A GREAT MISTAKE.

His kind, half puzzled stare into her eyes was hard to bear; but she did not flinch. The young man felt as if he would have liked to take her into his arms and give her a good shaking for her sweet provoking folly. Why should this trouble have come upon them, he wondered irritably, when they had all been so happy and so friendly together?

"It is all very well to say you like her," he urged vexedly; but you don't look as if you did. And I am sure Miss Ludlow is a very jolly sort of girl, and all that."

"I have no doubt of it," returned Bee quietly. "Why do you think it necessary, though, to insist on her jollinessto me?"

"Because——" George ran his fingers through his hair in a restless manner, and could get no farther. Was ever man in such a painful, ridiculous, pathetic plight before?

"Because what?" Bee demanded, standing quite still, with her two hands in his.

"Well—because, my sister Bee," the young man burst forth vehemently, "has taken some absurd fancy into her head about that harmless little person, and chooses to make her old friend and brother very unhappy about it." He felt Bee start convulsively, but he was holding her shaking fingers close, and would not let her go. "Why should this stranger have come between us?" he continued. "What has she to do with you, or Jack, or me, who have all been so unspeakably happy together, and without her?"

"Nothing!" whispered Bee breathlessly. George's voice was thrilling her. She felt faint with happiness in the rough warm pressure of his fingers.

But suddenly he dropped her hands and with hasty strides began to pace the floor.

"I gave you credit for more sense, Bee," he went on angrily. "I did not think you were like Laura Tulkinghorn or those Bryer girls, who imagine that every man they meet is thinking of love and marriage, because their own heads are full of nothing else from morning till night."

"Nor am I," declared Bee, in the same breathless whisper.

She felt it strangely sweet to be scolded in that kind, cross, tender voice. She had never felt so near to Geo ge March before, nor realized how intensely she loved him until now. She could not help thinking that that was how he would scold his wife, if ever that thrice blessed woman happened to vex him; and, with a curious jumble of associations Bee saw the ivy muffled chimneys of the house in Beaudesert Gardens rise before her in the dusky schoolroom, and pictured herself waiting for him—as she would never wait for him in all her life—and listening for his key in the door, by the fire the blue smoke of which she had watched curling calmly upwards against the stainless morning sky, as she sat that day—so long ago it seemed now!—in the quiet square garden, beside the woman who was going to take George from her.

"Then," George was going on hotly in the meanwhile, "if you have not been romancing about Miss Ludlow and me in some way, my dear child, what is the meaning of all the little airs and graces you have been pleased to treat me to of late?"

Bee turned very pale; but the young man kept on in obedience to a sudden resolve which he had formed.

"I dare say I am a fool, Bee; but, I have taken it into my head that you are beginning to be jealous of your big brother George."

"Doctor March!" gasped poor Bee, hiding her face in her hands.

"Now I won't have any more of that nonsense, young lady," continued George authoritatively, and he paused in front of the agitated girl, and pulled her hands down in both of his. "You know what sort of jealousy I mean very well—the only jealousy you could feel about me—the same feeling you would have if Jack were to become spoony on some girl without your royal permission. But you might as well feel jealous of Jack as of me in this case, dear. He is quite as likely to fall in love with Miss Ludlow as I am—I beg the young lady's pardon, I'm sure, for dragging her into such a discussion—and more likely, for he is not half as busy as I am. I am not the sort of fellow to marry at all, in fact," the Doctor went on remorselessly, half frightened by the brutal sound of his own words, from which Bee was shuddering away as if they had been so many blows. "Why should I marry? I am as happy as a king with my work, and my little brood of step brothers and sisters to provide for, and my friends to spoil me a little now and then. I am like my dear old Bee, who is far too sensible to be thinking about sweethearts at all just yet."

Bee drew away her hands again, and forced her poor pale lips into a smile

"Of course I am," she assented faintly; but she looked up into the beloved ugly face that was bending over her with an expression that nearly shook George's sensible resolutions.

"Of course you are," he echoed cheerily. "In about five years from now, if you like to ask my consent to your setting up a young man, and if you choose some fellow even half good enough—I am afraid I shall have to be contented with that—why, we will think about it."

Bee tried to make some answering jest, but no words would come.

"But, till that time comes and it comes to all girls so pretty and so good as my dear old Bee"—the young man laid his hand kindly on her bowed head as he spoke—"you will promise me that no Ada Ludlows shall divide us, or shall be allowed to shake our seven years' friendship?"

"That is more than you and I can say!" cried Bee, with an irrepressible sob. "Oh, let me go, Doctor March? I am forgetting that Ada is alone all this time.

"You two quarrelling as usual?" said a silvery voice at the door, which made Bee start away from George March's side and apply her handkerchief hastily to her cheeks and eyes.

"Come in, Ada!" she called a little hysterically. "We were just going to look for you." And Doctor March went over to shake hands with Miss Ludlow, and brought her into the fire-lit room.

"If you are quite sure the battle is over?" Ada asked, smiling, and hesitating as she searched the young man's face with her slow gentle gaze.

