetic perseverance to the task of surmounting the difficulties of the "double step." I know that he must have received Lady Torrens' letter of rejection, for she sent it by a private messenger; I know how cutting its terms were; yet Theo glides up to us, before our skates are fastened on, with the free, happy air of one on whom never so much as the shadow of a shade of disappointment has lowered.

"May I take you round? or do you mean to try a turn or two by yourself?" he asks, doffing his hat to Lady Torrens; and she answers—

"I think you had better take Tim. I can rely upon myself on the skates much better than she can."

As I am thrust upon him, and it is his habit to accept the inevitable gracefully, he takes me without hesitation, and after a minute or two he says—

"Who has Lady Torrens got hanging about her now?"

I take him literally, and look round to see if any one is clinging to my friend.

"I don't mean at this moment," he says, rather captiously; "but she's not the sort of woman to be off with an old love before she's on with a new. You may as well tell me who's the reigning favourite."

"I think she's in the happy condition of not caring for any one at all; certainly she has no preference for any one over another."

"She's always in that happy condition," he says with a sneer quivering over his handsome, delicately cut lips, "but she likes other people to prefer her, and to make their preference very manifest. She's a bad companion for you, Tim. I wouldn't invest any real feeling in her myself. A thoroughly heartless woman is the very devil."

"She's not heartless, and if you think her so why did

you want to marry her this morning?" I say intemperately.

"Oh, she's told you *that*, has she?" he says calmly. "I thought that if I could get a rise out of you, that I should rapidly arrive at the truth. My reason for asking her to marry me, as you put it broadly, was a very simple one. She had led me to believe that if I were free from Claire she would marry me; and Claire having broken with me ——"

"She can't have done it!" I interrupt.

"I give you my word of honour that she has; I heard from her last night. Apparently a sudden change has taken place in her sentiments about me, for she dismisses me as absolutely and grandly as if I had been hanging on very much against her will all this time. Here, sit down for a minute, Tim, and let me tell you something—shall I?"

"You had better not," I stammer, for I am in a tremor soul and body, half of fear and half of joy.

"But *I will*," he murmurs. "Words can do no harm; you can forget them if you don't like them—no one will know they've been spoken. You have been the cause of the whole business, Tim. I loved you, and let you go to Brighton, and fancied that I had lost you altogether, and—turned to the others for diversion; that's the whole story."

Liar that he is, how I love him still! Inwardly, I am wounded, shaken, smarting and sore; outwardly, I am as much at ease as he is himself.

"What a pity it is that I can't believe in even that pitiful excuse for your having behaved so badly to my sister! I might deceive myself into feeling tolerantly towards you still, if I could," I say quietly.

"Tolerantly!" He gives a low, satisfied laugh. "If you could only tone yourself down into feeling merely 'toleration' for me, you'd be a considerably happier girl than you are now. What is it about me, I wonder? Why, Tim, if I were ten thousand times more worthless than I am—which isn't possible—and you knew it, you'd

love me as devotedly as—you do now, little woman. Come, let us have another turn.”

He rises up and holds his hands out, and I take them and am drawn on by him, though I tell myself that he is bloodthirsty in his passion for conquest over me. For what purpose has he stained his soul with these latest falsehoods? Why has he striven to shatter the one rock upon which I believed myself to be founded, namely, my faith in his having cared for Claire from the first, and only having used me as a blind. Why? What nonsense it is, though, to question why the cat plays so gracefully with the mouse! Cat and mouse are cast for their respective parts from their birth, and bound to fulfil them.

For about three weeks we hear no more of Theo Bligh, and though I call repeatedly on Mrs. Macpherson, I fail to find her at home. Claire writes to me once during these weeks, and begs me, if I love her, never to mention Theo Bligh to her again. “He has quite broken down my patience and killed my love,” she writes. “I mean to marry some one else, and be very happy, but I won’t have his name mentioned to me. Papa is very kind and generous to me; he seems to be quite pleased that two of his daughters are looked upon as rejected and jilted girls.” When I read this I know that it is Claire’s pride which is bent, not her heart which is broken.

By mutual consent Lady Torrens and I cease to speak of Theo Bligh, or of that past with which Theo is connected. She interests herself heartily in the family of her husband’s successor to the title and estates. The daughters of this branch of the Torrens family are not up to the mark of their position, and their pretty widowed cousin is keenly alive to their deficiencies, and genuinely anxious to remedy them. She has them up to stay with her, and introduces them to society, and her own dress-maker and milliner. She makes me ride with them; and altogether startles them out of a portion of that lethargy which has crept over them in the course of their uneventful,

monotonous lives. It comes about that gradually the Misses Torrens make spasmodic confidences to me, and I discover that one of the greatest anxieties which oppress their maiden hearts is the dread that "Cousin Lily" may marry again.

"Why, *of course* she will," I say, with such profound conviction that I am impressed by it myself, and I look about keenly for a few days with the design of discovering in which one of the many men who are about her Lady Torrens takes a special interest. And I come to this conclusion, that in her power of enjoyment, in her intense liking for life, beauty, pleasure, variety, and sympathetic companionship, she is as fresh as ever; but that in love she is played out.

The echoes of the past are re-awakened rather strongly the day before I go back to Ravensbourne. Mr. Murray calls to say good-bye to me. He has got his appointment, and is off to fill it in a day or two.

"I was nearly playing the coward's part, and slinking off without seeing you, Tim," he says to me; "but you might have thought, if I had done so, that I was accessory to the deed ——"

I see Lady Torrens put her finger to her lips, and he pulls himself up abruptly; but it is too late.

"What deed?" I question breathlessly.

"My sister has bought that lad, and makes him call himself her husband and 'The Macpherson,'" he says sternly; and I feel as if I would gladly cower into a grave, to avoid the shame of facing a world that knows of Theo's degradation.





CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE KING OF TERRORS.

THREE months have passed since the words of doom were sounded in my ears by Mr. Murray. Three months of expectation, anxiety, hopes, fears, mortifications, and a multiplicity of minor miseries. In spite of these having been our portions respectively, neither Claire nor I are in the least degree emaciated. We have not waxed paler and thinner than is well in ones so young." We go out into society, ride, play, and sing, dress, dine, and dance, as freely as ever we did. And if we don't sleep quite as well, we are not romantically idiotic enough to mention the fact to any one.

"'Tis an evil lot, and yet
Let us make the best of it,"

we declared to each other, when the blow first fell and we had to face it; and so we have faced it fairly in our different ways. Claire meets every covert attempt that is made to bestow scornful pity upon her with a scorn so much more genuine, that the offenders never repeat the offence. So far from shunning those who knew her story, she seeks every scene in which they are to be

found, and invariably enlivens that scene. Like the "free and happy barley," she's the "queen above them all"—the queen of every social gathering, whether it be a revel on a refined scale, or a humdrum tea-party at Mrs. Poland's. Claire is always to the fore. First in beauty, first in brightness; fascinating every man; forcing every woman to feel friendly towards her because of her kind, spontaneous manner—and apparently utterly forgetting Theo Bligh.

As for me, barring the beauty and brightness, I am very much what Claire is, and I do very much as Claire does. We both occupy a more prominent position domestically and socially than we have done heretofore, for Aunt Helen has left us, and the onus of inviting and entertaining, of managing and arranging all household matters, is on Claire now, and naturally Claire hands all the drudgery of it over to me.

Aunt Helen has left us, and left us of her own free will too, after a long interview with papa, which must have been a sufficiently sad one to both, to satisfy the worst enemies of either. They come back into the room where my sister and myself are after it, and say a few words that have a painful air of being pre-arranged.

"Your Aunt Helen has resolved upon going away, as you girls are grown up and capable of managing my household," papa says, with a ghastly air of ease that doesn't impose for an instant even upon the twins. "I regret her determination, naturally, but our selfish interests mustn't stand between her and her higher duties any longer. What do you say, Claire?"

"I say nothing," Claire says, lifting her eyes to the faces of the chief actors in the scene in turn; and then, though I haven't been appealed to, I put in—

"And I say Aunt Helen is quite right to go where higher duties take her, and where, perhaps, she will get more love in return for all she does than we have ever been able to give her." And papa begins to whistle, and Claire throws her head up a little, and the twins

open their eyes and mouths; but Aunt Helen puts a trembling hand on mine for a moment, and says—

“Thank you, my dear.”

There is nothing more approaching to a scene after this before her departure. But on the morning she is going away, I am prompted to pay her some unusual trifling attention, and she responds to it curiously.

“Tim,” she whispers, “we old people have our romances as well as you young ones; I’m sentimental enough to wish you to give me a promise that you will be a friend to Theo Bligh, if the day should ever come when he may need your friendship. I know him, and I know that he will tax it—hardly, perhaps. Will you tell me that you’ll be good to him?”

I tell her “Yes!” It’s all I can say.

“I am able to give you back a portion of what he owes you, Tim,” she whispers, putting a bundle into my hands. “Try and think well of him; try and remember that if he had had a better mother—one who had loved him too truly ever to scheme for him—he might have been a better man; try to remember that the sins of the parents are visited upon the children, and that his father and mother wronged him from the beginning, and gave him nothing but poverty and shame for his birthright; try to remember all that’s best about him, Tim, and, if he ever wants your goodness, be good to him.”

It seems to me to be an utterly idle and vain request; nevertheless, she infuses so much earnestness into her manner of making it, that I am won to reply—

“I do promise, Aunt Helen; but it will be the fable of the mouse and the lion over again, if I can ever help Theo—or ‘The Macpherson,’ as we ought to call him now. As for ‘thinking well of him,’ I can’t do that, but I shall always love him.”

I say this doggedly, for I am perfectly well aware that though Aunt Helen asks for my suffrages for her favourite now, that she never has and never will give in her cordial adhesion to my love for him. In her

estimation I am at liberty to serve him and to suffer for him—so is the whole world, as far as that is concerned—but she looks upon my love as a dubious honour thrust upon him. What is it about Theo Bligh which so warps and distorts the judgment of every woman, young and old, who comes within the radius of his personal influence?

“Be good to him, if he ever wants your goodness,” she repeats emphatically. “Other women will be found in any number to flatter him and spoil him, but you *be good* to him, Tim. You’ve no beauty to snare him, no vanity to blind you into believing that his idle speeches are meant to hold good for more than the hour —”

She pauses suddenly, seeming to think that she has said too much in disparagement of what every true woman prides herself upon possessing, namely, my power of “charming,” though I have no beauty. But I literally have no vanity—at least, none that is so near to the surface as to be touched by another woman’s half-grateful, half-jealous mention and acceptance of me.

“I’ll never hold them good for more than the minute,” I say; and Aunt Helen relapses into herself, gives my hand a satisfied squeeze, and departs from our midst—who can tell with what feelings for any one of us?

I can’t help remembering that she has spent a large portion of her life at Ravensbourne. I can’t help feeling that, however unsympathetic she may have been with us and we may have been with her, at least she has given a full equivalent for all we have endured, in time, trouble, love, and disappointment. I can’t help feeling, in fact, that Aunt Helen is a woman, and that, as she has invested a certain amount of feeling in us Vincents, she has assuredly suffered by us.

A thunderstorm in June is a much more difficult matter to tackle than a thunder-storm in August. I realise this fact one morning when I wake up and find that there is nothing at all the matter with me, but that simply I cannot move. I drawl out a request for tea, and my maid tells me that my tea has gone cold—that I

haven't taken my little bit of roll—that she's afraid it's upset me very much.

“What has upset me?”

I start up as she speaks, and she gets herself away to the toilet-table, where she fidgets with the inane trifles that adorn it, and worries me.

“What has upset me?”

I repeat the question so quietly that she is compelled to answer me.

“Oh, Miss, it's Mr. Dale.”

I subside after this, subside into utter indifference about all things. When I rouse myself at last, I hear somebody say that I have had “a shock.” The phrase frightens me back into oblivion again, and for a long, long time, misery lies down with me, and I am conscious of nothing save her presence.

When I free myself from the soporific part of her embrace, I hear that Sydney Dale wants to see me once more, and they turn away and don't answer me when I ask why he asks me to go to him in that way—I, who would go to him at any time, anywhere, if he desired to see me. And when I say this they none of them speak a word.

The whole thing is photographed on my brain. I can but reproduce it—crudely and coarsely perhaps, but with cruel fidelity!

“Go and see him,” Claire says. “Go alone, Tim; the time's past for being conventional—go alone.”

“Why?” I ask vaguely.

“You'll know for certain soon enough—go! There! your hat is all safe as far as the elastic goes, and your dear little face is a sweet thing to behold, though you *do* look very white. I wish I dared to go with you; I wish I dared to see him now.”

“What is it?” I ask once more; and she says—

“Go to Dalesmeet and hear; I daren't tell you. Kismet has nearly killed him, they say, but, till you tell me so, I won't believe it's true. He's turned from you to me—as they all do—but you wouldn't have given

him a horse to kill him, would you, Tim? It *can't* be true."

I have been lifted up from my bed and put into a hat and jacket as she speaks, and presently I feel that I am out in the air, and that I am responsible for the grey pony's doings. "Shall I drive him, Miss?" the little stable-boy who accompanies me asks; and I yield the reins to him, and get numb with some unexplained fear and dread.

How pretty everything is! There is a soft moisture in the atmosphere that is not "damp," and that yet puts everything in a gentle, liquefied light that is eminently becoming. How can I think of these trivial things as I drive along through the sweetbriar-bordered hedges where Sydney Dale and I have so often ridden together? I do think of these and many other trivial things, in spite of reason and myself—no, not in spite of myself, for I am weakly inclined to drift whithersoever feeling leads me; and I have no guide! Fate has made me my own fortune, circumstances have made me counsellor to myself.

