JOSEPH'S COAT.

BY DAVID CHRISTIE MURRAY.

[Registered in accordance with the Copyrigh Act of 1875.]

They listened, and heard the steady coming and going of a deep breath. Dinah crept to the door, and noiselessly opening it, looked in. The little parlor faced westward, and through the curtained windows she could see a great jagged line of pale yellow where the sun had gone down and the clouds were slowly severing, and in this faint and uncertain light, this line of pale yellow reflected into the room, she could just distinguish Joe's figure from that of Cheston. She knelt down by his side and looked at him with hungry heart and eyes, and yearned to thrown herself upon his bosom and clasp him in her arms. She knew the story of his wanderings now, as well as Ethel and Sir Sydney knew it. She knew old George's wicked tale of her second marriage, and somehow to Dinah's mind the two first years during which errant Joe had been silent were as nothing. She stooped and kissed his hand and let a tear fall upon it, but the sleeper never stirred. For those in danger there had been some little rest, for people do sleep in the face of death, and sleep calmly, with blissful, innocent dreams at times; but for him, since the first news came until a few hours ago, there had been no possibility of slumber. Seeing how wrapped in sleep he was, Dinah took courage and kissed his hand again, and since yielding to the impulse made it stronger, she slid her arm beneath his head and kissed his cheek very softly and nestled down beside him, watching him until in the fast gathering darkness his face was lost and she could only fancy it.

But after half an hour she rose and stole silently back to Ethel.

"Is there any news of him, my dear? forgive me asking. Have you heard of him?"

"Yes," said Ethel, whispering. "He was here an hour or two ago. He went out when I came down."

The mother's right was indisputable. Dinah could not be blamed for loving the child of her own body, but Ethel had yet to take herself to task for a half inclination to think the love unreasonable. The very thought of young George grated on every nerve in her soul, and yet she knew, though with fear and self-reproach, that she was beginning to be happy again. The why and wherefore of this new contentment she either did not know or would not for a second acknowledge to herself.

Dinah passed like a ghost to the rearward door and looked out into the night. In a little while she heard a footstep, and as it came nearer she fluttered out into the darkness to meet it.

"Is that you, George?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"Oh George," she cried, what are you out here for?"

"I couldn't stop in the house," he answered doggedly. "To remind everybody——"

He broke off abruptly and was silent.

"You're wet through," said Dinah, laying her hands upon him. "Don't wait here, my dear. Go somewhere and get a change of clothes, and——"

"I can't get anything," George answered bitterly, "I haven't got a penny in the worlp and who would trust me?

"Oh George," cried Dinah, I've plenty of money. Mr. Keen sent us some money the day before we went down the pit, and I've got it with me. Here. Go to the hotel we stayed at in Birmingham, an' have a glass of somethin' warm afore you start. An' let us know where you are, an' oh, George, George, do try to be a good lad now. You'll you, my darlin'—won't you? an' with God's blessin' we'll be happy after all. Try to be a good lad again. Do, dear, do."

She was embracing him again with tears, heedless of his rain soaked garments.

"I'll try," said the wretched George, weeping also. "I don't deserve your goodness. The best thing I could do for everybody would be to make a hole in the water some where and rid the world of such a burden.

There was even in the young man's mind a remote idea in favor of carrying this programme into execution, though there was probably little hope of the remote idea coming nearer. But it terrified Dinah.

"No, no, George," she broke out, clinging to him.

"I'm a disgrace to everybody," said George, weeping. "I'm in everybody's way."

"No, George, no," cried Dinah, and she clung to him still and extorted from him solemn promises that he would live and be good. And at last with an aching heart she let him go, and watched his figure as it melted from her sight in the darkness.

She waited in the night a little while after this to compose herself and then returned. Ethel was still keeping watch by John Keen, and all the sleepers in the little house were sound. The two women found themselves food and made tea, moving noiselessly. It was midnight when Cheston awoke with a great yawn, and stumoled sleepily in to speak to them; but Joe still slept on, and Dinah, going to look at him, had terrible tremors about his never waking any more, until his regular heavy breathing reassured her. At one in the morning the Bowker family appeared, Mr. Bowker coming first in search of lucifer matches, the brew house fire having long since gone out.

"Let him sleep, mister," said William. "He's never closed a eye till this afternoon sence we heerd the news, an' that's more'n four nights an' days ago."

Having gone away to light the fire, he returned, and, at Sir Sydney's invitation, sat down. They talked in low voices in consideration of the patient, who was by this time sound asleep again, and there was little mystery in the story left before they had done with it. William had been told of Uncle George's gift of a hundred pounds to Joe, and the narration of it softened all hearts to the hard old man. He could not have begun to plot evil then, they thought, and could only have yielded to a sudden temptation. Mrs. Bowker made more tea, and bringing it into the kitchen with her own hands pressed it upon them, and in the growing twilight they sat sipping together until a sound arose in the next room as of stretching and yawning, and a minute later Joe was amongst them. It was curious, and to everybody there a little touching, to notice the extreme diffidence with which the long divided pair met each other. But by common consent room was made for Joe to sit next to Dinah, and by and by, as the others sat and talked, it was noticed that the silent two had stolen a hand toward the other's, and thus in the chill growing twilight and the flickering light of the fire, they sat handed, looking at each other now and then, but quite wordless. It was broad daylight, though chill and dark even then, so lowering was the weather, when Miss Dorethea descended, and one of the younger branches of the house of Bowker being dispatched for the Baronet's carriage, returned with it in the space of half an hour in triumph side by side with the coachman.