"We will swear it."

The young lady turned, somewhat puzzled to Bee.

"Mrs. Throgmorton sent me down to look for you," she explaind in an apologetic way; "or else I know the brown room is forbidden ground."

"It is always in such a litter!" Bee stammered, confused.

Miss Ludlow turned to go.

"Would you like me," she suggested softly, "to tell your mother that you will come presently?"

"No"—abruptly. "Let us all go up-stairs. Will you come, Doctor March?" And Bee fled from the room, leaving George and Ada to follow.

The young lady did not linger for a moment.

"Am I not becoming dissipated?" she demanded gaily of the Doctor as they crossed the hall and ascended the stairs. "This is the second time I have dined out this week."

"Then I am sure," said George good naturedly, "that your mother continues to improve."

"Oh, yes, thank you! And I feel so much easier now that she is getting more used to Lucy."

"Your cousin helps you a little then in your nursing?"

"Lucy is very kind indeed," declared Miss Ludlow, with reproachful earnestness. "Unhappily mamma, who is so sweet to every one else, is prejudiced against her. It is such a pity! I am convinced that Lucy means well."

George was reminded again of what he had seen at Green Knowe, and did not feel quite so persuaded of the purity of Miss Thrale's intentions For a moment he was tempted to speak of it to her cousin; but he again decided that he would first give Miss Thrale fair warning.

"Your cousin is extremely pretty at any rate," he said in a half reluctant way, as they entered the drawing room, which was still empty, Bee having flown to her own room to bathe her tell tale eyes—"pretty enough to require careful looking after."

Miss Ludlow, usually so graceful and easy in her movements, stumbled against a footstool at that moment, and was only saved from falling by George's quickly extended arm.

"You are not hurt, I hope?" he said kindly, noticing how pale she had grown.

"Not in the least, thank you," she answered, smiling. "How very stupid of me!" And, going over to the fire to warm her hands, she added, looking up at the young man as he stood—tall and broad and dark—above her flaxen head, "You have seen Lucy then, Doctor March? I did not know that you had met."

"Yes," returned George carelessly; "we introduced ourselves one day, about a week ago, when you were out driving with Mrs. Ludlow."

"Luby did not tell me," said Miss Ludlow, sinking with a pretty rustle of silken skirts into a low chair by the fire. "But I am so glad you admire her. And I think you would acknowledge, if you knew her, that she has other merits beside her pretty face, though it is not every one who finds them out."

"Miss Thrale is fortunate in having so generous an advocate," replied the Doctor heartily, remembering the nature of Lucy's offense against her cousin.

Ada's eyes fell, embarrassed, for a moment, and then were lifted with a visible effort to his.

"Pray don't praise me, Doctor March," she said quietly. "I am afraid I like approbation too well—from some people; and I am schooling myself in self denial of all kinds."

Doctor March had no time to answer this little speech, for Mrs. Throgmorton came in, followed by Bee, and the conversation became general.

CHAPTER XVIII.

After dinner, Doctor March, by way of hiding poor Bee's distress, which she was not altogether successful in keeping out of her face and voice, bravely as she made the effort, challenged her to a game of bezique, and would take no refusal, though Mrs. Throgmorton anxiously suggested that perhaps Ada would play with him instead and allow Bee to give them a little music.

"Bee is not in a good temper," he declared laughing. "She would play nothing but Liszt and Wagner."

By this means Jack was enabled, greatly to his own satisfaction, to monopolize Miss Ludlow during a considerable part of the evening. He established himself on a stool at her feet; and it was surprising to see how much he found to talk about in a half confidential tone that struck George March as highly amusing.

"These children are growing up," thought the Doctor, "like the beanstalk in the fairy tale."

To be sure Jack was only urging Miss Ludlow to play for them, and she was merely assuring him that, having heard his sister, she never meant to touch the piano again in public.

"What nonsense!" cried Jack, with true brotherly unbelief in Bee's powers. "You who must have heard so much splendid playing in London!"

"But, indeed," returned Miss Ludlow, with gentle earnestness, "I have never heard any amateur playing so good as hers. It is quite remarkable. So much point and contrast and aplomb are not always to be met with in professional players; and I confess I did not expect to find such perfection in the country. It is only another proof—I am discovering fresh ones every day—that all the good things are not confined to London."

"I am glad you have found anything to admire in prosy old Barlaston," cried Jack, with enthusiasm.

"But I have found a great many," the young lady returned, smiling, and breathing the faintest possible sigh.

"And after London. Believe me, we appreciate the compliment. But confess, Miss Ludlow, that it is awfully dull for you down here. And you are so good; you never even speak about your old exciting life. It is wonderful, really."

"Oh, what is there in a girl's life to talk about?" said Ada, looking down with a wist ful little air into the lad's dark eyes. "It is you who should tell me of yours. A man's life is so full of interest, and" an arch little smile trembled on her lips—"sometimes it is the interest of a French novel, you know. One likes to hear about it all the more because it is a little risque to listen."