"And I hope you'll find that he's not gone, Miss," my little John says, as we pull up at the door of Dalesmeet; and as I get out of the pony carriage I feel inclined to cling to that stable-boy, I am so utterly wretched.

Mrs. Tierney meets me at the door, meets me with sighs and heaviness, and I crouch at once under the accumulated forces of family feeling and feminine hysteria.

"You must come to him at once, but it'll hurt him awfully to see you," she says, "and it will hurt you more, poor child, to see him. That wild, wicked mare!"

"How long—you here?" I try vainly to gasp out a coherent question. I want to know something so much, but I am not clear what it is that I want to know, or what words shall frame my meaning.

"I've only arrived this morning," she explains. "I got the telegram yesterday and started at once. Oh, the journey I've had, Tim! so long and hopeless, and to end in this!"

She turns away from me in her bitter grief, and I stand quite still, hardly daring to breathe, in ignorance still of what has really happened, only conscious vaguely that in some way or other *I* have been the means of bringing destruction upon one who is dear to me, and who has been good to me.

How long I stand there I don't know—measured by my misery it must be a very long time; measured by the hands of a clock, probably it is only a few moments. She puts her hand on my arm, and I move on with her into a room that was the very heart of the house while Sydney's mother lived—the room where her children were always sure to find her of a morning; the room to which they took all their joys and troubles; the room where Syd and I have played hunt-the-slipper and hide-and-seek a hundred times; the room wherein he is dying now!

I need no introduction. I recognise Death in a moment; the whole room is filled with his presence; he permeates everything. I see him in the slanting sunbeams that come straggling in through the closed Venetian blinds; I see him in the solemn watchfulness of those who stand about a bed; above all, I see it in the face of the man who is lying here.

Coward that I am, I can't approach at once and treat him as the real Sydney whom I have loved and relied upon all my life. I dread coming near him; he, in his powerlessness, is terrible to me; and in my cowardice I cling to everything I pass—to a chair, to his sister, finally to the side of the bed, in which I bury my face as I fall upon my knees.

"He wants you to take his hand; he can't move it to you," the doctor whispers, and there is something so awful in this inability that my soul dies within me.

"He was the grandest of them all,
The manliest in his strength!"

Why is he down in this way? Why is it that the strength,

and courage, and kindness that have been mine to rely upon so long are here no longer? Why can't I feel that this which is stretched at fearful length before me is Sydney Dale?

I creep nearer and nearer to him in spite of my terror, I realise that he is Syd directly I touch his hand; and as my quivering lips touch his cheek and try to caress him back into himself, the others stand afar from us, and I am alone with Sydney Dale and the King of Terrors.





CHAPTER XXXVII.

HE DIES.

HE opens his eyes as my lips touch his cheek, and they try to smile at me, but the smile struggles vainly against the weakness and suffering which are binding him down. In an ecstasy of love and remorse I clasp my arms about my dear old friend's neck, and mutter,—

“Oh, Syd, my darling Syd!” in a paroxysm of impotent pain.

“Loving little Tim!” he says, in a hoarse whisper that does not bear the faintest resemblance to the free, strong, ringing accents of manly Sydney Dale. “You're going to stay with me to the last, aren't you?”

To the last—to the end of his time here, till he goes into the silent land, and we have no further knowledge of him! Would that I could go into eternity with him, for surely he will go where good, true souls dwell!

“Let me have more light!” he gasps, and I see that his vision is darkening fast. But I can't take my clinging arms from round him while there is any life left to cherish in his form. I can't give up the chance of getting one more loving look, one more tender word, before Sydney Dale and I part for ever. So I motion to open the window and to raise the blind, and let in more of the bright, glorious sun, and the free, pure air.

How silently and motionlessly we sit by him after

this ! We are all so powerless before the grim Destroyer who is overcoming him so rapidly. The death-sweat has broken out on his brow ; his breath comes more and more faintly : Sydney Dale is dying fast. There has been a curse on the intercourse which began so sweetly when we were all little children, for Claire has broken his heart, and the horse I gave him has killed him.

He makes one more effort, but this time, though the eyes open slowly and turn towards my face, they no longer see me.

"You're here still, Claire?" he gasps. "The poor little mare ! it wasn't her fault. Kiss me, Claire !"

I press my lips to his as Claire would if she were here and loved him. And so he dies, happy in his delusion at the last, let us hope—happy in the belief that it is Claire who has caught his dying breath, and let him carry her love and kisses with him into the unknown world, as a last remembrance of this one which he is leaving.

I rouse myself with a start and a shudder to the knowledge that what I am clasping is senseless flesh. It is an awful thought ! I can't think of it by the conventional word "clay ;" I can only remember that it is dead flesh and blood which I am holding to my heart—that it does not respond to my tender warmth, and that it will never, never move, nor speak, nor be actuated by any feeling whatever again. The thought is awful to me, and in my terror I can't free myself, for I have slipped one arm quite round his neck, and the dear head has become so heavy that it seems to have locked me down.

"Let me go !" I cry piteously, abject terror of the "incomprehensible" gaining the mastery over me. "Syd, it's not *you* any longer ; let me go !"

Scared out of my senses, bewildered, and unstrung, I strive to scramble away, and am restrained by that passive power which it seems sacrilege to oppose ; and all my grief for the loss of him is merged in the passion of fear I feel of the form that was Syd, and that he has gone away and left me in some mysterious way,

They restore me with their commonplaces presently, and I find that I am standing by the window, that a sheet has been thrown over that which lies on the bed, and that the doctor and some of the servants are begging us dear ladies to be calm, and to go away from the sad spectacle. Calm! I shall never be anything but calm again. I feel I have been shocked, stultified, subdued out of all power of ever experiencing agitation again.

"You needn't feel fear, poor dear lamb," the nurse says unnecessarily; "he never hurt a living thing while he was here."

I know that quite as well as she can tell me. What shatters me to pieces is that Syd is not here now, and that what has been Syd all my life to me is lying there, under that awful sheet. As I get myself away out of the room at last, I steal back one more look over my shoulder, and the fine linen has settled itself down so closely that every feature is expressed. I leap on with bent head and outstretched hands, and my nervous, flying footsteps are arrested by Claire.

Her darling face is convulsed with weeping, but I disregard even her anguish in my own pain.

"I'm too late to see him?" she begins. "No, I'm not: don't tell me that, Tim: come with me."

"Where?" I falter.

I shrink from telling her "he is dead." Death is so much more awful to me, now that I have seen it, than I have ever supposed it possible to be before I looked upon it. I would rather go into a lion's den, or a maniac's cell, than into the room where the senseless, powerless form of the man who has been dearer to me than a brother is lying. But Claire is persistent; she must see him again, dead or alive: she will see him. So Mrs. Tierney takes Claire away to the room, from the very recollection of which I shrink appalled. I meanwhile move about aimlessly, and try to think how it was that I could ever have been miserable before this affliction overtook me. He made up so large a portion of our ives here, that it seems that nothing can possibly go on

without him. And it is the mare I loved, the gift *I* gave him, which has brought this utter desolation upon us.

The whole story is unrolled to me soon in various terms, with a considerable diversity of style, but with none at all of matter. The cook tells me, and the gardener tells me, and the groom tells me, and the doctor tells me ; and the sum and substance of that which I gain from these different authorities is simply this—that the best rider in our county was thrown by the fidgety little mare Kismet, who took fright at a crash of thunder or a flash of lightning, and dashed herself and her master to pieces in a thick plantation, close by his own home.

“The mare was found dead,” they tell me, “and poor master not much better. He never spoke a word till you came, Miss. It’s a hard day for us all—hard on him, poor dear gentleman, to die and leave no son to follow him ; and hard on us all, for we shall never serve a better master.”

So they speak, their selfishness making itself apparent at once, in a way that is essentially human. And I listen to them in silence, and look at them curiously, and wonder why Kismet couldn’t have executed her grand *coup* in company with one of them, instead of with the one whose loss has left me bankrupt in hope and friendship ; for, though he had transferred his love from me to Claire, I know for a fact that I have lost in him my staunchest, truest, worthiest friend.

The days pass over, and Sydney is buried ; and papa comes home from the funeral, and from hearing the will read, with tidings that make me so proud and so unhappy. He has left money to me, and from the wording of the will every one who has heard it has gathered that I might have been his wife if I had pleased, and infers that I must have been mad not to have pleased. I don’t care for the money—I don’t want it, for Aunt Helen has repaid me the two hundred pounds which I lent to Theo, so he will be screened under any circumstances. Still, though I don’t want it and don’t care for it, I love the proof it affords me of the estimation in which Syd held

me, though I failed, like a fool, to love him in the right way.

Claire listens to the tidings very quietly, but somehow or other I can't help feeling that she doesn't quite like them. When papa says—

"You're the best judge, I suppose, Tim ; but, if I had known that poor fellow ever thought of you in that way, I should have cautioned you to think twice before you said 'no' to an offer that any wise woman would have accepted."

"Tim mistook friendship for love, I think," Claire tries to explain. "He never proposed to you, did he, Tim? Never asked you right out to marry him?"

I recall what he did say at Brighton, and though I know well what he meant, I am justified in assuaging any feeling Claire may have in the matter by assuring her that "he never did ask me right out to marry him."

"I thought not," Claire says, a light frown flitting over her face. "I am sorry that there's anything in the world to make any one think such nonsense. He had a warm regard for Tim, a true regard, but Tim was not the one poor dear Syd wanted to marry."

Papa merely lifts his eyebrows and his shoulders a little, and Claire continues to explain.

"If Syd had lived, I believe I should have married him in time. His unselfishness was so winning, and the truth was stamped upon everything that he said ; and I have suffered so much from selfishness and deceit—haven't I, Tim?" she continues, with the tears bubbling up into her sweet eyes.

Poor Claire ! She has indeed "suffered," but she does not suffer supinely. The outside world would never guess that she has experienced a single pang on the subject of Theo Bligh's defalcation and dishonour. Much as I admire her for not being supine, for not sitting down and weeping, "Woe's me !" under her affliction, I still can't blind myself to the fact that, if her vainty had not received a bruise that hurt her more than the love-wound, she could not have portrayed heartlessness quite as effectively

as she has done. But even to myself I won't blame her, for she has been sinned against deeply by one whom I still love so well, that I seem a traitor to my sister whenever I think of him.

"If Theo had only been steadfast, how happy this money might have made you two," I say meditatively to Claire one day; and she answers promptly, as if the subject had presented itself to her mind before—

"Yes, indeed; if it had only come to us before, he wouldn't have disgraced himself by a marriage with that dreadful old woman, that philanthropic fool; it would have been only like you to hand it all over to him, or to me for him, and Theo's love would have lasted if it had been strengthened by the thought of ten thousand pounds; but now, what's the good of it? It's not making you any the happier. You had as much as you want to spend while you're Tim Vincent before it came, and it's caused Sydney's brother and sister, not to feel annoyed with him exactly, but to think themselves very admirable and magnanimous people for not being annoyed with you. It's not that they want what you've got, Tim—of course their 'dear brother was quite justified in leaving personal property to any one he pleased,' as Mrs. Tierney says; but they think about it a little, and thinking doesn't make them happier, any more than the money makes you happier."

"It's a tangled yarn," I say gloomily, for Claire's remarks are about as dispiriting as any that I have ever listened to; and Claire replies—

"I was afraid you would say something of the sort. You have acquired the habit from Theo of fitting a line of poetry to the majority of things that are under discussion, and some other bore has inoculated you with the fatal disease of uttering platitudes about the remainder."

I am not in the least nettled at her aspersions on my intelligence, but I am pained that she should think me false enough to agree with anything like implied disparagement of Theo's mental qualities. I have been hard pressed and compelled to surrender all faith in, and all

hope of, his moral ones. But I will strike one little blow for that brilliant ability of his, which, as much as his superb appearance, is to blame for my abject slavery to him.

“If Theo had had the saving characteristic of being a bore, he wouldn’t have been so fatally pleasant to every one, old and young, whose path he has crossed; and if he hadn’t been so fatally pleasant, he wouldn’t have been tempted, by flattery and gold, to the dishonourable things he has done,” I say.

Her eyes flash and her colour rises.

“I believe you’d be tame enough to make friends with him even now, if he crossed your path with that foolish old woman (who has made herself a laughing-stock) in his train. He has broken you most thoroughly on the wheel of his vanity, and yet you make yourself his champion even to me.”

“I have a presentiment that, some day or other, you’ll be glad that I’ve never run him down, Claire,” I say; and Claire shakes her head emphatically, negating my suggestion, and tries to make me believe that her love for Theo is dead beyond all power of resuscitation.

It is soon after this that I receive a letter marked “Private,” in the large, free, well-known handwriting of Theo. The receipt of it embarrasses me cruelly, for every one at the breakfast-table catches sight of the superscription at once, and marks the “Private,” and looks away from me with the laboured air of being intensely indifferent, which only people who are intensely interested about anything can assume. Intuition tells me that, for his sake, I had better attend to his careless attempt to secure privacy for the contents of his letter, and at the same time sympathy for Claire teaches me that the mere idea of there being anything clandestine in his correspondence with me must be exquisitely painful to her. Conflicting feeling makes me clumsy, and urges me on to the pursuit of a feeble, futile course that is infinitely distressing to myself. I half open the letter; it is thick

and long apparently. Claire still looks away elaborately, but I feel as if she had eyes in the back of her head—eyes that are endowed with the power of inspecting my soul and analysing the motives which influence it. I put the letter down, and pick up a sheet of the *Times*, and feel fast sinking into a state of idiotcy, when Claire forces a conclusion by saying—

“Tim, hadn’t you better read that letter and know the worst at once? It’s from Theo, of course we can all see that—and probably he wants some favour from you. Don’t be afraid to open it; I will not tempt you to betray him to me.”

