

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE TALE OF A TORNADO.

(Continued.)

"How hard you girls are getting," said Russell, stopping short to look after her. "What would your mothers in their unsophisticated youth have thought of the language so familiar to your lips? Is everything sweet and tender in womanhood going to shrivel up and perish? This accursed love of money is the strongest principle in all your hearts. It is shameful. What can the next generation of men be, growing up under such influences? It is enough to make one despair of the future of our country. To think that the fairest, purest thing, almost in the world—a young maiden, should be transformed into a grasping, calculating, speculative, cool, business hand—"

"Perhaps you had better stop a while, and rest," interrupted Jennie, "since you have got to calling names, and sweating. I beg your pardon, you did swear. Please let me say, that it is all the fault of you gentlemen. You won't allow us any outside work of our own, and we have to make use of another to get what we want. One is ambitious; one has æsthetic tastes; one wants a home and daily bread; we do the best we can for ourselves. It is true, however, that women admire success."

"Do they?" said the doctor, "and all women? Well, I have not succeeded yet, and from your point of view never may. I am a very poor man; I am not able yet to ask a girl to marry me. But I expect, some day, to arrive at what I call success, and I hope there may yet be left one girl who can be happy in the sweet old way, without millions of money. Does your sister think as you do on these subjects?" he continued, in a manner which he flattered himself was eminently easy and indifferent.

The young schemer felt that her moment was come, and trembled. She was really sorry for the poor fellow; she thrilled with indignation at Fate—as she chose to call it; that this good man, as she knew him to be—whom, moreover, her sister loved with her whole heart—should not have the needful money to marry Essie, and help their father; but Jennie never flinched from her high resolve; she would make the pain brief; that was all she could do.

"Essie has a high regard for Mr. Burton," said she gently; "and I know that he is very fond of her. I will tell you as one of our best friends, that I think there will soon be an engagement announced."

"What!" exclaimed Russell, and unconsciously standing still, in his utter surprise, looking down at her with such a stern face, that even Jennie almost quailed. Seeing that she meant what she said, and also that she was sorry for him, he spoke no more till he bade her good-night at her own gate.

What he said to himself at home was never known but to himself. John Russell was a brave man, and one that could endure both pain and wrong, holding his peace when it was needful.

"Is it settled, Essie?" said Jennie as she came up to where her sister sat on the steps, leaning her head on her hands. "Has he spoken out?"

"Why, of course not," returned the other half peevishly; "such things aren't done all at once; you expect too much, Jennie. Tell me what did Dr. Russell say?" she continued eagerly; "you were gone so long."

"O, not much," replied Jennie; he was very cross, and I am right glad to get rid of him."

"He might have come back, at least, to say good-night," said Esther; "poor fellow!"

The days went by; Mr. Burton called very often; John Russell never. Esther wondered a little, but supposed he had divined the state of things. With womanly tact she held her suitor back from declaring himself, and struggled for a longer reprieve with all the energy of a condemned criminal. Jennie dared not hurry her; the sweetness of her temper gave way under the terrible strain, for it was not her happiness alone, but Russell's also that she was destroying. The weather was hot and sultry, and to that was attributed her growing paleness and nervousness; not even Jennie knew how the weary days and sleepless nights sapped her strength; for she was one of those women whose impulse is to conceal their spiritual life from the eyes of all, except as it belongs to or can serve others. Sympathetic, affectionate and tender, in a remarkable degree, her own pleasure and pain were for herself only. So no one realized or even imagined the pain she was suffering day after day.

At last events forced Esther to a decision which she would perhaps never have arrived at if left to herself. After a long visit from one of the deacons, Mr. Williams remained shut up in his study, and sent them word not to wait dinner for him; then they knew the blow had fallen. Esther lingered about the study door, listening to her father's footsteps as he walked up and down the room, and to the faint frequent cough that seemed to go through her own heart whenever she heard it, till she could endure it no longer; she begged to be let in, and would not be denied. She found her father as she had feared, quite overcome by this most unexpected trial. The want of affection shown by people in whose service he had spent twenty-five of the best years of his life, had cut him to the heart; and he had an idea that he was somewhat blameable for what he felt to be wrong in them.

"Surely, I have laboured in vain and spent my strength for naught," said he, with an unsteady voice: "yet have I watched for their souls, night and day, as one who must give an account; and I have loved them and their children even as my own. What have I done, that this should come to me? But let not this shake your faith, Esther," he continued, seeing that she was crying quietly, "for my service was unto the Master, not unto men; and from Him shall come the reward not of my works, but of His grace."

"Dear papa," said Esther, shaking off her tears, "that ought to comfort you: the ingratitude and meanness of human beings cannot alter the worth of your service there."

"If it has indeed been worthy and acceptable service, Esther," returned her father; "that is work done through

me as an instrument by the High and Holy One, it will surely stand accepted; but a great doubt is in my mind. Have I been unfaithful to my high calling, that these my children have so wandered away from the truth? Have I neglected to feed them with bread, that they now desire a stone? What if the Master should ask of me, 'With whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness?'