Jack's smooth face colored with pleasure. He would gladly have invented something of slightly French interest in order to prove that Miss Ludlow was not mistaken in supposing that his harmless young life had contained passages that needed to be suppressed for family reading. But he was not of an imaginative turn of mind, and moreover, a little bustle at the door made him turn round on his stool and spring up with a sudden exclamation of pleasure.

"Ted Ackroyd, by Jove!" he said, going to snake hands with his friend; and the game of bezique as well as the confidential chat by the fire, came to an untimely end.

"Where the deuce did you spring from, old fellow?" said the Doctor, when the pleasant little fuss consequent on Ted's entrance had subsided and Mr. Ackroyd had taken possession of a vacant chair near the card-players. "I was out at your place to-day, and there was no talk of your coming home."

"Been turned out," answered young Ackroyd, with evident satisfaction; though as he looked at Bee, who was still very pale, his blonde face clouded over with an expression of anxiety.

"Turned out?"

"Yes. One of the children at Hawkhead was struck with a brilliant idea. Got the measles. So we were all sent home."

"Again the young man's eyes sought the pretty changed face of his idol.

"You may have the measles yourself some day," said Bee, flushing, and avoiding his eye.

"Rather have them twice than stay at Hawkhead!"

"And Lady Sarah?" pursued Bee, with a return of her old mischievousness. "Was it a very tender parting, Teddy?"

But to this young Ackroyd made no reply.

George got up and crossed over to Mrs. Throgmorton's work table, leaving Ted and Bee together.

"Jack," cried Mrs. Throgmorton eagerly, smiling up at her favorite as she spoke, "I wish you would bring me a foot stool, dear. Ada will excuse you for a moment."

Jack stood up to do his mother's bidding, intending to rush back to his lowly seat by the hem of Miss Ludlow's gown; but Mrs. Throgmorton sent him out of the room on some errand for her; and Doctor March, seeing Miss Ludlow alone, went over at once and sat down by her side. And so Mrs. Throgmorton's simple manœuvre was successful.

Ada had taken up the evening paper and was running her eye over its columns. As George drew near, she uttered a suppressed exclamation of interest that made every one turn round.

"Nothing dreadful, Ada, I hope?" said Mrs. Throgmorton. "No more murders or explosions?"

"No—oh, no!" returned the young lady, hardly looking up as she spoke, so eager was her interest in what she was reading. "It is only a familiar name that caught my eye, dear Mrs. Throgmorton. I see the paper says that Lady Sarah Nanneck and her aunt Lady Merrion are to spend Christmas at Croome, near Barlaston Regis. I remember they stayed with us at Fairoaks two years ago. How I wish I could see them again! Lady Sarah is so charming. Whose place is Croome? I think I will go and invite myself to spend Christmas there too!"

"Croome?" returned Mrs. Throgmorton, smiling. "Croome is Mr. Ackroyd's house at Green Knowe, my love. Don't you remember?"

"Of course!" cried Ada, biting her lip and coloring with annoyance. "How very thoughtless of me! Really, Mr. Ackroyd"—she turned to Ted, who was following Bee to the fire—"I hope you will believe that I was not angling for an invitation? I have not a solitary gown for the occasion, for one thing."

"Much jollier here," said young Ackroyd curtly.

But Mrs. Throgmorton, interested in this little bit of news, and perhaps pitying Ada's evident confusion, dragged from the reluctant young man some further particulars, and learnt that Lady Sarah and her aunt, having been unable to remain at Hawkhead, the country house at which Ted had been enduring exile in their society, and having in consequence several vacant dates in their round of visits, had accepted Mr. Ackroyd's offer of hospitality, and were to arrive a few days later at Croome.

"My father likes that sort of thing," explained the young man dejectedly.

"But Mrs. Ackroyd will be delighted with Lady Sarah," urged Miss Ludlow gently. "She is quite charming, really!"

Another of young Ackroyd's eloquent pauses ensued; and then Ada, remembering suddenly how late it was, went over to take leave of her hostess.

"Doctor March will," began that lady eagerly; but Miss Ludlow made an appealing little gesture.

"Doctor March is tired," she said gently. "And it is taking him so far out of his way. May not Mr. Jack?"

George heard the quiet words, and was almost as pleased as Jack himself, who brightened perceptibly when he heard of the honor that awaited him.

"Do let us walk, Miss Ludlow!" he cried eagerly. "There is such a jolly moon! You don't want to be shut up in a carriage, do you?"

Ada declared that she would enjoy the walk. And she set off, looking very graceful in her long, fur lined cloak and soft white hood.

"You are not at all cold, I hope?" her young escort asked solicitously, as they turned into the perfect solitude of King's Road.

"Cold! Oh, no!" Ada laughed rather dolefully, and shrugged her slender shoulders. "I feel as if I should never be cool again as long as I live."

Jack stared at her with a puzzled look in the bright moonshine.

"My ears are burning still," the young lady went on, "with the remembrance of that unlucky speech! What will Mr. Ackroyd think of me?"