“Poor Tim! the office of everybody’s friend is about the most unpleasant one in the world to fill,” papa laughs.

Then they disperse; Claire sailing out of the room with a debonaire assumption of having nothing at all to do with either Theo or me, which is, to say the least of it, ungrateful, as I am ready to forfeit every chance of happiness which may be left to me in life for the sake of making either of them happy.





CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ALL FOR HIM.

“Morwell-in-the-Marsh, Essex,
August 20th.

86



MY DEAR TIM,

“My foot is on the Macpherson native heath no longer. You would let soft pity fill your kind little soul concerning me, if you could only guess what a time I have had of it up there, with the helpmeet whose unnatural selection of me removed me from the Ravensbourne sphere. It's an awful thing to be an old woman's darling, I can tell you, especially if one shares the dubious honours of the situation with every homeless and starving cur that finds its way to her.

“Seriously, if I committed an error in marrying as I did, I've been punished for it as fully as if it were a crime. Mrs. Macpherson keeps a tight hand on the money, and diligently checks every effort I make to conduct myself like a free agent. In fact, she has, under that genial guise, as grasping and grinding a spirit as was ever parsimoniously trained and perfected. Her attempts to keep me in subjection would be odious and unbearable in a young and pretty woman—in an old and ugly hag they're simply maddening. I have got away down here for a week or two—alone, luckily, but I

shouldn't be surprised at any moment to see her, her wrongs, and her cursed cats, and arrogant old servants arrive. I have heard of the windfall you had when poor Sydney Dale died: if I had been the lucky owner of his wealth, I wouldn't have waited till my death to endow you with it. You can run from your station down to this place in a couple of hours. I wish you would come off quietly one morning and see me. The sight of your dear little face would cheer me up and send me back to my onerous duties better able to fulfil them. The fact is, *I must see you, Tim*, and I can't venture near Ravensbourne. Aunt Helen is up at the Highland home; she and Mrs. Macpherson hate each other cordially. Drop me a line saying what day you're coming, and say nothing to any one about having heard from me.

“Yours ever truly,

“THEO BLIGH.

“Address me at the Golden Lion, and as Theo ‘Macpherson,’—I've to pay that tribute to her besotted family pride.”

The letter burdens me. He thinks it so easy to deceive, that he has probably never given one consideration to the subject of the difficulties which will encompass me about it. I feel about it very much as a murderer must about the best means of disposing of the dead body. I can't put it in the fire, for the weather is warm, and there are no fires in which to put it; moreover, I don't like to destroy it till I have more thoroughly mastered its contents, and I am afraid, if I tear it up, that I shall forget the address. If I say nothing about it, Claire will conjecture something worse than the reality, perhaps; and if I say something and not everything, they will all suspect that which I keep back of being too bad to bear the light of day. For the remainder of this day I go about with the stamp of guilt on my brow. I take the letter out of my pocket two or three times when I am

alone, and begin reading it, and each time I am interrupted and startled out of all semblance of self-possession and innocence by some one coming upon me suddenly. I diplomatised more than I ever did in my life before about anything (excepting the two hundred pounds), in order to get a quiet half-hour in some secluded spot in which to write my reply—for it never occurs to me for a moment to disobey him. I drop him the few lines he has asked for, and I fix an early day for my surreptitious trip down to Morwell-in-the-Marsh. Then I fall to plotting and planning how best to deal with that early day when it arrives, and altogether I feel very unhappy and criminal for bearing such a load of deceit about with me in the midst of my innocent family. It is accident in reality, but it has very much the appearance of a design to frustrate my plans, when Claire actually proposes "an outing," in a very simple, quiet way for this very day.

"Let us take the pony carriage and a luncheon basket, and just go, the two of us, to some pretty place, and spend the day there. It's too glorious a day to waste in the house. Will you do it, Tim? or have you any other scheme to propose?"

I am dyed a guilty red in an instant to the roots of my hair, as I stammer out a lame apology for not falling in with her proposition.

"How limp you've become about everything lately, Tim," she complains. "I've broken the day up in my imagination, and it will be quite lost to me; for I shall not know what to do with it, as you won't go with me. What *are* you going to do?"

Her untoward pertinacity as to the pursuits I contemplate following this day confuse and lead me into a fearful mesh of falsehood.

"I hardly know; I haven't made up my mind; it's too hot to do anything very definite," I say hesitatingly.

"Oh, Tim, how ungracious you've grown! You have no plans of your own, and yet you won't agree to mine. Tim, you're not like yourself; you're changing. This

money that poor dear Syd left you is doing you more harm than good."

The accusation is awful to me; but I will let her think me "changed," purse-proud, anything she pleases to say, rather than say anything that may lead her to suspect that Theo is once again weaving a net for my feet. I am conscientious about the majority of things, but when he is in question, though I don't absolutely lose my sense of right and wrong, I muddle them up together and make him my only law. That he needs me now I am convinced. Theo would never take the trouble to write a long letter to me unless he needed me sorely. Therefore I must go to him, though in order to do so I must put Claire out, and make use of endless subterfuges.

I have found that a train leaves our station for Morwell-in-the-Marsh at twelve o'clock, and that train I must catch. I hear Claire say she is going over to the market-town about seven miles off to shop, at eleven, so she will be out of my way. Unluckily, she chooses to have the pony carriage, and as it would be an unprecedented thing for me to take the brougham out in the morning, and, additionally, as I don't want any of the servants to know that I go to the station, I resolve to ride. There is nothing out of course in my riding away alone for several hours at a time, but this day I feel as if my object were patent to groom, gardener, lodge-keeper, and everyone else who meets me as I ride away from Ravensbourne.

The necessity for concealment seems to me to be so urgent that I make a *détour* and reach the station by a circuitous route, and only just in time to put my horse into safe keeping, and take my ticket. "I shall be back by the five train," I say to the station-master, who has seen me consign Firefly to a porter; "see that my horse is taken care of, will you?"

I spring into a carriage as I speak, and the station-master comes forward with maddening civility, just as the train is off, to assure me that Firefly shall be sent up to the Ravensbourne stables, and fetched for me again

at five. Everybody will know everything! I am perfectly powerless! The train runs out of the station, and as we wind our way along, I catch a glimpse of the porter climbing up into my saddle, as a preliminary to taking Firefly back to Ravensbourne and instructing all there whom it may or may not concern as to my very dubious-looking proceedings. How angry papa will be! How indignant Claire will feel with me! How thoroughly they will all of them misunderstand me, and how impossible it will be for me to explain my real motives! I form and re-form a hundred stories, and know the whole time that I shall not tell one of them, and that the truth will get itself blurted out to the detriment of Theo.

I have let Theo know the time of my arrival, and as we run into the little station, which is represented by an uncovered platform and a sad-looking porter, I half expect to see him there waiting for me. But he has not thought it necessary to pay me that attention, and so I take my dreary path from the station to the village alone.

My progress is a very depressing one. The sun is out strongly by this time; the hedges are cut down so low that there is not any shade to be found, however close I creep to them. I am in my riding gear, and therefore have no parasol. I am painfully conscious of being a very conspicuous object, even here by the unfrequented wayside. How much worse it will be when I go up to the door of the Golden Lion. How distinctly I shall be seen; how derisively I shall be thought about; how desperately foolish I feel for being here at all.

As I go along, the dismal appropriateness of the name of the village for which I am bound strikes me vividly. The muddy marshes are about me on every side—dull, uninteresting wet lands, intersected here and there by narrow dykes. What can have brought Theo down into this flat, tame country? It is not a sporting country, and, if it were, the time of year forbids the notion of sport; it is not a country for sketching; and I feel sure that there is not so much as a trout stream in the neigh-

bourhood. What can have brought Theo here? His home unhappiness must be of a desperate kind indeed, since it has driven him to such a doleful harbour of refuge as Morwell-in-the Marsh. What can have brought him here?

Indications of the village being close to me are on either side of the way, in the shape of a few stray cottages and one or two houses of rather a better order. Then I seem to come with a sudden jerk upon the church which stands at the roadside end of a large, straggling, unpicturesque yard. The heart of the village is lying open before me; in fact I am in its only street.

I pass the village shop, where groceries and draperies contend for empire in the dusty window, and begin to look out anxiously for the Golden Lion. I have just caught sight of him, as I am about to pass the green-barred gateway of an abominably glaring, shadeless, stucco-and-shellwork garden, when my steps are brought to an abrupt standstill by the sight of Theo, and of the cause of his being here.

There he stands in the chequered shade of a most unromantic-looking porch, talking to the same pretty, graceful-looking woman with whom I saw him skating on the rink. Apparently she is striving to detain him with pretty eager eloquence and graceful animated gestures, and he seems laughingly careless as to whether he goes or stays, for he saunters backwards and forwards with a cigar between his lips, his hands in his pockets, and the well-known well-loved smile of bright indifference on the face that is still so exquisitely dear to me.

My habited and hatted form must cast a peculiar shadow on the glaring path, for he turns to look at me, and is down by the gate in an instant.

"Dear Tim, your train is early," he begins at once, "or I should have been there to meet you. I was just going to the station, and now you're upon me and have saved me the trouble. You *are* a brick, Tim!"

He has passed the green barrier and is by my side in the street as he says this. Then I suppose it occurs to

him that he has left the lady rather unceremoniously, for he opens the gate and runs back to her, and—I do not hear his farewell.

When he comes back to me he has thrown away his cigar, his air of indifference, and a goodly portion of his gaiety. There is almost solemnity in the earnestness with which he says—

“I’m in an awful fix, Tim ; if you hadn’t come down here to me to-day, I should have risked everything and presented myself at Ravensbourne. I never wanted a friend so much in my life as I do now, and naturally I thought of you at once. You look fagged, dear.”

No ; I am not fagged. I am not anything but keenly conscious that if this man were good, painstaking, conscientious, not given to acting upon impulse, and endowed with a large share of that prudent, cautious self-control which is wisdom’s root, he would not be half as interesting or half as dear to me as he is now that he is his own faulty self. The weight of my own folly in being so lenient to all his shortcomings fatigues me.

“I *am* fagged,” I say emphatically. “Theo, not even our old friendship justifies you and me in playing such a perfidious part to—to ——” I hesitate, for I am not sure to whom we are playing the “perfidious part,” whether it is to Claire or to his wife.

So fearfully have my notions as to right and wrong been distorted by my keen appreciation and dread of the difficulties encompassing the cleft stick in which I have been placed for the last few months, that I am still doubtful as to whether Claire has not the highest claim still on Theo’s personal allegiance. What is the real solution of the riddle of his being here with the lady with whom I saw him on the rink ? I am not naturally curious on such matters, but womanly feeling causes me to revolt against Theo’s cool and practised deceptions. I long to ask him who and what this woman is. I long to reproach him for the omission of that courtesy towards me to which I, as a gentlewoman, am entitled, which he has shown in allowing me to arrive at the

station unwelcomed, and walk to the village unattended (though I am here on his summons), while he is in idle dalliance with this strange lady in a garden that is redolent of bad taste. But though I long to question and to reproach, I know that it will be useless to do either, for he will evade the truth in replying to the question, and laugh light-heartedly at the reproaches.

“Well, Tim,” he says gaily, as I hesitate after launching the words “We are both playing a perfidious part to ——” at him; “well, Tim, before you hurl any more anathemas at me, let me ask how you think domestic happiness agrees with me. Am I looking as well as I did in those happy days before Mrs. Macpherson claimed me for her own, when ‘I was a free and a fetterless thing,’ like the Greek girl’s heart?”

I look at him; undeniably he is better looking than ever. He seems to me to have increased in stature, but a second glance shows me that this effect is produced solely by his more erect bearing, and more determined air. He has lost a little of the *greyhoundy* grace of the boy, and gained in exchange the grander grace of the man who feels that he has a good position in the world, which his *personnel* well fits him to fill. Still he does not look a bit like a married man, and I can’t help giving a moment or two to speculating as to whether that good-looking girl whom he has just left in the garden is aware that he is one or not.

“Well, Tim,” he repeats impatiently, “out with the truth: has age withered or custom tamed me yet?”

Before I can answer, he turns in at the door of the Golden Lion, and I am too staggered at finding myself in the parlour of a common inn, in company with Mr. Theo Bligh, to give a cool and critical answer to his question.

“Where is your wife, and what are you doing here, Theo?” I ask instead.

“My wife” (he makes a grimace expressive of the most profound distaste as he mentions her) “is up at her own place—I believe I’ve told you that already; I

am here—simply because being here is as good as being anywhere else.”

“You had no motive in coming? You have no friends?”

“None,” he says, with the consummate coolness of a master in the art of lying.

“Then was your meeting with that lady with whom I saw you on the rink accidental?” I say, goaded into something like unseemly persistence in pursuit of knowledge by the calm way in which he assumes that I am credulous enough to believe everything he says.

“I’ll satisfy your curiosity on that point, and then we’ll get on to a more interesting topic—ourselves, namely,” he replies. “If it hadn’t been for that young lady—she’s a fine girl, isn’t she?—I should never have heard of Morwell-in-the-Marsh. Some one introduced us on the rink, and she spoke of the place she lived in, and somehow or other succeeded in giving me a favourable impression of this infernal hole. You see, she’s an unsophisticated girl, Tim—attached to the home of her youth, and all that sort of thing ——”

“And she asked you here?” I interrupt.