"I can get a cab and follow you afterward," said Ethel; "but until the doctor arrives I shall stay with Mr. Keen."

Nobody ventured to offer any remonstrance except Cheston, who murmured something about being in Mr. Bowkrr's way.

"Not a bit of it, mister," cried William. "It makes the hearth brighter like to see her theer. An' my misses," added Mr. Bowker, turning upon her, "is as willin' as willin' but here's never been need to nursin' sick gentlefolks, an' it'll be as well to ha' one of his own sort along of him till the doctor's seen him again and gi'en me orders about him."

So they drove away in such uplifted silent thanksgiving of heart as no words of mine can tell, and Ethel was left behind with her wounded lover, whom she had not yet learned to love. Young Bowker called his mother and father from the room.

"Leave 'em to 'emselves," he said. "Whether he'll live or die there's no sayin', but all the while as we was down nothin' 'ud satisfy him but he must have her settin' next to him, an' be' ho 'din' her hand an talkin' to her."

"Does her care for him?" asked Mr. Bowker.

"I do' know," her son answered; "but he cares for her. An' all the time he's been a callin' out, 'Ethel my love,' an' 'Ethel my darlin'' an' sayin', 'I'm glad to die for you.' Wasn't it her as was engaged to young Banks?"

"Yis, yis," said his father. "But young Keen's worth a hundred million on him an' p'haps her's a-finin' that out. Leave 'em to 'emsens."

Ethel, unconscious of the interest she excited, sat on still until the doctor came. No improvement yet. Had the patient been anyhow excited? No, they told him; he had even slept nearly the whole of the time since yesterday's visit.

"I am sorry to tell you," said the doctor to Miss Donne, "that I don't like the look of things at all. I shall act on Sir Sydney's instructions and call in a first-rate man from Birmingham."

"Do all you can," Ethel implored him. "He saved all our lives."

"What can be done shall be done," answered the doctor; and with that he went away.

"He saved our lives," said Ethel to Mrs. Bowker. "Will you let me stay here till we hear the news—till the other doctor comes?"

"Stay?" said that good woman, "an' welcome!"

So Ethel stayed, and the great local man arriving gave a more decided and more favorable opinion than his country colleague. With care and attention the patient would probably recover. But the case was grave. The great man having delivered his verdict went away again, promising to return on the morrow, and still Ethel waited. The lesser light of science, a sound reliable man of the old school, called twice or thrice during the day and found her always at her post. She sent a special messenger to Dinah, explaining her purpose, and Dinah reading between the lines could not fail to think of George and the happiness and honor he had sacrificed. In brief, Ethel stayed beneath Mr. Bowker's roof one week, and Sir Sydney made calls upon her twice with Joe, and twice with Dinah. Before that time had expired John had recovered consciousness, and was believed to be fairly out of danger.

On the last night of Ethel's stay an interview occurred between John and her which probably accelerated her departure. The Bowker family were bivouacked in the parlor, feeling singularly abroad and un-at-home there, and Ethel and John were alone in the kitchen. The invalid lay in his improvised bed, propped up with pillows, his redundant curls all shorn, his eyes remarkably hollow, and his cheeks remarkably thin and pale. Ethel was preparing beef tea for him, and his eyes, looking supernaturally large, followed her about the place with a pleased languor. When at last she brought it to him, he took the hand that held the cup, and showed no disposition to relinquish it. A very little violence would have released the hand, but who could be violent with an invalid, especially with an invalid whose valor and foresight had just saved so many lives?

"You are very kind to me," John murmured, holding the hand and the cup together in such a way that it was difficult to let the cup go without spilling its contents.

"We have reason to be grateful to you, Mr. Keen," said Ethel. "All of us. We owe you our lives."

"I owe you mine in return," said John, holding the hand a little tighter. "I knew you were about me all the white. Even when I was delirious I seemed to know it. I should have died without you. You don't mind my loving you?" demanded the unconventional young man.

Now, what possible answer could a young woman make to a question of that sort?

"I couldn't help it," John continued. "I loved you before I had known you a week. I wonder any fellow who ever saw you cares to look at another woman."

"You are weak, Mr. Keen," said Ethel, striving gently to release her hand. "You must not excite yourself by talking."

She moved her disengaged hand to the tea cup to steady it in the struggle, and the innocent invalid absolutely took that also, and being really near a physical collapse, closed his eyes and dropped his head, but held on to the hands.

"Let me give you your beef tea," said Ethel.