"Nothing but good, you may be sure," returned the boy ardently. "And why should you not go to Croome and meet these people? They were your friends. Not that Ted will think twice of what you said, Miss Ludlow."

"I do hope he will not," she answered softly. But, if he should, I will trust to you to be my champion, and to explain that, often as I suppose I must have heard Bee speak about Croome, it really did not occur to me at that moment that it was his father's place." She looked up suddenly with earnest eyes from under her white hood. "You will take my part, won't you?" she said wistfully.

"I only wish I had the chance," Jack murmured with a blissful blush. "But you have no need of a champion."

"Not when you are by, I am sure," said the young lady gratefully. "And you don't know what a number of sweet and sad recollections came back to me when I read those names. I could see dear old Fairoaks and the pleasant people who were with us that year. Do you know, Mr. Jack"—she nestled a little closer to his arm and dropped her voice—"don't think me very silly, please—but whenever I go to Mrs. Bryer's, I always look forward so eagerly to see the society journals; it is so nice to be reminded of one's old friends."

"Do you mean to say that you never see them anywhere else?" cried Jack indignantly.

"You don't suppose I should feel justified in spending money on such things now?" the young lady asked, with quiet reproach.

"I am sure I don't know why we don't take them," Jack went on, in a disgusted tone. "We are awfully behind the times in our house, I am afraid."

"You are everything that is good and kind," protested Miss Ludlow, warmly. "Please don't abuse my best friends, Mr. Throgmorton."

Jack took up the little ungloved hand that lay on his arm, and gave it a timid squeeze.

"There!" said Ada, smiling up at him. "We have shaken hands on our compact. Don't forget! You are my companion, and you are to explain my unlucky little speech to Mr. Ackroyd. Of course I only spoke the truth in saying that I should like to go to Croome—under different circumstances. I do not attempt to deny that. Only it is usual," she laughed prettily, "to wait until one is asked, and I dispensed—quite unconsciously—with that small ceremony this evening. I shall not sleep for thinking of it!"

And then she quickened her pace, and was soon at the door of the sleeping villa in King's Road.

Lucy was sitting up for her cousin as usual, and helped her to undress by the bright little fire that was burning in Miss Ludlow's bedroom.

"I have lost my rose," Ada said, putting her hand to her bosom as she took off her cloak; "and I am so cold! I dislike walking at night; but one does not like to be rude."

"Did Doctor March walk home with you?" asked Lucy, who was seated on the hearth-rug, eager to listen to her cousin's budget of news.

Doctor March's name was often mentioned now between the two girls, though for some undefinable reason Lucy never mentioned her one meeting with him in the dusty drawing-room.

"No," returned Ada gravely, sitting down and putting her slippered feet on the fender. "I would not allow him to do so."

"Oh, why not?"—anxiously. "You like him Ada, don't you?"

"Yes, I like him, of course; but——"

Lucy sat, a breathless little image of curiosity, and hugged herself on the hearthrug.

"But what?" she asked at last. "Does not not Doctor March like you?"

Ada Ludlow bit her lip and drew her delicate brows together.

"Why do you ask me that, Lucy?" she said half reproachfully. "Such admissions are always unwomanly, even between sisters, as we are almost."

"Oh, yes, we are!" cried Lucy joyfully. "I am so very glad you feel that, Ada! And I will not ask you any more questions if you don't wish it."

Ada smiled gently.

"I know I can trust you, dear Lucy," she said; "and so I will admit that I am afraid he does."

"Afraid!" echoed Lucy, her lips apart, her blue eyes blazing with excitement. "Why need you be afraid, Ada, when everybody likes him so much?"

"Are there not two sides to such a question?" returned Miss Ludlow sadly. "And do you suppose I feel in the mood just yet to think of such things at all?"

"But suppose you should care for him, too, after a while?" suggested Lucy, deeply interested in her cousin's budding romance.

"Yes, 'suppose,'" repeated Ada, with a faint smile. "That would simplify matters, perhaps. But in the meanwhile I am sure only of one thing."

"That he likes you?" Lucy was holding her handle crooked and letting the wax run down as she breathlessly awaited the answer.

"Is that what you mean?" she urged, nodding and smiling affectionately, with a little anxious frown over her sweet eyes.

"I am afraid so," Miss Ludlow answered, gravely reluctant. "I am very much afraid so, Lucy!"

CHAPTER XIX.

George March felt like a brute for days after his talk in the brown room with Bee; and the returning sweetness of the poor girl's manner to him, the brave effort she was making to hide her trouble, made the recollection of the lesson he had given her all the harder to bear. Every laugh she gave, every light word she uttered, hurt the young man in spite of all his common sense.

"I have been guilty of a piece of gross cruelty," he told himself, though he came in time to see that it had been at the worst a cruel kindness.

But in the meanwhile he noticed with concern that the girl's roses were fading and her tall head drooping more and more each day, and felt that it was time for him to take the law into his own hands.

"If this sort of thing goes on much longer," he thought one evening, as he was moodily pacing the floor of his study, "I shall go to Bee one of these days and ask her to marry me, and we shall both be miserable for life!"