“She did nothing of the kind,” he answers, flushing up; “but when the yoke of Mrs. Macpherson became too heavy the other day, I thought I’d come to the most peaceful spot of which I’d ever heard, partly because it’s peaceful, and partly because it’s within reach of Ravensbourne. Does my explanation satisfy you?”

“Not a bit.”

“What more do you want to know?”

“Does she know you—are married?” I ask. The last two words come laggingly, for as my question first framed itself in my mind it stood thus: “Does she know you were engaged to *my* sister?”

“Marriage has never come upon the *tapis* between us,” he says coolly. “Do *you* find it necessary to explain to every man you meet that you are not married? Unless you do, I don’t think you ought to call me to account for not proclaiming to every

casual acquaintance I meet the unpleasant fact that I am."

"Then she doesn't know it?" I urge.

"Certainly not," he laughs; "why should she? My object is to promote the greater happiness of the greater number at the cost of the least trouble to myself. Now, I don't think it would make Miss Ashton a bit happier to know that I'm married, and the mention of the fact would involve me in a long-winded explanation; accordingly, I obey the golden rule of silence. Are you satisfied now?"

"Why did you send for me?" I ask.

"Because I want your help, Tim, and you have promised that, whenever I want it, I shall have it. What made you come in your habit? You're so awfully conspicuous, all the village will be talking about you, and asking who you are, and why you came."

"All the village will be talking?" I repeat, with contemptuous emphasis. "Really, Theo, if the village and its possible opinion and probable impertinence are of more importance to you than my presence here, it's a pity you sent for me, isn't it?"

"I can't answer that question till the close of your visit," he says, with that invincible good-humour which closes all argument, and leaves the aggressed in the position of the aggressor. "Time's slipping on too; shall I offer you some luncheon before I bother you about my business?"

His hand is on the bell to ring and order it, but I stop him. Food would choke me at this juncture.

"No, thank you, I'm not hungry. Tell me your business." I try to speak coldly, but cold accents have about as much effect on him as chilled shot has on the impenetrable side of a man-of-war.

"'Drink, pretty creature, drink,' then," he says, offering me a glass of sherry. "No? Well, it would make you ill, probably, for it's sweet and hot, and we don't value those qualities in our sherry as a rule. To come straight to the point, Tim, as the time is short—I

want money awfully, and I know you'll let me have it."

"How much?" I ask timidly; for, to tell the truth, it occurs to me that Theo may fancy the whole sum, and in that case, though I shall be scouted for my folly by my family and society, I shall probably let him have it.

He pauses for an instant and then says—

"Let's see. There's the two hundred I owe you already; let me have eight hundred more—that will make it a cool thousand ——"

"Aunt Helen paid me back the two hundred," I say eagerly.

"Did she? Bless her!" he says, with something really like an approach to gratitude and warmth. "Then lend me a thousand straight out, Tim, will you, dear? You can get at it without going to your father, can't you?"

I nod assent. I am too glad, too ready to serve him, but my heart is too full to speak.

"I can never thank you enough, never repay you for the kindness, Tim," he goes on. "It was my right to have had it from that horrible old woman I've married; but she wants to buy my presence, and a show of what she calls decent affection and respect, with her coin. By the way, Tim, I can't help feeling that *you* let me in for that business; your letters were filled with hysterical tributes to her generosity and readiness to part with her money to any deserving object, and I thought it a pity that it should be frittered away upon a number of little cats and dogs, when such a deserving object as myself needed it."

"I think I would rather have seen you dead than married as you are," I say indignantly; "don't accuse me of having had any hand in such an iniquitous union."

"As I had to remark to you on a former occasion, cease, rude Boreas," he laughs. "And now—excuse the apparent rudeness, but I must remind you that you ought to be getting back to the station. I'll walk with you."



CHAPTER XXXIX.

DO I DESERVE IT?

IN order that I may catch my train and reach Ravensbourne at something like a respectable time, we are obliged to walk fast; but, urgent as is the need for haste, Theo finds time to run in for a minute to speak to Miss Ashton, who apparently spends her life in the garden, for she is sauntering about its glaring little gravel walks now as we pass.

“Who is Miss Ashton?” I ask, when he rejoins me.

“Rather a nice girl as that class of country girls go,” he replies carelessly. “Her father is a rich retired tradesman here. She’s good looking, isn’t she?”

I concede the fact, but not very heartily. Miss Ashton’s good looks are not of an order that appeal to me. I grant that she is tall, lithe, well-formed, and that no fault can be found with her features. But there is no mobility in her face, and the only expression I have seen in her eyes is one of leering interest in Theo Bligh. How Theo, who has loved Claire and been fascinated by graceful Lady Torrens, who satisfies a man’s head as well as his heart, can be even temporarily in subjection to the soulless charms of this uninteresting piece of mere animal beauty is perplexing to me.

“She has a handsome head,” he goes on, utterly regardless of the depreciation of Miss Ashton which is

conveyed in my tone ; “ a very good-looking head, indeed. Not much in it, you know.”

“ Why discuss her,” I ask.

“ Why? Well, for this reason—she’s the most interesting object I’ve seen by the wayside as we have come along ; and she’s awfully fond of me ? ”

I am awfully fond of him myself—perilously, idiotically, hopelessly fond of him ; but a strong sense of the iniquity on Miss Ashton’s part of loving a married man sets in upon me as he speaks.

“ Has she been disgracefully imprudent enough to tell you so ? ” I ask.

“ ‘ Pray, goody, please to moderate the rancour of your tongue.’ My dear Tim, why should *you* want to monopolise the privilege? She’s fond of me, so are you ; so are a number of other women. There’s no harm in it, and it makes things pleasant for me.”

“ But you’re married,” I protest.

“ So are several of the other women—that squares it, doesn’t it ? ” he says blithely. “ I say, Tim, we’re in very good time for the train—settle that matter for me as soon as you can, and say nothing about it, will you ? ”

Of course I say “ Yes ” to both his requests, and he proceeds to make the matter of helping him easy to me.

“ I won’t bother you to come over here again, Tim ; our seeing one another without the saving knowledge that the restraining eye of Mrs. Macpherson is upon us might be bad for us, mightn’t it? Dear little Tim, you’re just as good as a sister ; who’s your man of business ? ”

I tell him, “ The same as was Sydney Dale’s.”

“ That’s all right,” he says encouragingly. “ He and your father are not on the best terms, I found, when I was staying with poor Syd Dale. Just write to him to-night, Tim, and put it strongly. Make the cheque payable to yourself, not to me—I wouldn’t compromise you for the world, dear ; and people might talk if it were known that you were lending me such a sum of money. It’s entirely for your sake that I speak.”

I am nearly struck dumb by this mark of his consideration, still I manage to say—

“Thanks, Theo, but let them talk.” I restrain myself from adding, “No one can think me a greater fool than I think myself.”

“Here comes your train,” he says, as carelessly as if we were sure to meet again soon, and as if it were no ordinary errand that had brought me over. “I wish you had not come in riding gear; it’s bad form for a girl in your position to be going about in this way. You’re not a Miss Ashton, remember.”

“You say that to teach me to feel that you recognise the difference in our position, and yet you treat her as a friend—you put her on the platform of equality with yourself! You men *are* coarse—some of you!” I exclaim.

“Now, don’t go off in that way,” he says, as the train puffs up and I bounce into the carriage. “I’m down here on business, and I meet a girl I’ve met before, and I’m civil to her. Why shouldn’t I be civil to her? Give me your hand. Good-bye; how’s Claire?”

With the last words the best Theo shows himself. Real feeling flushes his face. I take back this scrap of consolation with me: his professed love for Claire was not a lie.

I need all the consolation I can scrape together as the train bears me swiftly along to home and confusion. How shall I account for myself if I am questioned? How shall I deport myself under their observation if I am not questioned? How shall I clear myself if it all comes out, without involving Theo? I ask myself these riddles over and over again, and as I run on in the train I can’t read them.

The home station at last! I nerve myself to bear the worst, spring out on the platform, meaning to call for Firefly and gallop home without giving myself a moment for further thought, and there stands papa.

“I’ve brought the brougham up for you, Tim,” he says quietly; “I thought you’d find it pleasanter than riding home.”

So I step into the brougham, feeling that my character is restored in the eyes of all the station-people, who must have wondered at my going off in such a dubious and unconventional way in the morning, but feeling much more keenly that I am afraid to be alone with papa.

Despair makes me very desperate. As he seats himself by my side, I turn round and meet his eyes.

"Papa, tell me the worst you think about my going off in such a funny way; tell me at once."

"That your heart has misled your head, Tim," he says quite cheerily; "that some nature far less noble than your own is influencing you, against your better judgment, through your affection. I suppose it's that scamp Bligh, is it?"

"I have seen Theo," I say quietly, though my lips grow stiff.

"Is his wife dead or dying? Is he trying to sound you about Claire?" papa questions savagely. "He shall never have her, if he crawls from his house of shame up in the Highlands to Ravensbourne on his knees ——"

"His wife is quite well, and he only mentioned Claire to ask how she was," I cry out eagerly. "Papa, don't be too hard on him. He has sinned and he is suffering; he wanted to hear about us all; he knew I was the only one foolish enough to go to him, and so he sent for me."

"Is he staying anywhere near here with his wife?"

"No, he is alone—on business at a place in —— He said I wasn't to tell you where, though."

"Business!" papa repeats sneeringly. "He's deluded you with that idea, has he? Well, don't go again, Tim; that's all I have to say now." And as he says it we reach Ravensbourne, and I breathe freely under the conviction that papa hasn't the faintest notion of the real reason of Theo's desire to see me.

But Claire has to be met still, and Claire is a woman who knows Theo as well as I do myself. She spares me during dinner, for we have several guests this evening, and one of them, Cuthbert Dale, is much favoured by my father as an aspirant to the hand of Claire. But when

we are sauntering about in the moonlight on the lawn, knocking about the croquet balls, she says—

“Did you enjoy your trip to-day, Tim?”

I can answer this question truthfully, at any rate: I say “No” emphatically.

She comes and links her arm within mine, and leads me off from the others.

“Poor dear Tim!” she says softly. “What a victim you are! I won’t ask to whom you went or why you went, dear; I seem to know all about it without asking. I’ll only say one thing: is he in trouble?”

“His marriage naturally makes him wretched,” I say extenuatingly.

“Don’t you believe it, Tim; *nothing* makes Theo wretched but want of money, and surely he has plenty of that now?”

“How can I tell you about his private affairs?” I say evasively. “He seems wretched—well, not that exactly, but reckless and regardless of consequences; and being these things, he must be wretched.”

Claire laughs.

“That’s your reasoning, is it? Why, Tim, he was reckless and regardless of consequences when he made love to you and me at the same time, but I don’t think he was a bit ‘wretched;’ he leaves all the wretchedness to be done for him by his friends. I am glad I’m past that phase; I can never feel anything about him again. But I’m glad that he only wanted to see you to-day to throw a halo of romance over his position. I was afraid he wanted to regain a friendly footing at Ravensbourne, and while I am mistress he shall not come here.”

I repeat her sentence: “While you are mistress?”

“Yes. It may not be for long; I haven’t the art of wearing the willow gracefully. Cuthbert Dale isn’t *quite* as dear a fellow as poor Syd was, but he reminds me of Syd, and it’s good to be reminded of something honest, and manly, and true. It will end in my going to Dalesmeet—if he’s pertinacious enough.”

I look at my sister and admire her for her sense.

After all, why should she waste her life on an idea, and that idea so untrustworthy a one as Theo—especially now that Theo is a married man, and to think of him is sin, and shame, and social degradation? I respect Claire for her resolution, but I know I couldn't follow her example.

She is not put to the test yet awhile. Cuthbert Dale is a young man who acts with the greatest deliberation; and though he pursues his suit steadily, he is in no haste to proffer it. He evidently desires to be sure of his ground—to be more certain than he is at present of Claire being genuine. She leads him on, and flatters him so prettily, that I wonder how he can withstand the temptation to claim her "for his Queen of Love" before all the world. But perhaps he knows something of his brother's story, and may fear that she is fooling him too.

The little business matter between Theo and myself has been settled very satisfactorily and privately as far as the transfer of the money to him is concerned, and he has even begun to pay me heavy interest for it—which is too noble of him, I think, as not a word had been said about interest when the loan was made. I receive business letters from his lawyers regularly, but from himself I hear nothing, and I begin once more to think of him as one who has passed out of my life for ever.

After all, there is a great deal of happiness in my life. The twins are both fully and fairly engaged to gentlemen who need not be more exhaustively described here than as most "excellent matches, and admirable young men." One is a wealthy rector; the other, the equally wealthy squire of his parish. They have hunted in couples ever since their boyhood, and now they come courting together, and agree to be united in holy wedlock on the same day; and I believe it would be perfectly immaterial to either of them which of the twins he married. Altogether domestic happiness reigns supreme at Ravensbourne, and it is not in my nature to be antagonistic to an order of things which makes other people so perfectly happy.

I am getting well accustomed to the discipline of rising up each morning and not expecting the day to bring forth anything specially pleasant to me, when I am upset again by a request from Mrs. Macpherson that I will go up and stay with her in her own house, amidst the pine-trees and strong blasts which surround and sweep about the hold of the Macpherson.

“You are the only person I can think of who can give me comfort. I am a foolish and unhappy woman, and I care not to be alone, and dare not have anyone but you here,” she writes.

Am I worthy of her trust? Do I deserve it?





CHAPTER XL.

CAIRNHOLME.