"If you won't go away afterward," said Jonn.

"I will stay," Ethel answered, and he released her, and for a while lay like one coma tose, to her great dismay. But in a little time he rallied and submitted to be fed with a spoon, and was extremely orderly and quiet until Ethel made a movement as if to rise.

"No," said John feebly, and with one of the thin hands that lay outside the counterpane he caught one of hers, and taking it to his lips he mumbled it there feebly. "Let me cheat myself for a day or two till I get stronger," he said. "Don't think ill of me. I m very weak at present. I shall know better by and by."

And he fell to kissing the hand so passionately that Ethel withdrew it straightway in fear from him, and half by virginal instinct.

"Forgive me," said John, humbly, and she pitied him so that she gave him the hand back again, and he closed both his own upon it, and lay quite still in a sort of prostrated rapture.

"I shall be sorry to get well again," quoth John after a pause.

"Why, Mr. Keen?" asked Ethel.

"I shall leave this fool's paradise when I'm better," said John with a tear born of weakness in each eye. "I'd rather die like this than live to part from you."

She said nothing but turned and looked at him with a mournful pitying tenderness. He looked back at her straight into the eyes.

"I love you," he said in a half whisper, his lips scarcely moving. "I love you—I do love you."

And Ethel never knew how it happened, but his eyes seemed in some strange way to draw her to him, and she stooped slowly over him and kissed him on the lips. John threw an arm about her neck, and kissed her back again with a vigor surprising in a man who had so lately had so many bones broken. She struggled gently to be free of him, being half afraid of him and wholly afraid of herself; but

"Let me die like this," said John and lying back again fell into a placid sleep.

When she was assured that he really was asleep the girl kissed him again. And it is remarkable that she was not yet sure she loved him. Only he was so handsome and so brave and good, and he had suffered so much, and she had such a pity for him and such an admiration.

But when in the course of two or three hours the invalid awoke and of his own initiative desired beef tea, he was absolutely beyond control, and insisted on kissing her fingers every time they approached his lips. And at last this shy young man's insolence reached to such a pitch, encouraged doubtless by her non resistance, that he said:

"Ethel, kiss me." And so overcome was Miss Donne by his command that she obeyed him. "You won't send me away when I get better, will you?" asked John. "You'll get to like me a bit, won't you? You'll let me go on loving you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

And in this unexampled fashion was a modest reticent good girl, within little more than the space of two years, brought to be in love with two men, and to confess to them both. She was angry at herself, she thought it unmaidenly, she called herself shallow hearted, and even shed some secret tears over the phantom of that lost rascal George, who did still at times revisit the glimpse of the moon.

"You are getting stronger now, Mr. Keen," said Miss Donne, "and I shall come and see you sometimes, but I must go back to Dinah in the morning."

"No," said John.

"Yes, Mr. Keen," said Ethel, "I must go."

"Call me John," said the young man who had always until now been so shy and reticent. Ethel obeyed him in a whisper. Then, having secured that point, John besought her to stay a little longer, but in that respect she was adamant. But she promised to see him every day, and they took a tender farewell of each other; Ethel still distrustful and uncertain of herself, and full of maidenly shame at being so cheaply captured. She had vowed never to care for any man again, and yet he had suffered so, and was so good, and loved her so dearly. She did not quite love him yet, but only took pity on him, and John seemed tolerably contented with it. The doctors fairly stared at him next day, he made so much advance.

The youngest Bowker had been sent for a cab, and Ethel had gone away before either of the doctors came. She went straight, of course, to Cheston's house, and the Baronet came out to receive her as the cab drove up the avenue.

"And how is the patient?" he asked.

"Better," returned Ethel, "much better. How is Mrs. Bushell, Sir Sydney?"

A shade came across the genial Baronet's face.

"Miss Donne," he answered. "I don't know what to make of things in that quarter at all. You had better see her yourself."

"What is the matter?" cried Ethel in alarm.

"Lunacy's the matter, according to the best of my belief," said Cheston, testily, though he laughed a second later. "Go and see her."

Ethel ran upstairs to Dinah's room, and found her sitting there alone, looking pale and dejected.

"Where is your husband, Dinah," asked the girl when the first greetings were over.

"He's staying at the hotel in Birmingham," said Dinah with tremulous lips. "He's very kind and good, my dear, and he writes me beautiful letters, and he's been here twice to see me, but——" Dinah suppressed with effort an inclination to cry, and Ethel said indignantly:

"Dinah, he ought to be ashamed of himself. Give up thinking about him, my dear."

"No, no," said Dinah; you don't understand."

"I don't indeed," responded Ethel.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MATTERS OF CONSCIENCE AND MATTERS OF SENTIMENT.

"MY DEAR WIFE."

Thus far Joseph Bushell, with a sheet of letter-paper otherwise blank before him. Joe sat in his own room in the Birmingham hotel and bit disconsolately at the feather of his pen. A letter of Dinah's lay before him, and whenever he took it up and looked at it, as he did often, a swelling arose in his throat, and he found it necessary to get up and pace about the room a little to recover himself. The gist of Dinah's letter was simply this: Let the past bury its dead. I am your faithful and loving wife now just as much as when you went away. Don't desert me again, or you will break my heart. The letter said these things over and over again, but it contrived to say little more.