He paused at the window, and stood looking out, his hands in his pockets, across the darkening square.

Hard hearted as he called himself, the young man's veins were thrilling vaguely at contact with this girlish passion which he could not return; and he fell to wondering restlessly whether he might not do worse with his life than give it to make an innocent girl happy, and whether a man's house could well have a kinder mistress, or his children a sweeter mother, than tall brown Bee Throgmorton, whom he had known since she was in short frocks, and who had excited no more sentiment in him than her nice warm hearted mother had done.

"No," he decided, turning away abruptly from the cheerless look-out into the misty light dotted square, and falling into his old walk up and down the room—"no. Bee Throgmorton deserves a better fate than that. All the heart I have is in my profession Why should I wrong her by offering her the cold pretense of a feeling about which she will live to learn the warm honest truth from some good fellow? Poor little Bee—poor darling child. She must go away; that is the only cure for her. I will see her mother about it to-morrow. There is no time to be lost."

Accordingly a confidential meeting was brought about between the Doctor and his friend, and the young man suggested that Bee would evidently be the better for a little change of air.

"You don't think there is anything wrong with her, George?" asked the anxious mother, who was absolutely without suspicion as to the cause of her companion's worried and embarrassed manner of offering his advice.

"Wrong with her? Of course not!" he declared irritably. "But these girls are more trouble to me than all the rest of my patients put together. There is nothing the matter with Bee. I dare say she wants tone; but there is nothing whatever the matter with her except what a little change of air and scene would soon set to rights. Mrs. William is going to London shortly, isn't she? Send Bee along with her, and I guarantee she will come back with roses in full bloom again."

"I can't think what has come to my girl," said Mary Throgmorton—"she who has never had a day's illness in all her life! And I'm sure I don't know how to break it to her father George. He has been so much worried of late about Jack."

A few tears fell from the mother's kindly eyes, George laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"The old story, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes. Bills are always turning up; and really, with his allowance, he ought not to run in debt. It is hard on the kind old father, Doctor; I feel it is. But Jack is so headstrong, poor boy, I am almost afraid to speak to him; and he has not seemed happy of late. I suppose all this was weighing on his mind."

"There has been an explanation then?"

"Yes. It has been smoothed over for the present; but"—with a sigh—"I don't know what Tom will say to parting with Bee."

"Oh, come, it won't be for long!" cried George cheerily. "What will you do when it comes to giving her away for good?"

A day or two later Bee was gently informed that Mrs. William, who was going to London to show her baby to a longing grandmamma, and probably to spend Christmas with her family, had recieved an invitation for her pretty sister-in-law as well, and had declared her willingness to chaperon Bee.

"We must see about things at once, my love," said Mrs. Throgmorton, kissing her daughter's pale cheek. "Charlotte promises you a ball and all sorts of gaiety. I shall be having my little girl's head turned by the time I get her back again."

"Must I go?" asked Bee, forcing back her tears when she saw how they distressed her mother. "There is nothing the matter with me, and I would so much rather stay at home."

"Nonsense, my dear!" cried Mrs. Throgmorton brightly. "A little change will be the making of you. You will be able to compare notes with Ada, besides, when you come home. We don't want our lassie to be a country-girl all her life."

In spite of this seductive prospect, Bee began to sob convulsively; and her mother, greatly distressed, determined to urge on the preparations for her journey as quickly as possible.

"I did hope she would have spent Christmas at Croome," she told her husband wistfully; "but Doctor March knows best, and Bee is certainly in no spirits to go among strangers."

As the door closed behind her mother, Bee sprang to her feet with an exclamation of self contempt, drying her tears resolutely and trying to control the hysterical quivering of her lips.

She knew perfectly well that George had been closeted with her mother a few days before. Could she not distinguish the roll of his wheels and the stepping of his horses among a dozen others, and had she not stood with her burning cheek pressed against the dining room window to see him get into his carriage after the interview, and drive away quite—quite out of sight?

"What a wretch of a girl I am!" she declared, in bitterest humiliation. "Have I let him see so plainly what I am suffering that he tries to hide it by sending me away out of people's sight? Oh, I cannot bear it; I will no go!"

The big sobs began to swell again in the girl's throat as she walked excitedly about the room, endeavoring to collect her thoughts and to be calm.

"I suppose I have some pride left, though I have let him guess what I would rather have died than tell him. I did not know it myself until Ada Ludlow made me think about it, and then I felt frightened—it was all so sudden and so wonderful! But he need not be afraid of me. My happiness ended on the day the Ludlows came to Barlaston; but there is still his to think of; and if he believes she can make it why——"

The self sacrificing little speech ended in a fresh burst of grief and sobbing, and, this over, Bee sat down, pale and resolute, to face the great disappointment of her hitherto unclouded life with what courage was left her.