THE journey has been a trying one to me, both physically and mentally. It is a long one, and I am not quite as strong as of old, and it has been a harrowing one, for its solitariness has enabled me to have a long and undisturbed interview with recollection. But now, after a three hours' drive through wild, grand mountain scenery, I arrive at Cairnholme, the Highland home of the Macphersons—the house of which Theo Bligh is master by right of his marriage with its mistress.

Everything has been vividly impressed upon me from the moment of my feeling that I have entered the Macpherson border. The same grim old man-servant who was with her in London has been sent with the coach to meet me, and at a certain point he gets down from his seat by the coachman, looks in at the window, and tells me, as if it were part of the programme, that “we’ve now come on our leddie’s land.” I look out, eagerly, curiously—for her property is Theo’s—and I see vast heath-covered tracts, dotted with sturdy cattle and brightened by groups of clean-looking sheep, stretching away on every side. All is Theo’s, by right of his marriage with the lady of the land. How I hate this bit of hardy Scotland, as this view of it first dawns upon me.

The road winds away into a dell at last, shows signs of

culture, and presently is barred by a gate before it passes along between two thickly grown rows of pines. Sheeny silver firs, ladylike larches, and rowan berries mix themselves up together, and form a lovely late summer picture; and suddenly we emerge from the shade of the trees, and pull up in front of a big porch, under the eaves of which I see standing Mrs. Macpherson, Aunt Helen, and Laird.

I feel that my face is covered with blushes, as I spring out to meet the dear old friend who has done herself and my judgment of her the wrong by marrying Theo Bligh in her old age. She is not the bright, rosy-faced, elderly woman who met me, some months ago, at the London terminus any longer. The smiles no longer shed themselves sunnily over her lips, nor does tender solicitude beam any more from her watchful, observant eyes. She looks like a disappointed, humiliated woman, as she welcomes me and presses me to her heart. But still there is a little air of pride in her manner, as she turns to lead me into the house, and notices the glance of undisguised, honest admiration which I bestow on the novel scene.

Cairnholme is only a two-storeyed house, and from its exterior I had not been led to expect such a hall as this in which we pause. It is pannelled with pinewood, and its grained roof runs the whole height of the building. The floor is covered with rugs and skins of all kinds; the corners are fitted up with stuffed stags, antlers, and other trophies of the chase. Mild as the weather is down with us in the south, a chill has come into the mountain air, but this is set at defiance by the huge wood fires that are burning on dogs at either end of the hall. Near one of these fires a large round table, covered with a snowy cloth, stands spread with every description of grain and confectionery dainty that is admissable at afternoon tea. As on a former occasion, Mrs. Burnie, the sedate waiting-woman, comes to relieve me of my travelling wraps, and Nannie, the comfortable cat, purrs a welcome to me from the depths of a fat chair. But, unhappy as I was on that

former occasion, I can't help feeling still more unhappy now, as I reflect that Theo is master here, and my host; that Aunt Helen is present to watch me: and that Mrs. Macpherson is sad, sorry, and pitiably conscious of the fall she has had in my estimation.

I make a great struggle to be natural and at my ease. I discourse as volubly as I can to Aunt Helen concerning Ravensbourne and the march of events there, and try to mention as if it were a matter of no moment to anybody that I think "it will be a match between Claire and Cuthbert Dale." I also speak of the great friendship which now exists between Lady Torrens and ourselves, and at the mention of this latter circumstance, I cannot be blind to the fact that Aunt Helen pricks up her ears, and hoists a little signal of interest in her cheeks, in the guise of a blush.

At length I nerve myself to say, "How is your husband?"

It's an awful thing to ask—it's an even more awful thing for me to mention him thus—but I must not call him Theo, and I *can't* call him Mr. Macpherson. It seems to me that it will be wording the price of sin to give him this latter designation. So, though it makes my tongue ache to call him what he is, Mrs. Macpherson's husband, I brave the pain and do it.

"He's out on the hills schooling a young horse," Aunt Helen replies, as Mrs. Macpherson looks aside with tearful eyes and quivering lips. "There's not much to keep a young man at home; I mean there's not much to amuse him in an out-of-the-way place like this, you see, Tim. I tell Mrs. Macpherson she'd be wise to give up the grandeur, and go to some place where Theo would be able to get *work* to employ his time."

The words are dropped out lethargically from Aunt Helen's lips, but I detect, for all their monotonous cadence, a malicious ring in them. She loves Theo, and is glad that he is wealthy, but—she cannot be lenient to Mrs. Macpherson for having been the means of giving it to him in such a way.

We sit sipping our tea for a few minutes, talking awkwardly and dispiritedly, until at last, happily for me, the thought strikes Mrs. Macpherson that I may like to see "some of the rooms." As soon as we are in the spacious, airily furnished, and most comfortable-looking drawing-room, away from Aunt Helen, the barrier of reserve breaks down, and my hostess shows me herself in her own honest, true colours.

"I am a wretched woman this day, Tim," she says, "and all through having been such a foolish one that I deserve no pity. I've only one comfort, my dear, and that is that I have saved some better woman than myself from a miserable fate, by marrying a man who hasn't it in him to be grateful, and who loves himself better than all the rest of the world put together."

"I am sorry you're unhappy," I say, as gently as I can; and then I think of Theo's wicked charm, and wonder how she can have dared to marry him.

"It's all deserved, all deserved," she says hastily; "he is young and I am old, my child, and the wickedness and the folly of it are greater than it was when 'twas the other way with you and Robbie. I saw all the wrong and foolishness then clearly enough, didn't I? and I saved *you* from a fate that would have been as hard for you to bear as *he* finds *his* with me."

There is no anger, only pain and sorrow, in her voice as she speaks of her young, faulty husband. I am touched by her forbearance, in spite of my contempt for her infatuation and my indignation at the result which it has brought about, and so I say,—

"A man can't be as unhappy as a woman under such circumstances; he has his liberty, and all sorts of resources that are denied to women."

She looks at me sharply.

"All sorts of resources?" she repeats. "That's what his Aunt Helen, as he calls her, declares I deny to him. I offer him the mastership of the house, and the management of the property—they're offices that Scottish gentlemen have filled with pride; but he just shrugs his shoulders

and goes off with that laugh of his without a word, and I know that all the interest he takes in the place that is so dear to me is the money he gets from it to spend on his own pleasure away from it."

She pauses, and I remember Morwell-in-the-Marsh, his flirtation by the wayside with Miss Ashton, and have no words at command wherewith to answer her. We are standing at one of the windows that open down to the floor as she speaks, looking away down a long vista of loveliness into the very heart of the dell, and I cannot wonder at her resenting his indifference to a place that so abounds in beauty. It is but natural that she should forget that she, in her age and lack of all comeliness, blurs the fairest aspect of the place in his eyes. It is but natural that she should feel hurt and aggrieved that the man whom she has made lord and master over a place that has never owned any other than genuine, legitimate Macpherson sway before, should show himself to be arrogantly indifferent to the honour. It is but natural that she should feel these things about him, but even as I acknowledge this truth to myself, I look at my poor old friend, and feel that Theo's conduct is natural too.

"He was always restless," I say rather timidly; for I am afraid to offer an apology of the faintest kind for him, in case she may think that I am taking sides against her, his legal wife.

"And he's grown more so since his Aunt Helen came to us," Mrs. Macpherson goes on. "He makes her the excuse for leaving his home and me more than ever. I have Aunt Helen for a companion, he tells me. And she tells me that I can't expect to tie a young man to my apron-string."

The tears are pouring down her sunken cheeks as she speaks. Horrified as I am at the exhibition of the sentimental pain she feels on account of her young husband's neglect, I can't help pitying her. Heavy as her sin against common sense and good taste has been in marrying him, she is being heavily punished for it. I

picture the continual mortifications to which she must be subjected here, under the observation of the old friends and servants who have revered her formerly : I picture his goading indifference to her and her affection and her wishes : and, in spite of my strong sense of the enormity of her folly, I do pity her.

“ You will have my companionship, too, now,” I say, as soothingly as I can. “ The thought of how good you’ve been to me ought to make you a little tiny bit happy.” Then I venture to ask for Mr. Murray ; and I hear, much to my surprise, and—shall I confess it?—a little to my chagrin, that he is well and happy, and going to be married shortly.

“ He has chosen well this time, has Robbie,” she says approvingly. “ A nice sensible woman she seems to be from her letters, and one with a good bit of money, too. She will appreciate having a kind, good man like Robert to turn to and take counsel of, for she’s a lone woman, and has had no settled home for years, being fond of travelling.”

In my own mind I paint a portrait of the future Mrs. Murray, and it is not a flattering one. She is probably one of those restless old maids who are just sufficiently well off to be able to ravage the well-frequented spots on the Continent in search of their natural prey. I dislike the idea of being succeeded by such a one as this, and I suppose my displeasure is expressed in my face, for she says earnestly,—

“ Child, never regret that I was wiser for my brother than I have been for myself, and never grudge him a more suitable companion than you would have been. On the journey downhill —— There’s the gong for dinner, and his voice in the hall,” she adds suddenly, as Theo’s light, ringing tones peal out some imperious command ; and I notice that her face brightens, and that the hand she has placed on my arm trembles. I feel inclined to stand apart from her, to show her that I cannot countenance her folly. Love of the romantic or passionate order in a woman of her age and appearance seems to

me to be so wildly incongruous a thing, that I can hardly constrain myself to be even contemptuously tolerant to it! For a moment I feel thus; then I banish the feeling, and let only pity for her reign again in my breast, as I think of his false, fair, winsome manner and face, and sweet, subtle tongue! Who can tell how perfidiously he pleaded to her? Who can tell how bewitchingly he beguiled her into believing herself all it suited his purpose to pretend to believe her himself? Who can tell how strongly he mixed the potions which he offered to her love and vanity? Has he not the curse laid upon him of being able to win every woman whose evil fate it is to be thrown in his ruthless path? Have I been so wise in my generation about him that I may dare to sit in the seat of the scornful about her folly?

He comes in, a Scotch bonnet in his hand, a Scotch plaid over his shoulders, the *beau ideal* of a young Scottish chief, and he tries to do away with embarrassment on my part at once with the words,—

“You *are* welcome to these wilds. The wilderness will become a smiling land to us now Tim has come, won't it? What's your news from Ravensbourne? Remember, I've not seen you since I took upon myself the honourable state of matrimony. Consider how I must be thirsting for information!”

I remember those hours at Morwell-in-the-Marsh so vividly as he speaks, that I fear the incidents that occurred as they passed must be photographed in my face. I feel that I am playing a treacherous part to his wife, the woman who trusts me, in tacitly aiding in the concealment he is practising upon her. At the same time, I know well that I should do more harm than good, were I to betray him now. Accordingly, I do violence to all that is honest within me, and I respond to his greeting as if it were the first I had received from him since he became Mrs. Macpherson's husband.

This first evening at Cairnholme is a bitter trial to me in every way. It goes against my sense of right that he should treat the woman whom he has made his wife, the

woman by means of whose generosity he is surrounded by the affluence that is so dear to his pleasure-loving soul, with a carelessness that almost amounts to contempt. My cheeks burn as he leaves her remarks (and every one of them betokens anxiety to please him) unanswered, while he rattles away gaily and easily to me. I seem to myself to be aiding and abetting him in this sin of neglecting the unfortunate lady, who is tasting the full, bitter flavour of the sensations of "the woman scorned."

On the other hand, I cannot help despising her for that supine yearning for a word or a look from him which betrays itself in her every glance, sentence, and gesture. At dinner she worries and wearies the servants by the countless directions she gives them concerning the master, and what they are to request him to eat, drink, and avoid. She calls his attention to numerous dainties which have evidently been ordered because he has at some time or other expressed a liking for them, and he rejects them with contumely, and turns with renewed eagerness and a remark to me after each freshly proffered attention of hers. I am truly and thoroughly miserable, and I acknowledge that I am deservedly so. He is showing himself in the most hatefully selfish colours in my eyes, yet this is not the real reason of my misery. I will try to lighten my consciousness of sin by confessing it. I am still good enough to scorn myself for being here, in the house of the woman who has been a true, wise friend to me, unintentionally filching from her that which she would give her life to gain—the attention, namely, of her husband, of my bane, of the man I love to such a degree that neither crime nor cowardice on his part can alienate my erring heart from him.



CHAPTER XLI.

“I WILL BE MASTER, UNDERSTAND!”



AM infinitely happier this morning. Mr. Macpherson goes out for one of his customary long rides, and I am left alone with Mrs. Macpherson, for Aunt Helen never leaves her room till the luncheon hour. My heart grows lighter the moment I am alone with my old friend; for I feel that she is comparatively happy in my society while she has it to herself. The knowledge that her husband shares her sentiments spoils all the pleasure she would otherwise derive from me when he is one of us. And I am just enough to acknowledge that it is reasonable she should feel displeasure that such should be the case, and generous enough to admit that it is only human, only what ninety-nine women out of a hundred would do, to show that displeasure to me, the innocent one.

But now that he, the graceful shadow of whom I am “half-sick,” like the Lady of Shalot—the beautiful bone of contention, which has been grabbed at by so many, and secured to her cost by this luckless woman—now that he has gone out, and left us to ourselves, peace settles down upon my spirit; for I begin to fulfil my proper vocation—I begin to be *of use* to Mrs. Macpherson. I listen with interest, I listen “well,” to a tale she would shrink from pouring into any other ear. A tale of

foolish fondness—"foolish" because she feels the whole time that it was against nature—of the falling away from her of the friends of her youth and the family of her first husband—of the gradual decline of that power which their respect for her had formerly given her over the servants and retainers who are now witnesses to her want of influence over the monarch whom she has elected to reign absolutely over her kingdom. She tells me all these things in a desultory, uncertain, almost unwilling way. Still, there is comfort to her in the telling, for she must (as she is a woman) feel that I listen with sorrow, with pity, and above all, with sympathy.