"They are not all of these new opinions," said Esther, broken-hearted, but resolute to console. "The best of them cling to you still. Look, papa, at the life and death of those who have gone to heaven from your teaching, if you doubt yourself. Oh! when their children remember them, how can they be so ungrateful?"

"Let us not judge the brethren, my child," said the minister; "and if the work here can be done better by another than by me, so be it; let the Lord's work prosper. We must go away soon, Esther; and to speak the truth, I am troubled about that also. I am growing old, my dear; and if my own people who are accustomed to all my failings, and have had the best of my strength, can listen to me no longer, how can I expect that strangers will do it? It is too late now for me to change my profession. Yet we must live. For myself, it would disturb me but little; the time will not be long; but for my daughters, it distresses and perplexes me, more perhaps, than it ought. We must have faith."

"It will kill him, I am afraid," said Esther, when she left the study to tell her sisters the news they were expecting. "What shall we do?"

"We must not depend upon papa any longer, that is certain," said Jennie firmly, "and I must give up my place in the school, I think. I could not stay behind when the rest of you go. Where shall we go I wonder, Esther?" but her sister could not reply for tears. After this Esther hesitated no longer. Mr. Burton made his offer, and was accepted. It was understood that the marriage should take place very soon, in order that the parsonage might be vacated for Mr. Williams' successor.

People said that Dr. Russell was growing old and grave, too fast. He worked very hard, driving about all day, and sitting up at night to study; and a deep wrinkle was coming between his eyes. As everything is known in a village, there were many speculations and surmises, but the respect Dr. Russell inspired did not permit people to make any remarks where he would hear of them. So he pursued his darkened way unmolested.

One bright, hot afternoon Esther came out on the piazza, where Susy was busy making a dress for her doll with patient little fingers.

"Where are you going, Essie?" said the child, looking up, "and why are your eyes so red?"

"I am going for a little walk," replied Esther; "you won't mind, dear? The girls will be home soon."

"Oh, no," said Susy; "but what shall I do if Mr. Burton comes?"

"Talk to him," said Esther with an impatient sigh; "you can amuse him well enough. It doesn't take much."

Susy watched her sister as she walked down the street, with a hasty nervous step. "I don't like Mr. Burton," said the child, to herself, "and I don't think Essie does either. I wish he would die," and her sweet face, beautiful like Esther's, but delicate as a white flower, assumed a beatific expression, as she added to this pious aspiration and "leave Essie all his money."

Meanwhile Esther left the village street and struck into a lonely road that led through the meadows on the river bank. "Anywhere to be alone!" she thought. There were days—and this was one of them—when the bitterness of her lot was too strong for her; when some little unexpected association would call up her dead hopes "in form as when they lived," and break her heart with contrast between the future as it lay before her now and the future as it should have been. She walked a long way, until through physical weariness the pain at her heart became duller; then she sat down under a great tree by the roadside and gazed listlessly back at the white village, seeming asleep amid the sheltering green boughs and the broad river sweeping past tranquilly.

"It looks sweet and peaceful," thought the girl, "and yet what a hard, cruel thing is life! It is like a mighty machine, without guide or ruler, driving blindly on, wounding or crushing, no one caring. Oh! I am growing wicked. I knew I should. 'There is a lie in my right hand,' as the Bible says, but what else could I do? There was no other way possible to me; papa is sick, and I could not take care of him only so. Oh, if I might have married John Russell and lived in the smallest house down there, and worked hard to help him and be happy! I will think of it now, for the time is coming fast when I can never think of him again;" and she threw off her hat and leaned her aching head on her two hands, looking like a beautiful picture of Despair, as she sat alone under the great green tree.

It was a burning, glaring day, and just now was strangely silent; not a bird chirped, not an insect hummed. The sky was not the cool blue arch that affords the eye such refreshing relief during the hot New England summer; it looked as if heated white by the angry red sun, which shorn of its rays resembled a spot of fire. In the western sky toward the north lay a heavy, dark cloud, and in the opposite quarter another mass of vapour was accumulating; but except at these points the heavens were clear, and there were no indications of storm. The stillness, the waiting attitude of nature, struck in some subtle way upon Esther's senses and awoke her attention. She raised her head and looked anxiously about, searching for the cause of her instinctive impression of danger at hand. Glancing at the sky, she saw the cloud in the south rush with strange and fearful rapidity toward the large mass in the north. A tremendous peal of thunder seemed to make the earth vibrate, as the two bodies of vapour united amid great commotion, and, rising to the zenith, overspread the whole sky with darkness.

"What can it mean?" said Esther to herself, terrified. "Is it the last day? Shall I be taken in the midst of my sins?"