"I am not so badly off, after all, as Lucy Thrale," she reflected, with a sudden pang of remorse. "I have my home still left, and those who are dear to me and who love me; and yet she finds consolation and peace in the midst of a life that would break my heart. I will go to her for help. In my selfish trouble I have forgotten my promises to her. But now I will try to prove that I am not an idle useless girl any longer. I will stop thinking about myself, and try to think of others who are still more unhappy than I am. Such troubles as these, George would say, are meant to elevate, and not to drag us down. The blessing of his love has not been granted me, but I can at least find a sad pleasure in proving myself less unworthy of it than I have hitherto been. I will go to Lucy Thrale this very day, and ask her to help me. And I will not let them send me away with Charlotte—I should go crazy up there in London!"

When Doctor March got home that night, feeling very tired after an unusually hard day's work, he found a note waiting for him addressed in a hand that had anything but a soothing effect upon him.

"What can the child have to write about?" he cried, wearily rubbing his hand over his eyes, and feeling that women in general were something of a trial to him just then.

"Dear Doctor March," Bee began, in her firmest and neatest writing—"Don't ask mamma to send me away. Why should you? I have not forgotten your scolding, nor that you called me your sister; and I don't think it is fair that because I happen to have headaches lately and to look a little pale, I should be banished as if I had done something dreadful. Please tell mamma that I am to stay at home; you know she will do whatever you advise. And I have found a remedy for my headaches of which I cannot tell you just yet, but which I know you would approve of.

"Your sincere friend,

"B. T."

With a miserable laugh George crushed up the note and flung it into the fire.

"I know she thinks me a brute, poor child!" he thought. "And it is hard that she should be banished against her will. But all the same, my remedy was the only sure one. However, I will trust to her good sense. She shall stay at home and work out her own cure, since all my bungling treatment seems to do no good. I will do my best to arrange it with her mother."

And so Bee heard of her reprieve, and was filled with deep thankfulness.

"You shall see that I will keep my word," she said, blushing crimson, the first time she met Doctor March after this. "I promise you to give you back your old happy Bee again—and before very long. Wait and see!"

CHAPTER XX.

Bee had told her mother of the chance meeting with Lucy Thrale in the drawing room at King's Road, and had asked Mrs. Throgmorton's permission to see her again.

Poor Mary Throgmorton felt herself more and more puzzled by her girl's conduct—her girl, who had never given her a moment's uneasiness in all her life before. And to think now that she should wish to associate with a person like Lucy Thrale, who was deservedly in disgrace with her own family, when such a delightful accomplished girl as Ada would have been so glad to be her friend.

"Really, Bee, it looks a little bit like perversity on your part," the kind woman said, vexed. "I can't think why you do it."

"Don't sick people always have queer fancies, darling?" asked Bee, sadly smiling. "Let me have my own way in this, mother, and you will see how much better I shall be."

George March had secretly ordained that his young patient was not to be contradicted, and was to be encouraged to interest herself in everything around her. Mrs. Throgmorton sighed.

"Well," she said reluctantly, "you must not ask me to countenance Miss Thrale, mind, Bee."

"You shall not see her, dear, until you yourself wish to do so."

"And you will promise me not to go where there is anything infectious? I am sure I am quite willing that you should take an interest in the poor people you speak of, my dear; but I cannot say that I approve of carrying things to extremes. I wonder what poor Ted will say to all these new notions?"

"It is so easy to guess!" cried Bee, brightening already now that she had gained her mother's consent. "As to what he will think, that is another matter."

And from that day forth she began to seek balsam for her wounded in the work which Lucy had so simply indicated.

"Do let me have the two girls paid regular visits to Maria's school in Primrose Alley, and together, in the privacy of Lucy's little bed room, they contrived, out of Miss Throgmorton's and Miss Ludlow's discarded winter garments, to make many useful things for their ragged little charges.

Bee took care to order her movements so that no demand was made on Lucy for time that should have been devoted to other duties; and Miss Ludlow and her mother, being out at these hours, had no suspicion of the flourishing little dressmaking business that was being carried on in the small room under the roof.

As it drew near Christmas time the girls found that their hands were full. The applications from weary mothers of many children were numerous; but, to their grief, Bee and Lucy were obliged to limit the number of their tiny scholars to six, Miss Thrale having sensibly urged that it would be no kindness to overcrowd the room and poison the air, and that it was better to do their best quietly for a few than to attempt any broader scheme which was quite out of their reach. And the original little scholars kept them well employed. Bee did not find much time now for the indiscriminate novel reading and bonnet buying and idleness on the score of which George used so often to lecture her: and before very long she began to look and talk like her old happy self, with a something sweeter added to it. A certain touching gravity and reserve had come to her with her trouble, and they sat well on the strong true hearted girl.

George March, who was anxiously watching her through her courageous struggle, began at last to feel that his cruel lesson had not been taught in vain. He could even remember the very day when Bee had so far recovered as to be able, for the first time since the luckless walk to Beaudesert Gardens, to meet his look and take his hand with real, and not feigned, composure, and to talk to him for a moment at the church door with unembarrassed cordiality, like the old friend she was.