I see my task before me, and I prepare to fulfil it. I am to be the repository of her grievances against Theo, and the fate her own folly has brought upon herself, whenever we are alone. This portion of my burden I can bear. It will be a dead, unpleasant weight, but still I'll be humane enough to take it up for her sake, poor thing! But how about the part which I may have to play towards Theo, when the custom of seeing me daily has taught him to drop into that habit of reliance upon me which has invariably hitherto been developed in him when we have been thrown together?

It is sufficient amusement for me to wander about the house during the first part of the day. It is an old time-honoured place, showing evidences of having been in the possession of a race with plenty of wealth at command for generations. The furniture is splendid in a sturdy, substantial way that never aimed at being artistic when it started in life, but that is so now because time has mellowed and coloured it so well, toning down whatever might have been crude and coarse, glaring and too pronounced, fifty or a hundred years ago, into a most harmonious series of pictures. It is congruous enough to think of Theo in the midst of richly carved buffets and escritaires, of heavily embossed shields and flagons and salvers of silver and gold that came originally from the "rare old town of art and traffic." Thoughts of him do not jar with the billiard-room, or the well-filled

stables, or with any of the tangible proofs that are about me that I am in the home of one to whom these luxuries and extravagancies come in the natural order of things. But the thought of him—and far more the sight of him—does jar with the pictured forms of those brawny, bony, long-armed, high-cheek-boned Macphersons who look down upon me from the walls of every room. The ancestors of her former husband seem to me to follow me with their cold grey eyes wherever I go, and when I face round and try to read the impression those eyes convey, it is invariably one of reproach for my being a passive ally even of the interloper.

I am more and more imbued with a sense of respect for the property, as being the representation of the power of one race, when I go out on to the side of a hill which kindly rises on the north-east side of the house, and look away over miles of moorland, and hear that “It’s all Cairnholme. It’s all mine—ours,” she hastily corrects herself; “the Macphersons have never parted with an acre for five hundred years.”

I am impressed with the statement, and am in a sort of glow of enthusiasm about the greatness of the clan Macpherson, when Mrs. Macpherson tells me this as we stumble down the hill after my first surveying expedition. It is difficult to avoid this special form of hysteria when a possessor is playing the part of showman to you over possessions which he or she regards as rather superior to any other corner of creation. Walking here with the relict of the last of a race that has held every inch of the land for five hundred years, I find myself balancing and adjusting Theo’s claims to consideration far more reasonably and moderately than I have ever succeeded in doing before. I compare his Will-o’-the-wisp nature with that grand tenacity which has kept the Macpherson lands intact.

“They must often have been tempted to sell,’ I exclaim involuntarily; “is your air up here so pure and good that love of gain can’t flourish here?”

“They’ve all loved the land like a living thing,” she

says, with a little touch of pride, "and they must be uneasy in their graves now that ——" She pauses and shakes her head, but her sentence seems to finish itself in my ears as Theo comes to meet us from the stables.

His hat is tipped forward over his brow, to protect his eyes from the sun; but no shadow darkens those flickering, false, beautiful eyes as they fall on us, two of the women whose lives he has shaded. He comes forward loungingly, followed by a troop of Gordon setters, soft-eyed collies, and big majestic deerhounds; and I see that Mrs. Macpherson is ready to melt into tears of admiring affection for him, as she sees how lovingly the dogs she loves follow the man who has no heart for her.

His first words are addressed to me.

"What sort of a fellow is Cuthbert Dale, Tim? Is he a safe fellow, like Sydney?"

"I don't think Syd's duplicate is born yet," I say, flushing up with the remembrance of how things are between Claire and Cuthbert Dale.

"I don't want æsthetic tributes to the varied excellences of the loved and the lost," he laughs, wheeling round by my side; "all I want is to be assured of the banking account of the living Dale. He has written about the Hut and the moors," he adds in a careless but still explanatory tone, turning his head to address his wife.

Mrs. Macpherson is compelled to trot in order to keep up with that slinging step of Theo's, which covers so much ground, and which he does not deem it necessary to moderate for our convenience. Trotting takes away her breath, and so she is obliged to pull up before she can reply.

"About the Hut and the moors! What do you mean, Theo?"

"That I'm going to let them," he says airily. "I've been wasting my substance in advertising them in the *Field* for the last six weeks, and at last I've got two decent offers for them. I should like to let Dale have

them for auld lang syne and his brother's sake," he adds to me.

I am so saddened by the recollections of Syd which are evoked by his speech, I am so stultified by the idea of the sacrilege he is committing in merely contemplating letting the cherished Macpherson moors, that I don't attempt to answer him. Mrs. Macpherson, however, having recovered her breath, does so.

"But I'll have no Mr. Dale nor Mr. anybody else at the Hut and on my moors for the sake of auld lang syne or any money they may offer," she says angrily. "You should have told me this before, Theo. If 'twas money you wanted, you should have had it—have I ever refused it to you?—and if you wanted to disgrace me in the eyes of the people of the man whose name you've condescended to take, you've done that so well already that you might surely rest satisfied with your work, and not want to bring fresh witnesses of my folly to my very threshold."

If it is an ill-advised, infuriated, inconsequent speech, nevertheless I don't wonder at her having been goaded into making it, as I mark his utter *insouciance*, his supreme disregard of her and her feelings in every way.

"Now, pray, none of that nonsense," he protests, appealing to her as if he really had put up with more of her whims already than mere mortal man could be expected to endure. "Whenever the matter of money is mooted, Mrs. Macpherson's nationality comes to the fore, and she 'fears I'm going to be incautious;' and whenever I propound a scheme for raising the wind, she's afraid I'm going to mulct 'the family' of one of their hardly held acres; so between the two fears I come rather badly off, you'll observe, Tim."

Her poor anxious, unhappy face grows plainer by reason of that very anxiety and unhappiness of which he is the cause.

"You have never found any difficulty about money, Theo," she says gently, and there is such a profound sense of having deserved all the humiliation he can put

upon her, that I "suffer" more than ever on account of her position and the probability of his taking advantage of it. I am getting to know him so well as such a thoroughly heartless fellow, that I believe myself to be prepared for the worst, the wildest statements he can make. Nevertheless, well-prepared as I delusively suppose myself to be, he staggers, hurts, wounds, *outrages* me by his next remark.

"I was going to tell you, when you interrupted me," he says sparkingly, swaying himself towards her in order that she may catch his words distinctly and have no doubt as to their meaning—"I was going to tell you, that though feeling prompts me to give this man Dale, the Vincents' friend, the preference, interest (the genuine motive power of my life) counsels me to take the offer of a man called Ashton. Ashton's a snob, but he has plenty of money, and he'll keep things going at the Hut, and get such a lot of fellows about him that there will be no difficulty in managing the matter another year."

I anticipate an outbreak from Mrs. Macpherson in response to this; rather to my surprise, she listens to him quietly. All she says is—

"I must know something about this man whom you call a 'snob,' even while you want to plant him at your gates, Theo. Who is Mr. Ashton? Is he some wild young fellow you're bringing up here to back you up in whatever course of life seems pleasantest to you?"

"Hear her!" he says contemptuously. "Was there ever such irrational and absurd opposition offered to a fellow before! Ashton is a man who has made more money than he knows how to spend in trade; he has heard that it's the right thing to have a moor, and so he's ready to pay highly for the privilege. Dale would be quite a different fellow to deal with; but with Ashton at the Hut, I shall feel as if the place were entirely in my own hands still."

"It would give me pain—worse than that, it would give the friends I have left to me still a worse impression

of you than they have already," she interrupts with trembling lips. "Keep the moors in your own hands still—don't let the Hut—have as many of your friends as you please here to stay with you and shoot with you ; let me have my way in this for once."

He answers with his boyish, heartless laugh, and the words—

"I will be master here, understand! It's not a woman's province to manage these outdoor matters, even when she is endowed with the wisdom of years and experience which are your portion. I've decided Ashton shall be the man. I could hardly have Dale at my gates, if he came accompanied by Claire—could I, Tim?"

I look at him angrily, reproachfully—that is to say, I try to do so, but his winning, pleading glance meets mine and disarms me ; and as we near the entrance to the house he backs up these mute, but potent, supplications with even more potent words, uttered in a whisper—

"Let my wife go in alone, Tim ; you're the only friend I have in the world, and I'm going to tax your friendship now." Then aloud he adds—

"I'm going to take Tim to show her the horses. You never care for the stable round—do you, Mrs. Macpherson?—so we'll say good-bye to you for an hour or two."

He saunters away, leaving us two women standing together in uncertainty. I long to obey him and go with him ; I long to have some fresh demand made upon the love and forbearance I feel for him. But how will "his wife" (he needn't have called her that ; he needn't have reminded us both that she has the highest claim upon him, and that he holds that claim in the very lowest estimation)—how will his wife regard the fact of my doing so? It will be like ranging myself on his side against her position as the wife and mistress here ; it will be holding up my hand in favour of his election as lord and master absolutely without appeal ; above all, it will be like myself to try and please him at any cost to everybody also, myself included.

"Go with him, Tim," she says. "Don't let him have this to accuse me of, that I grudge him the society of those who can interest him as I can never hope to do: go with him, Tim."

I obey her and follow him to the entrance of a winding walk, bordered with high thick shrubs, which leads away to the stable yard. A garden seat is planted midway down the little winding walk, and on this he reclines while he lights his cigar. When he has satisfactorily accomplished this feat, he says to me—

"Our little expedition to Morwell-in-the-Marsh must be kept dark from the old lady—you understand that, don't you, Tim?"

"It seems to me that everything you do has to be kept dark from somebody or other," I grumble.

"No, now really, that's taking an exaggerated view of my amiable foibles," he answers good-humouredly. "As I've told you before, it wouldn't be a good thing for you for it to get blown about that you had met me there by appointment, unknown to your family and friends. I don't care for myself, but Mrs. Macpherson would make Cairnholme rather hot for you, if she suspected anything of the sort."

"There was nothing dishonourable in my being there, Theo," I half plead, half assert. "I went there to befriend, if possible, a man whom I once thought would have been my brother: was my aid of use?"

I say this more with the hope of turning the subject and taking his thoughts away from Morwell-in-the-Marsh than with any other design. But apparently the diversion is not pleasing to him, for he starts up with the scowl that is apt now to cloud his once always bright, careless face, and says—

"Don't revert to the money, please, Tim. It's disagreeable enough for a fellow to owe it to a woman, I can assure you, and I'd have lost the best chance I've ever had of fortune rather than have borrowed it of you, if I hadn't made sure of being able to repay it almost directly; but you see what Mrs. Macpherson is. My

only chance of raising the sum unknown to her will be to let the moors, and do a little horse-dealing with Ashton."

I ask the question I have been longing to ask him since the first mention was made of the Hut and its probable tenant—

"Is the Miss Ashton you were speaking to when I went to you at Morwell-in-the-Marsh any relation to this man?"

"His daughter."

I have anticipated the answer, nevertheless it stuns me. However direfully we may dread baseness developing in those we love, the shock is none the less when it does develop.

No further word is spoken between us till we enter the stables, when, as I stand patting one of his beautiful horses, and thinking how much nobler this powerful, gentle beast is than the man who owns him, he mutters—

"I have trusted you with a secret because you asked me for it; I charge you on your honour as a gentlewoman, not to betray it."

"And in return I charge you, on your honour as a gentleman, to take your wife to call on Miss Ashton as soon as she comes to the Hut. The girl, not knowing you're married, may get to care for you, to her misfortune."

"Not unlikely," he answers carelessly. "Well, as you make a point of it, I'll take my wife. But I tell you what, Tim, I'll keep you from the Hut; Miss Ashton not being a thoroughbred, might betray surprise or emotion at seeing you, and then the little tale which I have a terror of being unfolded for your sake solely, would tell itself."

"I've no desire to go," I say, drearily following him into another stall and patting the glossy sides of another gentle, generous creature. "I only want Miss Ashton to know your true position. It's not the action of a thoroughbred to have deceived her, whether she is one herself or not."

"When I have sold my horses to the old cad at my own price, the Ashton family may return to their native marshes at their earliest convenience. Until my horses are sold, it will be my object to make life at the Hut as delightful to every member of the Ashton family as possible. Now you know all about it, Tim, it's not a very nefarious or immoral scheme, is it?"

I question myself seriously as to whether anything he ever does, or ever has done, has been the reverse of these qualities; but I think silence the better part, and my silence annoys him.

"Cairnholme seems to have stultified your faculties; you used to be as amusing a companion as a man could have. Do you remember the day by the otter-pool?"

Do I not remember it!

"I was a better fellow then than I am now," he goes on more seriously. "Well, come back to my bonnie bride, Tim; we don't seem to hit it off together as well as we did in that time of roses. It's a bargain about the Hut."

It has been a horribly unsatisfactory *tête-à-tête* for me, for he himself has painted a few fresh traits in his character in even darker colours than I had ever seen them in before. It is hard, therefore, to detect, as I do when I go back to the house, that Mrs. Macpherson seems to think that I have had sunshine enough for one day, and accordingly glooms at me in a way that, by reason of my sore and sorry state, makes me feel that mean injustice is the strongest characteristic trait of the majority of my fellow creatures. She it was who had weighted the beam and sent me over into the peril of that quiet promenade with him. If she could only know how unhappy he has made me by his callousness to every consideration that I hold dear, she would surely be kinder.