"She must know something more of me," said Joe, pacing up and down the room "before I can ask her to accept me again as her life companion. She ought to be sure of me. And I feel," he murmured to the walls, "I feel as if I ought to be married again, as if a return to her were somehow an attack upon her purity. We ought to be married again. It isn't bigamy, I suppose," said Joe, with a wretched little grin, "to be married twice to one's own wife. I suppose it's legal. Cheston says young Keen is getting strong again. I'll go and ask young Keen's advice."

So he shoved all his papers loose and crumpled into a writing desk, locked them up, took his hat, and set out upon his journey. The day was bright and cheerful after recent rains, and a spring-like feeling was in the air. No body is entirely insensible to such influences, and they were strong on Joe Bushell as he walked sturdily on again in the month of spring. Spring came again and seemed to bring some promise of a new spring of life for Dinah, and for him. In spite of all the self-accusations he had written to her, in spite of the self-accusing things he had said to her, Dinah would and could see nothing in Joe's prolonged absence but the result of Uncle George's wickedness.

"If you'd ha' been fortunate, Joe," she had said to him, "and had made enough to keep me afore he wrote that wicked letter, wouldn't you ha' sent for me, or come back to me?"

And he had been compelled to answer, "Yes," though he strove to inculpate himself by showing that he had acted like a fool and like a coward, to all of which Dinah lent an unbelieving ear. And the more Joe accused himself, the more eager Dinah was to believe the best of him; and the worse things he said of himself, the better man she thought him. For he could but tell her that wickedly and basely as he had acted he had been true to her in heart and life, and that was enough for Dinah. A hard and cruel fate, with old George as the controller of it, had come between them; that was all, and she had no blame for Joe. Not even now, when his scruples were dividing them, and when she would have taken him back with her whole heart and soul, could she blame him. Fate was hard and always had been hard, but Joe was not to blame. "Commend me to my kind lord," said Desdemona with her dying breath, and if Joe Bushell had turned Othellorish in act and fancy, Dinah would probably have had no harsher farewell for him. This is the nature of women sometimes, and if it leads to misery it breeds happiness as well; such happiness perhaps as a heart otherwise put together can never know, or do more than dream of.

As Joe walked on his spirits rose higher and higher. He had no fear of his own faith for the future. Whatever happened he would be true to Dinah, and would guard her so gently that the end of her life should be sweet to her. Only, a little pause, for the sake of the delicacy of his own thoughts about her, seemed necessary; a new courtship—they had been so long apart—a new ceremonial of some sort to bring them together again, to renew a tie so strained and weakened by the lapse of time that it felt to him a thing broken and faded almost into nothing.

The road he took led him for some four and a half miles over the ground he had traveled when he walked to catch the London train at almost the beginning of this story, and the way was changed, as he was. There were new landmarks on the road, as there were new landmarks in his history, and many of the old ones were clean gone, as in his own history likewise. And since he walked now, not in the old direction, but retracing those youthful steps, this special present journey seemed to have a special promise in it, as if it were only now that he was really coming back again to love and duty.

It is not at all an unusual thing for two or even three people to come to a resolution on the same day, and almost at the very moment when Joe resolved upon a visit to John Keen, old George Bushell set out upon a visit to the convalescent lawyer. And the history of old George's visit was briefly this: The hand of Heaven in judgment had seemed to his wicked superstitious old soul to weigh so heavily upon him, and the way of disarming its vengeance seemed so clear, that within a day or two of his interview with his whilom private secretary, he had sent a note to Mr. Packmore, requesting that gentleman's presence at a settled hour. At the settled hour Mr. Packmore came and learned that he had been sent for to alter George's will, and learning, further, in what direction the alternation was proposed, was greatly disturbed, and became so doubtful of old George's sanity that he refused, after a lengthy squabble, to have anything to do with the matter.

"My money's mine, ain't it?" asked old George of his stubborn counselor.

"And my reputation is mine, sir," returned Mr. Packmore, stiffly. "And my professional probity is mine, sir. And I will have nothing to do with a scheme which seems to me, sir, to be no less than crackbrained."

"I didn't send for you o' purpose to be insulted, Packmore," said old George, with a dignity more wooden even than of old. "An' I'll tell you what. You send me all the business dockyments you got o' mine, an send your bill in, an' I'll send a check an' ha' done wi you. Talk to me about bein' crackbrained!" he quavered, getting on his legs and shaking both his sticks at the conveyancer. "I'm as sound i' mind as iver I was, thank God, an' I know what I'm a doin'. But I don't want no unwillin' service, and I don't want no reflections on my intellee', thank you. An' you can get out o' my house, an' send my dockyments at your earliest convenience."