The change was like new life to the young man. He had sometimes felt that, if, after his lesson and the lapse of time. Bee Throgmorton still made it clear to him that she depended on his sympathy for her future happiness, he could not turn away from her, and that, despicable as marriage without love seemed in his eyes, it was what he would only too surely drift into before very long.

When therefore Bee gave him a hand that scarcely trembled and met his kind gaze with steady eyes, Doctor March thought the fact worth remembering with solemn thankfulness during the morning service, as a man is thankful for peril averted from himself and from one who is dear to him.

How cheerily he went about his work in the bright days that were bringing in Cristmas, carrying happiness with him, and feeling as if a new world had opened before him! How pleasant the old town looked, and the old bachelor house, and good Mrs. Batters, and the trim leafless gardens of the square! George March had never felt so thoroughly contented before, so warmly interested in his work, so anxious to be of use in his generation. Demands were being made upon him for money in his step mother's fine foreign hand, and he supplied it even more willingly than before. It seemed as if he would gladly have made the whole world as light-hearted and hopeful as he was himself.

Keenly he felt the renewed sweetness of his intercourse with the family in Upper Brunswick street. He could once more smoke his cigarette in peace in the dear old brown room, with Bee to light it for him too—Bee, who was beginning to be delightfully impertinent again, and whom he had never regarded so affectionately as now, when he knew that she was being cured of her sweet idle romance about her old friend.

"It is jolly to hear that laugh, child!" he said to her one day when he met her driving her ponies along King's Road in her sealskin jacket and sap, and carrying a clumsy looking bundle on the front seat of the phaeton. "I feel now that I have really got my old merry Bee herself back again."

"Yes," she returned, blushing brightly, but laughing too; "I am much happier than I was, Doctor March; and it is all through Lucy."

"What! Through Miss Thrale? Have you struck up a friendship with her now? What does Miss Ludlow say to that?"

"I have never thought of inquiring," returned Bee quietly. "Ada is mamma's friend, not mine. But you would not sneer at Lucy, Doctor March, if you knew how sweet and good she is."

"I sneer at Miss Thrale? Heaven forbid! I look upon her as one of the faculty. She has done my dear old Bee more good evidently than all her brother's bullying. Indeed, child, I am very happy in your happiness, but——"

"What?" asked Bee, holding in her ponies with some difficulty.

"Look here, Bee; you just advise your friend not to walk so far from home by herself, and not to choose such a queer time for her walks."

"What do you mean?" the girl cried, firing up at something in George's tone.

"Just what I say. I have met her more than once lately out at Green Knowe—towards dusk too. What takes her there at such an hour? She must go by train; she could not walk the distance."

"I suppose she must breathe the fresh air sometimes," declared Miss Throgmorton stoutly. "And she cannot always choose her own time. She has to suit Ada's convenience."

"All right," said George good humoredly. "But it doesn't look particularly well for so young a girl—and she is pretty too."

"Give a dog a bad name!" cried Bee with bitter warmth. "Whatever Lucy goes to Green Knowe for, it is for no harm, I am convinced; and she has something better to think of than her pretty face."

"It is really very well worth thinking about," said the Doctor, laughing. "Don't fly in a rage, Bee, because I tell you to give your little friend some good advice."

"She is better able to advise me," declared Bee; and she drove off in a huff, leaving George to go his way.

"My dear old Bee," the young man thought kindly, as he looked after the straight young figure that was vanishing in the winter sunshine. "She inherits that warm nature from her mother. As Mary Golding devoted herself to Letitia Butler, so will Mary Golding's daughter let Miss Lucy wind herself about her heart. Let us hope the little coquette may be worthy of so pure a refuge."

Miss Throgmorton, on arriving at the Town House, warm and rosy from her morning's drive, found Ada sitting by her mother's side and reading aloud from one of the society papers with which the table was strewed.

"Percy Trefusis is engaged to Mary Kilmansegg after all, mamma," she heard the young lady say as the door was opened. "She has caught him at last, poor fellow! How handsome he was! Oh—and it is all quite true about Mrs. Fantail and the Colonel; only fancy!"

The paper was gladly laid aside on Bee's entrance however, and mother and daughter smiled a welcome.

"You very busy Bee, to be out so early!" Ada cried as she insisted on removing Miss Throgmorton's furs and stirred the fire into a brisker blaze, while poor Mrs. Ludlow put out a kind wistful hand and drew the girl's blooming face down to her own pale lips. "You have come to spend the morning with us, of course? It seems an age since we have seen you!"

"I have been very busy," explained Bee: "and I have not come to stay now, thank you. Mamma has gone over to Croome to help Mrs. Ackroyd to arrange about those people who are coming for Christmas; and I want you to lend me Lucy for all the afternoon, if you don't mind."

It was known by this time that Miss Throgmorton had made Lucy's acquaintance; but so far, their friendship had been carried on with a certain degree of secrecy; and as Mrs. Ludlow heard Bee's request, her face clouded over and her fingers began to play restlessly with the fringe of her coverlet.

Ada looked up calmly from her work.