CHAPTER XLII.

TO THE RESCUE.

HAVE been at Cairnholme three weeks, and the futility of my visit becomes more apparent to me hourly. I am no comfort, as she hoped and said I should be, to the woman who has quitted the tower of strength in which she was placed by her wealthy and respected widowhood, for the uncertain footing afforded her in her new position of not only unloved, but utterly neglected and despised, wife. She shrinks from my observation—my poor old friend who has sought to purchase indemnity from suffering for violating nature's laws, and all her gold has failed to do it; and, though all my heart aches for her, I can but acknowledge the grim justice of nature's unvarying decree.

“Gay youth loves gay youth.”

I recall these words of Owen Meredith's, and as I think of the good-looking Miss Ashton who is coming and the elderly, podgy Mrs. Macpherson who is present, I tremble for Theo's fair fame before the world; for intuition teaches me that he will continue to deceive the girl into the belief that he is free and unmarried, if it be possible for him to do it.

~ In spite of all my fears, time will not stand still; and

so the day dawns which brings to us at Cairnholme the tidings that the Ashtons have arrived at the Hut. The intelligence is conveyed to Theo in a brief, business-like note from Mr. Ashton, to the following effect:—

“SIR,—This is to inform you that I have taken up my residence at the Hut, and that I shall be happy to see you whenever you like to bring your gun and have a day’s sport.

“Yours obediently,
“JOHN ASHTON.”

Theo reads the letter aloud, and laughs over the manner of it, while his wife perceptibly winces at the matter. Presently she speaks.

“Has the man brought a family with him, or is he a bachelor?” she asks.

“He didn’t go into those details when he offered to become my tenant,” Theo says gaily. “I can only say, if he has brought a family with him, that they’ll have to camp out on the moors. The Hut’s a sweet place, but rather cramped.”

I tingle; my intuitions are correct; Theo is going to continue his game of deception, and I have not the courage to unmask him. I have not the courage—so much is certain. Am I sure that I have the wish?

About eleven o’clock he orders out a string of horses, and directs that they are to be taken over to the Hut. There has been a *souppçon* of truth in his statement after all; he does hope to do something in the horse-dealing way with Mr. Ashton. I grow absolutely hopeful about the future, as I suffer my mind to revel in the luxury of the new delight of finding him veracious.

“Shall you call on the Ashtons?” I venture to ask timidly of Mrs. Macpherson in a day or two; and she shakes her head and answers—

“Theo only speaks of ‘Mr. Ashton,’ my dear; he has made no mention of ladies, so I conclude there are none; why should I call?”

"Ask him if there are any," I say boldly. "If there are, it looks unneighbourly on your part to hold aloof from them. Surely you won't do such a wrong, even in seeming, to your Scotch pride of hospitality."

"It's his object to ingratiate himself with Mr. Ashton, for he wants good prices for his horses," she says, with concentrated bitterness. "If there were ladies, he would make me show them courtesy. My dear, I needn't ask him if there are any."

She foils me herself, when I am trying to work for her weal. I cannot bear it, so this day at dinner I say, looking him innocently in the face—

"Has Mr. Ashton a wife or daughters with him?"

He gives me back a gay glance; nothing discomposes him.

"No wife—only a daughter," he says. "Oughtn't you to call on her, by the way?" he adds abruptly, addressing Mrs. Macpherson.

"If you wish me to do it, but I see no necessity for the performance of such a penance," she replies.

"Well, as you like! send your card—that will be enough. I shall go over there to-morrow, and I'll convey it with your compliments, if you'll allow me."

She accedes to his proposition, and he looks at me and laughs at my obvious discomfiture.

"You do try your utmost to explode me," he says to me in the evening. "How is it, Tim, that, clever as you are, you can't do it."

"Because you're meaner than I am," I say bluntly; "we don't fight with the same weapons."

He gives me credit for a greater amount of talent the following morning, when he is about to depart for the Hut in his dog-cart. I have obtained Mrs. Macpherson's permission to go over and deliver her card to Miss Ashton, and so, just as Theo is about to start, I say as carelessly as I can—

"Tell Miss Ashton that I am going to call on her to-day as Mrs. Macpherson's representative."

He stands still, one foot on the step of the dog-cart,

the reins in his hands, and he withdraws the inevitable cigar from his lips.

“You are?”

“I am.”

“Nonsense! Why should you? She’ll remember —— As you please, though. A wilful woman will have her way, however unpleasant that way may be to her. Miss Ashton won’t be at home, in the first place; she drives out with the luncheon, and when once she gets with the guns, she’s in no hurry to leave them. She’s a determined young woman, is Miss Ashton, and doesn’t stick at trifles.”

“If you tell her your wife’s representative is coming to call on her, as I ask you to do, she’ll hardly have the incivility to go out,” I say.

He smiles.

“Well, Tim, the drive’s a pleasant one, at any rate. I can’t make myself responsible for Miss Ashton, of course; nor can I presume to attempt to regulate her movements. Good-bye; I’m rather late,” and he springs into the dog-cart and drives off, leaving me dissatisfied with him, Miss Ashton, circumstances, and above all—oh, above all—with myself.

“You are a good girl to take so much trouble for the sake of keeping up my character as gentlewoman in the opinion of these people,” Mrs. Macpherson says to me affectionately, when I am about to depart on my self-appointed mission. “I can trust the telling of the right thing about me to you, Tim. I couldn’t see the place habited by strangers.”

“You’ll let me ask Miss Ashton to come over here, won’t you?” I plead, for I do long for Miss Ashton to realise the whole truth.

Little red spots blaze up in Mrs. Macpherson’s cheeks at once.

“You heard what Theo called the father,” she replies; “is it likely that the daughter of such a man as he described would be in place as a visitor at Cairnholme?”

“Very likely, indeed,” I say eagerly. “Her father is

rich—don't you think that he has taken care to surround her with all those external refinements which tend to refine a woman's nature? Remember, she is alone here; be kind to her."

"She is not likely to care for the kindness of an old neglected, despised, woman," she says, with angry energy. "No, Tim, my dear; probably Theo has painted such a picture of his wife that Miss Ashton pities him and loathes me. No, Tim; I will make no further advances to the Ashtons."

I dare not tell her the strong reason there exists for her facing the Ashtons, and proclaiming herself to be what she is—Theo's wife. So I withdraw for a while from this weary game of expostulation which I am for ever playing with her, and go away to my first fencing match with Miss Ashton.

It is a splendid drive along the roads which intersect the lofty hills that lie between Cairnholme and the Hut. I have no very great hopes of achieving an interview with Miss Ashton, for probably Theo will do the very thing he ought not to do, and win her in some indefinable way to go out and avoid me. Still, I may do some good; so I go on in hope, and enjoy the scenery.

I have been warned that the distance is long between Cairnholme and the Hut—"something like eight miles as the crow flies"—but I am unprepared to find it as long as it is in reality; for the road winds in and out among the hills, and prolongs itself in the wild, lovely mountain passes, until I tell myself in my impatience that, even if I find Miss Ashton at home, I shall have no time to say more to her than "Good-morning" and "Good-bye," if I wish to regain Cairnholme before the shades of night fall.

At last I reach the Hut; and in answer to my almost eager inquiry for her, I am told that Miss Ashton is in. In another moment I am face to face with the young lady who, in my estimation, is either despicable as a lure, or to be pitied as a dupe.

A gleam of something like recognition crosses her face

as she comes to meet me ; a puzzled expression follows it. She evidently cannot completely identify me with the girl who went to see Theo at Morwell-in-the-Marsh ; and small marvel that it should be so, for my sorrow is of stronger growth and greater age now, and it is telling upon me. Just as I am thinking this, and being glad of it— for I do not want her to conjecture about or question me—her eyes fall on that golden-red hair of mine, and she remembers me perfectly.

“What odd places we meet in ?” she says. “First on a rink where, out of all the hundreds who were there yours is the only appearance I can recall ; then at my dear little village home in Essex ; and now up in the Highlands. Are you staying in the neighbourhood ?”

She is perfectly quiet, self-possessed, and polite. In spite of everything, I am rather prepossessed with her.

“I am staying at Cairnholme ——”

“At Mr. Macpherson’s place ?” she interrupts, and her face works rather nervously.

Ah ! do I not know the feeling well which causes it so to work ? She shrinks from the thought of even a possible rival near the throne of her king.

“I am staying with Mrs. Macpherson ; I am the bearer of her cards and compliments,” I say, as cheerfully as I can under the circumstances, which are depressing me out of all hopefulness as to good resulting from my visit.

She glances at the cards, which are lying by her on a monkey-table, trifles with them nervously for a moment or two, and then says—

“Is Mrs. Macpherson too old or infirm to drive out ?”

“Oh dear, no !” I reply with energy ; “she’s activity itself.”

“But not even the spirit of activity which possesses her is strong enough to bring her from Cairnholme to the Hut,” she says, with a slight forced laugh. “I am sorry for it. Papa is absurdly sensitive on the subject of any slight being offered to me, and I’m afraid he will take this as a slight, and perhaps be annoyed with Mr. Macpherson about it.”

"It is a long drive," I say apologetically; "and, moreover, Mrs. Macpherson has a little feeling still about this place having been let. I've no doubt she will get over it in time, and then you will find her what I do,—one of the kindest of women and warmest of friends."

She looks at me uneasily again, and asks—

"Have you known her long and intimately? Have you known her son long?"

The moment has come for the thunderbolt to fall on this poor girl's innocent, unhappy head. My voice trembles with real pity for her, as I reply—

"She has no son. Yes, I have known her for several months, and we have both passed through such trouble that we have become very intimate."

"No son! Who, then, is Theo?"

"Her husband. Hasn't he told you?"

She stands up, her slight, graceful figure absolutely swaying under the cruel pain this weighty blow is giving her, and I dare not try to comfort her. For a few moments she stands covering her face with her hands, then she lets them fall, and says brokenly—

"Pray don't think that Mr. Macpherson has made any false statements, or even deceived us voluntarily; but he has always spoken of her as Mrs. Macpherson, and I knew she was old. I have been the one to blame all through. I took no interest in any human being but Theo himself, and I suppose I ought to feel that I am rightly punished; but my father will be more than angry, and in his anger he is apt to be so hard and unjust, that my life will be a very wretched one."

My own life is a very wretched one, but I have grown accustomed to the wretchedness of it. This poor girl's misery is so very young a thing, that I can but treat it tenderly. Moreover, I am touched by her generosity. She has been duped, wronged, led on to love where no love may be honourably paid back to her, and still she tries to spare the man who has done it—still she will have him held blameless if she can.

I say one or two words that are utterly inadequate to

the occasion, and prepare to take my leave. As she holds my hand at parting, some instinct teaches her to trust me.

“You will never let him know that the intelligence affected me as it has done,” she says, with quivering lips; “and you won’t betray the concealment he has practised—it has been nothing worse than that, you know—to his wife?”

I give her the promise she asks for, and go back to Cairnholme with such a craving for rest in my soul, that I fancy I must be suffering from premature old age: youth can surely never be so intensely weary as I am.

Theo is neither cast down or angry when he comes in, rather earlier than usual, this evening. He tells us, as carelessly as if it were a matter of no moment to him, that Mr. Ashton has “backed out of the purchase of the horses”—has “made up his mind to leave the place, as he finds he is no sportsman, and his daughter finds it intolerably dull;” and that they have come to a mutual understanding, by which he (Theo) has it all in his own hands again, even for the remainder of this season. There is clearly no animus in his heart against me as he tells us all this, even though he is the loser through my zeal. There is good in Theo, perverted though it be. I feel a trifle less weary as I think this.

It is not for two or three days after my visit to Miss Ashton that he finds an opportunity of saying to me—

“I wish you had deferred your call for a few days, till I had landed the money for the horses. Old Ashton fell into the pardonable error of believing that I meant to ask his daughter to be the lady of the land. He’s very savage, and thinks I’ve behaved ill. However, ‘all’s well that ends well.’ The Hut will be vacated the sooner for the occurrence of the little mistake; and Mrs. Macpherson, consequently, will be better pleased.”

“I hope it will all end well. Theo, I wonder what would be the best ending for you?”

And he shakes off my sympathy by saying—

“Freedom; but I shall never find it, I’m afraid.”



CHAPTER XLIII.

GOING HOME.

I am home again, hearing of great and astounding changes that are coming to my own people at Ravensbourne. As I listen to them with loving interest, something in the looks of those who are telling me of them apprises me of the fact that a greater change has been wrought in me than any of which they can inform me.

They are happy changes of which I hear; there “comes a sound of wedding bells” as I listen to them. Mabel and Magdalen are to be married with much pomp, on the same day, a fortnight hence; and a week later papa and Lady Torrens are going to take each other “for better and for worse” in a quieter way.

“She’ll be a darling stepmother,” Claire says, turning to kiss Lady Torrens, who is leaning over me as I lie on the sofa; “only you and I will be left to bother her, Tim, and I expect we shall bother her for the remainder of our lives.”

I smile in response to this, and I feel that I smile very feebly. My day is done, I know that very well, and they all know it for me; but Claire is in all the glory of her beauty still. Claire, in the order of things, will go out to add to all that is good and gracious and beautiful in some other family. Claire will surely reward the Dales for their fidelity by marrying Cuthbert.

I suppose I look all this, for, though I do not speak a word, Claire answers the unspoken thought.

“Tim, dear Tim!” she says caressingly, “our earthly idol is broken, but we both love him still: you with such resignation, such perfect renunciation of him, that your folly will surely be forgiven; I with anything but resignation—in fact, with a most faulty hope.”