Mr. Packmore at this had bowed with exceeding stiffness and retired. And now, old George, after new cogitations, had bethought him of John Keen, who knew the whole story (which it was not easy to tell to Mr. Packmore), and who would know his reasons, and would make his will in this amended fashion without misgiving. He let the time slip by, however, until falling into a state of querulous rage with Mrs. Bullus one day, he felt a recurrence of his old pains and terrors, and went off headlong on his two sticks to seek the lawyer.

"Is Mr. Keen well enough to see a body?" he asked of Mrs. Bowker.

"He's sittin' up areadin'," said that estimable woman, who for reasons of her own had no affection for old George, and answered him somewhat scornfully.

"Is he well enough to see a body?" demanded George again.

"I'll ask him," returned Mrs. Bowker disappearing. "You can come in," she said ungraciously when she returned; and old George, entering, found himself face to face with the lawyer, who was sitting up in bed in the parlor, proped with pillows, and looking like a rakish ghost in a smoking cap which set so much to the side of his head that it totally obscured one ear. The smoking cap had fitted him once upon a time, but now that his locks were so closely shorn it was ridiculously too big for him.

"Be you well enough to do a minute or two's talk on important business, Mr. Keen?" asked old George.

"Yes," said John, "I think so. Take a seat."

Mrs Bowker slammed the door and went out, repenting herself a moment later on account of the invalid. Old George began to unfold his purpose slowly.

"Mr. Keen," he said, "I'm come to you because you know everythin' appertainin' to me an' my lung-lost nevew, Joseph, an' my late private seckitary, knowed beforetime as George Banks."

"Yes," said John.

"It's been o' my mind," said old George, "as I might ha' acted straighter than I did, an' what I did as was wrong I want to mek up for."

"Yes," said John again.

"I'm agettin' main old new," George renewed, "an' I feel as if I wa'n't lung for this world. An' I want to do right afore I leave it."

"I am very glad to hear you speak in this way, Mr. Bushell," said John, in whom his recent illness and danger had left many grave thoughts behind them. "Your coming here," he added, seeing that old George paused nervously, "seems to indicate that I can be of use to you. Can I?"

"Yes," returned old George. But gi' me time. Gi' me time." He sat for a moment or two, with a hand on either stick quavering there. "I allays meant to be a respectable an' a God-fearin' man. An' I gien my nevew Joseph a hundred pound to run away wi', an I've never been hard—not over an' above—wi' the poor. An' what wrong-doin' I fell into, Mr. Keen, I've been sore punished for, an' I want to mek things straight again, an' die wi' a clean conscience." There he paused again and looked up at John with an uncertain glance easily abashed. "I'm agoin'," he continued, "to have a noo will made, I am, an' I am going to leave everything divided betwixt my nevew Joseph an my late private secretary knowed beforehand as George Banks. Everythin' equal divided betwixt them two."

There was a something in old George's manner which John construed rightly as conveying an expectation that he would be surprised at this and would applaud it as a moral action.

"I had always heard," said John, "that it was your intention to found an institute and hospital. That was never made a secret."

It never had been, and that fact made it none the easier for old George to satisfy afrighted conscience and angry heaven.

"Such was my intention, Mr. Keen," said he, "but I'm now bended on another course, so to speak. Will you carry out them theer instructions?"

"Certainly, Mr. Bushell," returned John. "Assuredly if you wish it so. Do you attach any conditions?"

"No," said old George, "no conditions. Divided equal betwixt 'em," with a heavy sigh. "That's all. Folks'll talk, I count, but I've got my peace to mek wi' Them Above, Mr. Keen, an' I'm agettin' main old, an' I ain't been all I should ha' been, an' I'm a good deal broke wi' trouble, an' I don't look to last long."

"I believe, Mr. Bushell," said John, "that you are trying to do what seems to you to be a duty, and I can understand how hard it is. But you will have the sympathy of all who understand your motives; and as for those who don't, what matter?"

"Ah," said old George, "what matter, indeed. These things is betwixt a man an' his conscience. I don't want to hurry you, for it's plain to be seen as you're still sickly. But as soon as you can, Mr. Keen, as soon as you can."

Old George, when John really came to look at him and in his own mind to contrast him with what he had been, was wonderfully changed and pitifully broken, insomuch that the wrongdoer extracted a sharp twinge of pity from the honest man.

"It's the meanest proverb ever put in print," thought John to himself, "but it's true for all that—Honesty is the best policy."

Old George did not seem to have anything to add to the instructions he had already given, but he sat with somewhat stertorous breathing, and looked at the pattern of the gaudy carpet, pushing one of his shaky sticks about it as if he followed the design. He had not sat thus silent for a minute when a tap came to the door.

"I'm agoin' now, Mr. Keen," said George, "an' I can open your door for you. Good bye. You send word to me when you're ready, will you?"

John promised, and the old fellow crawled forward leaning on his two sticks, and shuffingly set both of them in one hand whilst he opened the door. And there before him stood a bearded man of middle age whom he did not know. But the bearded man knew him, and to his terror and amazement said very quietly:

"My Uncle George."