The girl's nerves were unstrung by the mental conflict she had gone through, and she sat trembling under the war of the elements instead of running to some shelter. Not much time was given her, however, for either reflection or action

before a tempest of rain and hail burst from the cloud, accompanied by a wind that seemed to beat her to the earth and pin her there. In a moment the air was full of branches, rails, shingles and rafters; the great tree bent and swayed like a reed; the wind shrieked like a demon; the driving hail cut her face and hands. Aroused from her fright by the necessity of exertion, she endeavoured to reach a little deserted hut not very far off, but before she had advanced two steps her haven of refuge was a heap of ruins and its beams flying over her head as she fought her way back to the tree. Here she clung for her life while the tornado tried to beat and tear her away, till with a terrible crack the great elm was broken short and the whole leafy top was sent whirling off. Gazing after it, spell-bound by fear, Esther saw a great store-house that lay between her point of view and the village, suddenly tipped quite over on one side; and at the same moment the massive covered bridge that spanned the river was blown off from its foundations into the stream. The force of the hurricane increased every moment, and Esther was shelterless under the driving tempest. She felt already benumbed; she could not stir from the spot where she was crouched; she believed that life was over for her and prepared herself to die. She folded her hands to pray, and the names she loved best came first to her lips.

"Bless my dearest father," she said; "bless—oh, what am I going to do? Marry one, while my heart was given to another! Now in the hour of death I have not a thought for him! I had forgotten that there was any one but John. Thank Heaven! I am shown my sin and saved from it by death." And so saying she sank down on the sodden grass, covering her face with her hands that she might not see any more terrors.

When the tornado first commenced its work of destruction, Dr. Russell, riding home from a visit to a distant patient, was forcing his frightened horse up the street when he became aware of a little figure at Mr. Williams' gate, clasping the other. Poor Susy's long hair was loosened, and the wind blew it about her white face and carried it up straight the bars firmly with one hand while she beckoned with in the air so that she looked like the Wind Spirit of fairy lore. "Oh, Doctor Russell!" said she when he had succeeded in getting his horse near enough to hear her: "Essie is out in this awful storm, and I don't know what to do. Papa is out of town and Jennie hasn't got home."

"Which way did she go?" said Russell quickly. "Stop crying, Susy, and tell me; that's a dear child. I'll find her at least as soon as Jennie would." Hardly waiting to catch the sobbing little girl's answer he wheeled his horse sharply round, and convincing that animal by means of the spur that the time was come for resignation to his master's will, he rode rapidly away.

He had gone a long distance, or so it seemed, examining every pile of debris that he passed, before he distinguished a drenched and flattened heap of clothes lying at the foot of a great stump. Struck with a terrible fear, he sprang from his horse and knelt down beside the motionless figure, while the steed finding himself at liberty dashed down the road with nostrils in the air and trailing bridle.

"Esther, my darling!" said he, and his trembling voice found its way through the benumbed senses to the soul faithful in death; and Esther opened her eyes and a pathetic half-smile dawned on her white face.

"Guess now who holds thee? 'Death,' I said; but there The silver voice rang, 'Not Death, but Love.'"

There was a solid old barn which had braved the storms of many years, in the centre of its great lonely meadow; and there Russell conveyed his lost and found treasure. The hay was dry and warm, and the barn, though it creaked and shuddered, resisted the wind and held staunchly together; and there Esther came back to life, and the desire of life, under the eyes that watched her with a sad and tender anxiety; came back with a new resolution in her heart.

"I will not take the work of Providence into my own hands any more," thought she. "Right is right, and wrong is wrong; consequences are none of my business."

The wail of the storm became fainter and died away; and when they emerged from the barn, the sun shone out on the great rain-drops, and it seemed to Esther as though all trouble had been swept away by a merciful flood, and a new world had arisen over the ruin of the old, a world once more glad with simple joys of sunshine, and bird-songs, and the sweet scent of the earth after rain.

"And I am not going to be so poor any longer, dear," said Russell; "I have had an offer of a partnership that will make a rich man of me; I did not care for it until now. We will take care of your father, Esther. All he wants is rest."

A week later, Jennie entered the room where Esther lay on a sofa, weak and nervous, but at peace in the depths of her heart.

"Essie," said she, "Mr. Burton is here, and I think you are well enough to see him to-day. If you are not going to marry him, you should at least tell him so, and put him out of misery."

"Oh, Jennie!" said the other rising, as she spoke, and clasping her hands nervously. "If you would do it for me! I cannot face him. Let us never again do evil that good may come. I am ashamed to meet Mr. Burton."

Jennie reflected. "It is a horrid thing to do," thought she; "but after all it was more my fault than Essie's, for I made her accept him; so I may as well take my part of the disagreeables. Besides, she will be sure to say something shocking, for she is all in a tremble now. Very well, dear," she said aloud; "I will see him and do the best I can;" and she departed on her unpalatable mission.

How she got through her story, or what she said, Jennie never knew afterwards; but at last the state of affairs was made clear to Mr. Burton's mind. He did not seem as much moved as Jennie had expected; but sat looking into his hat, and twisting it in his hands, "more like the Laird of Cockpen than ever," thought his excited and embarrassed interlocutor. At last he drew a large handkerchief, and wiped his brow.

"Miss Jennie," said he, "this is a surprise, indeed; yet it is not altogether unexpected; I have sometimes been fear-