She says these last words in a very low, remorseful kind of voice, and neither Lady Torrens nor I care to ask her the reason why.

Winter passes away, and the changes have taken place, and have become such established facts that I sometimes have the feeling that the present order of things has been going on all my grown-up life. It is as though it had never been otherwise, when my two married sisters and their husbands come to dine with us, and she who was Lady Torrens takes the head of the table as Mrs. Vincent. The only change that never ceases to puzzle me is in myself; hour after hour, day after day, week after week, I lie on the sofa in my stepmother’s boudoir—lie here listlessly, aimlessly; reading sometimes, but far oftener doing nothing but suffer the pain of utter weakness and weariness.

A chill has settled in my system, the doctors say, and I am ordered to “lie up” and recruit my strength during these winter months, in order that I may come out as good as new in the spring. My two married sisters tell me (in confidence) that their respective husbands have told them (in confidence) that I am “a very foolish girl to cherish a fruitless affection for a worthless scamp like Theo, and that by doing so I nourish an illness which might otherwise be shaken off.” They are very sensible men, and I acknowledge their sensibleness, and my sisters’ kindness in repeating their improving advice, but my gratitude does not give me the power to follow it. I do not “cherish” an affection for the “worthless scamp;” my affection for him is a hardy, strong plant, that stands in no need of care and culture. It is a love that is real and true—“a love that ne’er rose to passion, nor to passion’s

sure decay"—a love that is bound up with my being—a love that has never been shaken or weakened, shadowed or defiled, by any rival—a love that will surely, some day or other, plead with Theo for himself.

Winter is passing—has passed, and spring's bright glances are bent upon us without intermission. Everything seems waking up into new life. The fern fronds in the window-garden burst their earth-bonds, and in their vigorous strength and beauty compel me to look forward with anxious delight to the day when they shall be full-grown luxuriant plants. Heartless and Music are happy and useful, for otter-hunting has set in with enthusiasm in our neighbourhood, and the two good old hounds are still unmatched in our country-side for keenness, courage, and prowess. Lily and Claire "get up" wonderful archery costumes. Picnics are organised by every one we know—and still I lie here, wondering why I do it, and unable to do anything else.

The beauty of everything in nature grows upon me with such intensity that I strive to gather in as much of it as is possible, and to clasp it to myself so closely that we can never be quite parted. I cling to beautiful thoughts in books; I steep myself in the fragrance of the beautiful flowers with which the thoughtful love of those around me fills my room; I gaze at Claire's ripening loveliness until my eyes swim in tears and a halo surrounds her, and I almost fancy my darling sister is an angel already. The dogs seem to grow fonder of me; they flop their kind old heads down on the pillow by my side, and give vent to little grunts of affection whenever they come into the room. And as for papa, I seem to be more to him than ever, in spite of the constant presence of his beautiful wife. He seems unwilling to leave the house, for ever so short a time, and interrupts himself in his beloved writing perpetually to run up and ask if there is anything he can do or get to amuse Tim.

Snowdrops and hypaticas give place to violets and primroses, and these again vanish and are replaced by the roses and lilies of June. I love this summer weather

more than I ever loved it in my life before. It reminds me of those glowing, gorgeous days when Theo first came to us—of the days when my love was a young, fresh, happy, pure thing—of the days when I went through life with a bound, I was so full of vigorous health and spirits.

How changed I am—how entirely altered! I see them go out two or three times a week—a great gathering of them—to the otter-pool, where they pleasantly mix up sport with picnic, after the fashion I know so well—the fashion I have been accustomed to since I was a tiny child; and, to my own surprise, I have no desire to join the merry group, or rather the group that would be so merry were it not that the thought of my listless, lazy state damps it. Is it listlessness and laziness only, though? I begin to think that it is something else—something that I cannot combat, something that we must all face sooner or later, and that I shall be called upon to face very soon.

I realise the truth: I am dying.

How they will all grieve for me, and how hard it will be for me to tell them the truth, that I am glad that I am going home! May God, in his goodness, grant happiness to Claire and Theo!





CHAPTER XLIV.

TRUE TO ONE FOR EVER!



CLAIRE, take up the pen my sister Tim laid down six months ago, with a full sense of my unworthiness to complete the story of her life of self-abnegation. The last words she wrote were words of tender, loving hope for Theo and for me.

Mine is a difficult task, but it is self-assigned; and, having commenced, I will not shrink from it, nor will I seek to avert criticism by offering apologies, or putting forth painful and perplexing circumstances as a plea for leniency being extended to me. It is my wish and will, not my pleasure, to tell out the tale of my sister's unselfishness, and in doing so I must portray the selfishness of myself and another.

It was the time of roses when she died, the brightest, most glorious season of the year—the same season as when Theo came among us first: and she, the brightest, most glorious flower of the family, faded just as the roses came to perfection.

How wildly we clung to her during those last awful hours! How we tried to hold her back from Death for a while, until all in a moment we felt the full force of his terrible power, and understood all the puny insignificance of our futile efforts to thwart him! It was such agony to see her ebbing away, knowing how powerless we were

to save her, that there were moments when I prayed for the end—that the agony might come to a climax. When the end did come, there seemed to be no light in heaven or earth for me, and my sorrow was dry-eyed. I had no tears to shed.

What a blank it was, when what had been Tim was taken away and lowered to the bottom of that ghastly deep grave! While she was lying in her coffin, in the room that will always be a hallowed spot to us all, with a sweet look of rest and peace on her face, I seemed to hold communion with her still, and hardly felt as if my sister and I were parted for ever in this world. But when my longing gaze followed the flowers into that terrible pit, then the woefulness of it all came upon me, and I knew that Tim was gone.

Those flowers! How they will always be associated in my mind henceforth with death and despairing misery! Crosses of lilies of the valley, crowns of the roses Tim loved so dearly, white Eucharistic and arum lilies, and delicate azaleas, covered her in her coffin, steeping all that remained of her in an atmosphere of such fragrance and purity as befitted my darling.

That flower-covered bier; I shall see it all the days of my life. Flowers must love death, otherwise they could not have remained blooming, beautiful and fragrant as they did while clustering round Tim's marble cold form, during all the days that intervened between the hour she died and that woefully blank one when she was carried out of our dear old home for ever.

Time has toned down the circumstances that were so vividly, gleamingly painful and distinct that day. There was pathos and anguish in everything—pain in the faces of the sympathetic friends who came about us to show, with that sweet instinct of humanity which such times call forth, that, though they recognised our claims to greater grief, it was reflected in their hearts—pain in the sight of the rooms she had inhabited, of the dogs she had petted, of the horses she had ridden—pain in blooming flowers and foliage, whose ripening and decay would

not be witnessed by her ; and such pathos and agony in the sound of the suppressed sobs that burst from the crowd of our humbler friends, when our sorrowful, broken family band passed through it from the church to the churchyard, and all around realised that all that was human of her was blotted out from our circle for ever.

“ A dreary thought, yet human too,
 For love is not the soul's alone :
 It winds around the form we view,
 The mortal we have known.
 With these the ‘human’ human love
 Will weave its thoughts and share its doom,
 And still confound the life above
 With death beneath the tomb.”

That Theo was there, uninvited, looking ill and unhappy to a degree that would have been deemed impossible by those who only knew him in his brighter, better days, and that his was the last hand that showered down pure white blossoms into her grave, was the one gleam of light to me in that dark day. Surely her prayer for him will be heard, and her unrewarded fidelity will some day or other plead with his better nature for himself, and will not plead in vain. During these six months that have passed since that sad sultry day, when he betrayed the best and most manly feeling of his life over that early grave, up to the present time, we have heard nothing of him. He, too, is blotted out ; and when Lily and I talk of him, as we do occasionally, it is always as if he and all interest attaching to him were things that belonged entirely to a past that can never be resuscitated.

Papa has changed into an old man quite suddenly, but Lily, his wife, does not seem to like him the less for the change. “ There must be a taint in the nature that is not altered by the death of a child,” she says. “ It's in the order of things that the parents shall go home first ; and when, in our own individual cases, that order is reversed, we must be callous indeed if we don't feel that

we must have offended a merciful God deeply to have been so heavily punished." Poor papa ! Tim, of all his children, was the dearest ; she was his idol. He believed her to be capable of making any intellectual effort, and saw in her a possibility of his own mental power being reflected in such a way, some day or other, as would have redounded to his own honour. Now that she has gone before him, all the frivolity and want of high motive, all the idleness and vanity and uselessness of the class of writing to which he has devoted his life and talents, come home to him. When he takes up the pen it is that of an unready writer ; and fictitious joys and woes stand a poor chance of faithful portrayal at the hands of one who has only lately learnt to know what sorrow really is, and who has been taught the lesson by being bereaved of an adored child.

It is a black, bitter January morning. The side of my face which is towards the fire burns fiercely ; for the fire is composed of blazing logs, which throw out an immense amount of heat, and yet fail to warm the room. Lily and I are wrapped up in furs, and declaring to each other that no consideration for the necessity of exercise, as a matter of health, will induce us to leave the house to-day. Suddenly a change comes over me, and I am possessed by the spirit of restlessness. Tim's grave must look so desolate to-day, with its flowers nipped by the frost, and parched and perished by the wind. I cannot resist the impulse that is on me to go to it, and put my hand upon it, and (if there is communion between the spirits of the dead and the living) make her sweet soul understand how my guilty one pines for, and loves, and longs to rejoin hers.

There is a footpath through the grounds to the village churchyard, and I take it without delay. It leads through the wilderness where Tim slept with her head on my lap on that bright summer day, long ago, when we first saw Theo, and past the meadows by the otter-pool. The end of it twists about the Polands' garden, and as I am running by the house a tap at the drawing-room window

arrests me, and I look through the glass at Mrs. Poland's face, whereon tears and smiles are fighting for supremacy.

"I will come in on my way back," I scream, for a biting blast is sweeping by me, and my voice will be carried away if I do not elevate it greatly; and for answer she opens the window, and drags me in.

"Is the child mad to be out in such weather?" she says. "Wait patiently; wait here."

"What for?" I ask wonderingly; and she looks at me in amazement, and asks—

"Where are you going?"

"To Tim!" I reply.

"What for?" she asks now, and I feel that my answer will seem a vague one to her when I say—

"For comfort."

"Wait here," she repeats; "wait here till I know what I ought to do. You shouldn't be out; it shouldn't be there ——"

"Why shouldn't I be out, and what shouldn't be there?" I say, getting myself away to the door as I speak.

"My dear Claire, I have a visitor," she pants out; but I rush on, for I see she wants to detain me, and I will not be detained.

It is but a step to the wicket-gate of the churchyard, and my eager feet carry me quickly from thence to the corner under the cypress where Tim is lying. Some one is standing here before me! As he lifts his bowed head from the top of the white marble cross to which he has been clinging, I see that it is Theo.

So once again Tim and Theo and I are together, and we have this comfort given to us in the midst of our misery, that she is happy and at rest.

CLAIRE VINCENT.

My wife Claire refuses to write another line, therefore I am compelled to finish the story our sister, friend, favourite Tim began. Tim had her faults, and, to be

perfectly candid, her worst fault was a mistake—she loved me! Other women have done the same thing, and seen the folly of it and got over it. But Tim was better both in mind and soul than these others, and so, though she saw the folly (that is, the futility) of it, she never got over it—but died.

It is a great pity, because Tim was just the sort of girl to have brought me to her feet, and made me the responsive, self-sacrificial, slave-like friend she wished me to be, if she had only been patient enough to have lived a little longer. She always thought of me before she thought of herself, and still she loved to seem to sway me. In short, she was a mixture of queen and child, and the mixture is a potent one to a man.

But in all honesty, I must confess that I should never have loved Tim, as I love Claire, my wife. Claire has superb beauty, and a magnificent manner; but her beauty and her magnificence never appeal to me so strongly as when she forgets them utterly, and bows her head into my bosom in a spasm of bitter recollection of Tim. When she does that, I love her almost as much for her resemblance to the darling who always made me her first consideration as I do for her charming self. This crowning one is added to my other debts to Tim—her example has made Claire far less selfish than she was when I knew her first; and a fellow does appreciate unselfishness in a woman, especially when it is exhibited for himself.

That day when Claire and I met at Tim's grave was three months from the date of Mrs. Macpherson's death. The good old soul died of a cold she caught while superintending the scouring out of the Hut, in order to free it from every taint of the strangers who had inhabited it for a while. She was not ill long, and she did not suffer much, and I was remarkably attentive to her the whole time. So her end was peace, and she left me the whole of her property unconditionally.

Claire and I spend most of our time at Cairnholme. I dislike the Ravensbourne district on account of

associations that are painful when recalled, and that I see no possible use in recalling. Mrs. Vincent is quite as charming as Lady Torrens was, but I can never quite forget that she snubbed me once.

Aunt Helen and I are not such good friends as we used to be. She falsified facts about my birth to Tim, and accused my father of crime and my mother of shame, in order to carry out her own aim and separate me from the Vincents. It was done of her ambitious love for me, but I can never quite forgive her. We ignore the subject, but are not comfortable together.

Our first child is a week old; it's a boy, and we are going to christen him Tim Vincent. May he, like Tim, "love through life and death with perfect faith," and be "true to one for ever!"



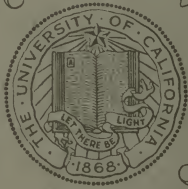




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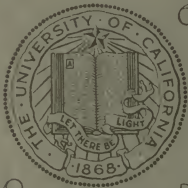


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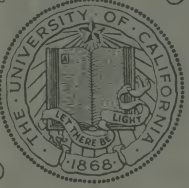


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