Uncle George showing no signs of an inclination to move, the new comer passed him and closed the door. Then, with his hands in his jacket pockets, he turned and confronted Uncle George, and looked at him, up and down.

"Be you my nevew Joseph?" asked George, in his shaky voice. He knew it well enough now, though he had not recognized him at first.

Joe could not trust himself as yet to say a word in the presence of this old traitor. There were too many terrible thoughts revived by the sight of him, and too great a spirit of natural vengeance stirred to make speech safe.

"I'm atryin' to put everythin' straight again as I set crooked, Joseph," said George, his eyes sinking before his nephew's gaze. "I own I acted bad toward you, but I've been punished for it heavy. Heavy, Joseph. An' I'm atryin' wi' God's help to straighten things out a bit."

"We're a very pretty family, said Joe with great bitterness, speaking to himself. "I can see that you're better, Keen," he continued in a changed voice, turning toward John; "I had something to say to you. I'll call again when you are disengaged."

"I'm agoin' now," quavered Uncle George. "I've been atryin' to straighten things, Joseph. You ask lawyer Keen if I ain't been atryin' to straighten things."

Joe made no response to this, and Uncle George began to fumble at the door again. He shook so, and went about the simple business in such a helpless fashion, that Joe turned the handle for him.

"Thank you, Joseph," said the old fellow, turning his fishy eyes upon him shiftily. "I meant well by you at the beginnin'. I give you a hundred pound to run away wi' an' I meant well by you at the beginnin' But I was tempted sudden, Joseph, an' I've been a bad man, I'm afeared. But I'm atryin' to set things straight again"

Joe said nothing, and Uncle George with much difficulty made off. His nephew closed the door behind him.

"Is that the first time you've seen him since you left England?" asked John.

Joe nodded gravely and drew up a chair to the bedside.

"When do you think you'll be about again, Keen?" he asked after a pause.

"Well," said John, "I want to get up now, and feel quite equal to it, but the doctors won't have it. I suppose they're right," he added with a sigh.

"You know what we all owe you," said Joe.

"You know what we all owe you," returned John.

"Keen," said Joe, suddenly. "I want to speak to you upon a delicate matter. My wife and I are absolutely reconciled."

"I am heartily glad of it," answered John. "Heartily glad."

"But we are still divided by a—by a sentiment, I suppose I must call it. We have been so long apart. Is a second marriage a legal possibility?"

"A possibility," said John, "yes. But not a necessity"

"If a possibility," answered Joe, "certainly a necessity."

"As satisfying the sentiment you spoke of?"

"Yes."

"If you feel the necessity you might get a clergyman to read the service through; dispensing with the purely legal formalities."

"Yes," said Joe; "they are not needed, of course."

"Not at all."

A knock at the inner door made an interruption here, and Mrs. Bowker entered. Mrs. Bowker was sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Keen must have beef-tea and toast at this juncture, punctually at midday.

"Theer's the clock astrikin'," said Mrs. Bowker in great triumph, as indicating her own precision of obedience to the doctor's orders.

Mr. Keen was of opinion that he could help himself with perfect ease, but Mrs. Bowker would not hear of it, and insisted upon feeding the patient with her own hands. So John being comfortably tucked into a clean towel, a little coarse in material but of snowy whiteness, was fed with provoking slowness by his hostess. Mrs. Bowker was of opinion that the measures taken with the rescued were still necessary, and so made great pauses between each spoonful, and took eager observations of the patient, as if in expectation of asphyxial symptoms.

"Let me drink it up," said John; "I want to talk wiff Mr. Bushell."

"Health's o' more importance than any amount o' talkin', an I'm sure Mr. Bushell don's want to see you sorgrin' your'sel' ough to him," said Mrs. Bowker.

Joe laughed and said, "Certainly not," and the slow process went on. When in the course of a half-hour it was finished. Mr. Keen's hands and face must be sponged with lukewarm water, and his beard combed and brushed to make him presentable to the doctor.

"An' somebody else as we knowin' on, eh, Mr. Keen?" said the hostess knowingly.

At this sally John blushed and laughed, and the sound of wheels being heard at that moment, Mrs. Bowker laughed triumphantly, whisked to the door and opened it, and a minute later admitted Ethel. The girl came in beaming, but stopped short at the sight of Joe, and gave him a frozen little nod.

"I'll call again, Keen," said Joe shaking hands with the patient; "I'll look in again this afternoon."

"Do," said John heartily, but perhaps not sorry to be alone with Ethel; "I shall be glad to see you."

Joe bowed to Ethel (who responded by another frozen little nod), and went his way.

"My darling!" cried John—they had got so far by this time—"you do him less than justice."

"Why," cried Ethel, with a flush of indignation, "does the worthless fellow stand shilly-shailying here when the best woman in the world is waiting and breaking her heart for him, and he knows it?"

John admired her all the more, if that were possible, for this outbreak, but he said only:

"Shall I tell you why?"

"If there is a reason," said Ethel" a little disdainful still, "I should like to hear it."