"I am sure Lucy would have been delighted," she said; "but she is out."

Bee's face fell. She was hatching a little plot, and its success had depended on getting her mother out of the way for a whole afternoon and having the house in Upper Brunswick street all to herself.

"Are you sure?" she asked bluntly.

Miss Ludlow's lips parted in a forbearing smile.

"Only sure," she returned gently, "that Lucy told me that she was going out."

"Then may I go up to her room and see? I know the way."

A flush of annoyance rose to the widow's pale face as Miss Ludlow rose and rang the bell.

"I will send Susan," the young lady said quietly. "I hope dear Lucy is at home; she has so few pleasures, poor girl!"

There was an awkward little pause. Miss Ludlow, whose tact was usually so remarkable, did not seek to fill it up; and Bee, eager to say something, began to admire a bowl of hothouse flowers—violets and heath and white roses—which stood on the table beside Mrs. Ludlow's sofa.

"What exquisite roses!" she said hurriedly.

"They have none so fine at Croome."

"They are a present," explained Ada, smiling. "And, oddly enough, I do not even know who sent them."

"What a pretty gift!" Bee felt that she was growing a little cold.

"They come very often," the widow added, her heavy eyes lighting up with motherly gratification. "I tell Ada she must suspect who sends them."

"I wish I did!" declared Miss Ludlow frankly. "I should be mercenary enough to confess my delight in them, in the hope that my generous friend would persevere in his liberality."

Bee's heart began to throb in spite of her. It was very unlike Doctor March, certainly, to send flowers to any one—he had so much to think of, and so much to do with his money; and the cost of the magnificent bouquet before her would have kept the little Primrose Alley kindergarten in dinners for a month. But who else among Miss Ludlow's Barlaston friends could afford such an expensive tribute?

"George sent them," she decided sadly, "though I dare say Ada does not know really where they come from."

In a few moments Lucy appeared, breathless from her hurried making of the last bed and her scamper down stairs.

As Miss Throgmorton rose and kissed her, putting her arms about her boldly before the eyes of the family, the poor child flushed and tried to shrink away, casting on appealing glance at her aunt's cold face.

"I want you to come and spend the day with me, dear," said Bee in a matter-of-fact way. "Mrs. Ludlow is good enough to say she can spare you; and I know Ada is glad that you should have a little change. She thought you had already gone out. I am just in time!"

"Oh, thank you!" said Lucy, very much confused; and her blue eyes met Bee's very wistfully. "I think I would rather not go; I would rather stop at home."

"That is polite!" laughed Miss Throgmorton. "Go and put on your hat like a good child, and we will start at once. You have never seen the brown room; we shall have it all to ourselves to-day."

Lucy looked at her aunt and then at Ada, twisting her fingers nervously together and unable to say a word.

"Well," said Ada, with a gentle smile, "are you waiting for your dreadful tyrannical cousin to say 'Go'?"

"Indeed no!" cried Lucy coloring, and laughing like one relieved of some doubt or dread. "Don't you mind, aunt Letitia?" she added, turning to Mrs. Ludlow. "If you would like Ada to go instead—"

"Oh, I am not asked!" said Ada lightly, with a little affectation of offense. "Do go and get ready, you foolish child. I suppose I had better come with you and make sure that you put your hat on straight."

"I am so glad it is my turn at last to play lady's maid, dear Lucy." Ada added, as the cousins entered Lucy's little bed room; and she took the child's happy face between her hands and kissed her softly on each cheek.

"I hope that you will enjoy yourself very much, and that it will be the first of a great many pleasant days for you."

Lucy was hurriedly twisting up her pretty hair; but she nodded a "Thank you" from under the burnished fleece.

"And"—Miss Ludlow's eyes fell; she began a trifle nervously with the simple ornaments of her cousin's toilet table—"you must be sure and tell me what you think of them all—as I tell you, you know."

"Oh, there will be no one there," said Lucy simply; "or else I should not go, of course!"

"Some one may come in; and I am so anxious to hear pour opinion of ——"

"Of Doctor March?" asked Lucy, smiling as the young lady paused. "I will be sure to take particular notice of him if he should come in; but I hope won't. There? Shall I do, Ada?"

Miss Ludlow bit her lip as she inspected the result of Lucy's rapid toilet.

"My dear Lucy," she said, startled, "is that really your nicest gown?"

"Yes"—Lucy blushed and looked down at her much cherished black silk. "Won't it do? I am sure it does not look so very badly; but I have grown a little since it was made."

"And all your money has gone to pay those wretched bills. I wish you could wear anything of mine." Ada shook her head, with a faint sigh, at Lucy's tall figure. "Even my fur cloak would look badly, I am afraid."

"My old jacket will do very well," Lucy declared a little impatiently. She was dying to get down to Bee; and tugging at her well mended gloves, she kissed her cousin and rushed down stairs, two steps at a time.

"Here you are at last!" said Miss Throgmorton, who could not see the shabby dress and jacket for looking at the charming eager face above them. "Jack shall bring her home, Mrs. Lud ow; so please don't