"There is a reason," answered John; "they have been so long apart that he feels some sort of formal ratification of their old union nece sary before they begin life together again. He wants some new solemnity between them to piece the tie so long broken."

"They are man and wife," cried Ethel.

"Legally, of course they are," John answered, patting one of her hands with his.

"But you can understand the sense of division which has come upon him. Think more gently of him, darling; think of what we owe him."

"It was you who saved us all," she protested.

"You would have found my help worth very little," John said gravely, "if it had not been for his."

"Is he going back to Dinah?"

"Yes; but I have a scheme in my own mind which I am going to propose to him when he comes this afternoon."

"What is it?"

"It depends on you."

"On me?"

"On you."

"What is it?" she asked again.

John, leaning nearer on his pillow, whispered his scheme to her. She heard him out, and answered "No."

"Not for Dinah's sake as well as mine?" pleaded John, who evidently set great store by this scheme of his.

"No," she said again, but in a way which was scarcely negative.

"It is the very thing," said John with cheerful emphasis—"the very thing" And with those wiles which happy lovers use he pressed his case until at last she yielded.

"May I tell him?"

"I suppose he must know," she answered with a pleasant confusion.

"I suppose so," said John, with a look of exultation on his face. "Will you wait till he returns and takes the news to Dinah?"

"Yes," she answered, and he, opening his arms for her, she arose and stooped and kissed him. The eyes of both were moist with the dew of happiness as they sat and looked at each other, a moment later, hand in hand.

"Do you know, John," she said after a blissful pause. "I am almost sorry for that wicked old man, hard as he has been."

"Old Bushell?" asked John.

"Yes. I should have been earlier here this morning if I had not met him upon the way. Sir Sydney's coachman was very near driving over him upon the road, and he seemed quite helpless. He knew the coachman and asked if he would drive him home, and said he felt quite unable to walk. Of course I asked him to get into the carriage, but the man and I had to help him. I wanted to leave him there and walk on, but he was evidently so ill that I was afraid to do it. So we took him home, and waited until the doctor came. And whilst I waited he told me what he had been out for. I really think he wants to do what seems to be his duty now. It seems only the other day since he was a stout healthy man, and now what a wreck he is! He cried in quite a pitiful way whilst he was talking, and he seemed to cling to me so, because I pitied him and spoke kindly to him. He begged me so hard to go and see him again, that I couldn't help promising. I had meant to call again this afternoon, but I must lose no time in carrying back this news to Dinah."

There she blushed a little and dropped the hazel eyes into which John looked so proudly and so fondly.

"Yes," said John, "he's nearly broken. He's been a terrible old rogue, but he has suffered for it. It was like parting with his soul to lose the money he had held so long."

"I don't think he can live long, John. I asked him to see a clergyman, but he said, 'No, no. You come an' talk about good things to me. You'll do me more good than a parson.'"

"So you will," said John.

And there again, as happy lovers will, and as they have a right to, they fell to talking of their own affairs. Joe meantime rambled lonely, but not downhearted now, and gave God thanks humbly, and with deep penitence and lofty longings toward the future. In two hours' time he returned to the cottage, and finding Ethel still there would have retired again, but John forbade him and called him in. Then, Ethel having joined Mrs. Bowker in the kitchen, John summoned his visitor to the seat she had vacated.

"Bushel," he said, "congratulate me, I am going to be married."

"I congratulate you with all my heart," said Joe; and added, "When?"

"As soon as I am well enough, and everything can be arranged." He laughed weakly in his joy and triumph and held out a hand. Joe grasped it, and he continued, "The one creature dearest in the world to your wife next to you is my wife that is to be."

"I know as much," said Joe.

"And Ethel has consented to this haste," said John, "on condition that you take our wedding day as yours."

Joe bent his head, and, bringing up a second hand to the young lawyer's clasped it hard in both of his without a word.

"That contents you?"

"Yes."

"Call Ethel," said John, dropping back upon his pillows with a tired but happy look.

Joe obeyed.

"It is settled, my darling," said John. "Ride away and tell Dinah."

"May I come with you?" asked Joe, blushing like a schoolboy, but looking in her face with candid eyes.

"Come," answered Ethel, brightly, "and secure her consent yourself."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SENTIMENTS.

"Let me go first," said Ethel, as she and Joe drove up the avenue at Worley Hall together, "and make her ready for you." And, Joe assenting, she left him with Sir Sydney in the library whilst she ran away to find Dinah.

"My darling," she cried, throwing both arms about her friend's neck, "I have such news for you." Dinah was not eager to ask the news, but Ethel whispered to her, "My dear, your husband is here and is waiting to see you. No. Don't run away yet. I have something else to tell you."

She had yielded to John's solicitations, and in a new-found happiness that had seemed an easy thing enough to do. But now she had to recall the fact, never very easy to forget, that she and Dinah's son had once been affianced lovers, and not so long ago. And yet Dinah knew as well as she did how much she was indebted to her new lover; by what singular bonds of pity and gratitude she had found herself tied to him.

"Dinah, I am going to be married."

"Yes, darlin'," said Dinah; "to Mr Keen?"

"Yes. We are going to be married directly he gets well again. And so are you." Dinah looked helpless at this extraordinary statement, and Ethel explained it. "My dear, I have seen more of your husband to-day than I ever saw of him before, and I begin to like him and believe in him—a little. And now that I know why he has been staying away from you I esteem his reason for it, hard as it seemed at first." She told the reason. "And now, Dinah," she said gayly, "your old sweetheart has come a-courting again." But there the gayety suddenly broke down, and the two women had a cry together, though they were very tender and joyful tears that fell.

Then in a little while Dinah descended to meet Joe, and waited for him in a small drawing room looking on the garden. Ethel went to the library, and having returned with him, fled, and left the two together.

"You know why I have been waiting, Dinah."

"Yes, Joe."

"And you will take me back again?"

"Joe! My own husband!"

They embraced and kissed each other, and sat there talking for hours, until Sir Sydney came in and roused them. Then, the evening being fine and bright, they walked in the garden together after dinner, like lovers, with their arms stolen shyly round each other, in dusky walks where none could see them, and at night, with a tender farewell, Joe went away to the town again, but only to return next day and sit and talk the day out alone with Dinah and wander about the gardens in the evening again with an arm wound lover like about her waist as they wandered in dusky walks unnoticed. And then again farewell for the night. A singular courtship, but full of a complete forgiveness on the one side and a complete penitence on the other, and bidding fair to lead—if ever courtship led yet—to a happy union. Sometimes these lovers talked of their unhappy son, and planned for his future, and he was the only blot upon their hopes of happiness.

"Could you bear, my dear," asked Joe, "to leave England and go abroad with him and me to some place where our whole story is unknown, where he would have a new chance for amendment?"

"Anywhere with you an' him, Joe," answered Dinah. "Anywhere."

"I'll talk it over with him," said Joe; "I think it best. Here the memory of the past may weigh him down and keep him hard and sullen. And perhaps, my dear, between prosperity and our watchfulness and affection he may mend."

"Don't be too hard upon him, in your mind, Joe," said Dinah pleadingly.

"I have no right to be hard in my thoughts on any man," Joe answered sadly.

"He was never a bad lad," said poor Dinah, "till he got into that money lending lawyer's hands and was tempted beyond his strength."

"Then we will go abroad together, and try for the best?"

"Yes, dearest. Anywhere with you and him," said Dinah, and the thing was settled.

So next day Joe sought his son and found him. Dinah's purse had contained no less than fifty pounds, and the young gentleman was once more in clover. He was living in a highly respectable hotel in private rooms, had already set up another suit of clothes, and on his father's unexpected entry to his sitting room was seated with his heels upon the low chimney piece with a cigar in his mouth and a sporting paper in his hands. Beholding the new comer, he arose embarrassed and murmured something about waiting for instructions and not knowing what to do with out them.

"I am here to give you instructions," said his father. "For God's sake, man, go on smoking and don't try to hide your cigar from me. Your mother and I," he continued in a changed tone, "are going to the colonies, where our curious story will be unknown. We think it better that you should accompany us. I have been talking things over with your mother, and I want to treat you kindly and to be your friend. There will be no temptations in the life before you unless you make them. Try to mend, my lad; try to mend your life and your mother's heart together. She has been unhappy in both of us. Let us try together to make atonement. You shall hear no more reproaches as to your past from me so long as you behave reasonably and give no cause for new offense. And I will try to do my duty by you and will be as kind and good a father as you will let me be. Will you come with us?"

"Yes, sir," said young George with bent head.

"What money have you?"

"My mother gave me this," answered George, producing his purse and spreading its contents upon the table.

"You are not happy here, are you? So near the——?" he paused, and George's head bent lower.

"No, sir. I had rather be elsewhere."

"Go to Southampton and await us there. When you want money write to me, not to your mother. To attempt to draw one penny from her without my knowledge is to forfeit my protection and your own prospects. And that—I hope—is my last threat to you. Shake hands. Good by. Keep watch upon yourself, and try to be a decent fellow henceforward. Good by."

And he was gone.

"I will try," cried the wretched young George, when left alone. "I will be a decent sort of fellow."

Joe went back to Dinah and told her all he had said and undertaken, and the quaintly tender courtship went on again. They planned, like common lovers, for their future life, and like common lovers looked forward to their wedding-day. Sometimes they went to see John Keen, and day by day they found him growing stronger. Sir Sydney pressed for the wedding to take place from his house, but Mrs. Donne was too shy to present herself there, and Daniel had no other nurse than her, and seemed likely very soon to be in want of no nurse at all.

Ethel had redeemed her promise to call upon old George, and at his request had read the Bible to him; the broken and defeated old rascal taking his breakage and defeat for penitence as other people have done. He was harmless now, to everybody, quite a scotched snake, and was gentle and forbearing even with Mrs. Bullus. When