

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.—NETTA AND DOROTHY.

Dorothy was alone in her own room at last, and sat down by the window to think over the events of the evening. She felt almost dazed, so much had happened in the few hours. Adrian Fuller had proposed, and she had refused him; and George Blakesley, whom she had been longing to see again, had been, and gone, and she knew that he cared for her no longer, and thought it probable that she might never see him again; and Netta had come back, and was sleeping in the next room. She could scarcely believe it all, it seemed as if the world had come to an end that night, or at least, as if she had come within sight of her end of it, for she knew now that she had lost for ever the love of the man to whom, when she was no longer bound, she had gradually given her heart, and whom she had learned not only to love (for love by itself is a thing that must sooner or later burn out), but to respect and esteem above all others. She sat and wondered blankly, as when a trouble too great to realize has fallen on us we often sit and blankly wonder, how she could have cared for Adrian Fuller in the old days. "I did care for him very much," she said to herself; "I can remember when the sound of his voice made my heart feel perfectly wild, and as it has never felt for George Blakesley; and yet, oh! what shall I do?" and she broke down, and hiding her face, sobbed bitterly. And so it was; for the one man she had had a feverish infatuation, to the other she gave the best love of her life; the one had blazed out, and the other felt shipwrecked. "He seems to have taken my life away with him," she said. And this was the secret of her love, or of much of her love for him, that he made those around him better, and he had led her into the right pathway, and she felt as if she were too weak to walk along it alone. While she knew him and saw him, in the mere effort to follow him she left much of the old world behind, and though she had learned to love that which she had learned through him to consider beautiful, and to know her duty, and to long to do it, yet still with all her yearnings, and all her longings, she felt too weak to stand alone. The love she had thrown away and found so terrible a burden once would have been all the world to her now, and she broke down, and sobbed again to herself in the darkness.

"Dorothy," said a voice, and the Beauty came softly into the room, and up to where her sister was sitting, "I heard you moving about a few minutes ago, and I wanted to come and talk to you, though I am so tired," she added, wearily. Dorothy did not move from her seat, only stared through the darkness at the dim white figures of her sister. "Now, tell me—what is the matter with you, dear?" she asked in the low, clear, sweet voice whose charm there was no withstanding. It brought the tears into Dorothy's eyes again, but she stood uncertain and doubtful, as she always had been of the Beauty, though she longed for the sympathy for which she felt afraid to ask.

"Nothing," she answered. "Yes there is, dear," Netta said. "Dorothy," she said suddenly, putting up her arms and twining them round her sister's neck; "I want you to forgive me for all I did to you in the past days. You will—will you not, darling? I have so often thought of you, and of how patient you were, but I am glad you did not marry Adrian." "Yes, so am I," Dorothy said, softly, leaning her head down on her sister's shoulder with a sigh of relief.

"I am so glad to hear you say that," Netta answered. "Do you know, Dorothy, I am different from what I used to be. You have had a great deal to do with it, I think, and I am not well; I fancy sometimes I shall not live very long—"

"Oh, Netta!" Dorothy began, but she could see her sister's blue eyes, which used to be so soft, looking at her with that unnatural brightness in them which she had noticed immediately on her arrival, and she stopped.

"Well, we do not know how that may be," Netta went on, "but I want us to be sisters in reality as well as in name—shall we?" she asked, humbly and entreatingly. "I will be good to you in future, and if you would only love me a little, Dorothy—"

There was something the girl who listened never forgot in those last words, they seemed to tell of a whole life of smothered feelings. "If you only would—" and she waited, half afraid of what the sister she had one so slighted would reply. But for answer Dorothy only put her cheek against Netta's thin face, and, kissing her passionately, burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXXIX.—WATCHING THE SUNSET.

"Dorothy," said Netta, early the next morning, "I want to send a note to your knight, George Blakesley, where does he live?"

"Oh, Netta, what can you want to write to him about? Besides, he starts for Liverpool to-day."

"Let me do as I like, dear," the Beauty answered, tenderly looking up at her sister's flushed face. "I want to say good-bye to him before he goes; I used to be so rude to him once." Then Dorothy caught at the idea; perhaps if he saw her again things might come right after all, she thought.

"Tom will take the letter if you ask him. Mr. Blakesley is staying with his aunts. Yes, do write at once, Netta!" for the Beauty had found out Dorothy's secret, and there was no longer any reserve between the sisters.

So Netta sat up, and wrote a note, and sealed it before Dorothy returned from asking Tom if he would take it before he went to business, for fear it should be too late if entrusted to the post. "He will be sure to come," Netta said, hopefully, "for I have told him how ill I am." So all through the day Dorothy waited, first patiently, and then impatiently, but no answer came to the note, and no George Blakesley appeared. "He will be sure to come," Netta repeated, "for, of course, the note got to him before he could have left home; so cheer up, Dorothy." Still he did not come, and when the sun began to set poor Dorothy's tears fell fast. "Oh, Netta!" she said, "it is too late; I shall never see him again." Then, suddenly, there came a quick sharp ring at the door-bell, and Netta looked up and nestled down again among the shawls on the sofa.

"Let me get out of the way," pleaded Dorothy, her courage failing when she needed it most.

"No; stay, dear, I am not well enough to talk," pleaded Netta. Mrs. Woodward had gone out with Sally. So Dorothy folded her hands and waited. The door was opened, a rustling of silk was heard, and instead of George Blakesley there entered his two maiden aunts.

"I came to see you, my dear," Miss Blakesley (dear kind Tabby, as, without a thought of disrespect, Dorothy always called her at heart) said to Netta, "I was so sorry to hear from your brother, when he came with a note this morning, how ill you were," and then she and Black-and-White sat down and talked, and presently the latter mentioned the name Dorothy

was trembling with longing to hear. "I am so sorry your note came too late, Lady Finch. My nephew started by the mail last night for Liverpool. My sister sent him on his morning letters, and yours with them, for he does not sail till this evening, so he probably has it by this time."

Poor Dorothy's heart sank. "He is gone," she thought, and could think no more, but rose, longing to escape. Then Black-and-White unconsciously came to her aid.

"I am so glad to see you back in your old house," she said; "and George has often told me about the garden; I should so like to see it if it would not be troubling you too much, dear." Neither of the old ladies showed that they saw that the rooms were filled with their nephew's furniture, though the sight of the old things they had known so long touched them sorely.

"It is a very wild overgrown old garden," Dorothy said, almost humbly, in an apologetic tone, as she took Black-and-White down the mossy pathways; "but we have known it like this all our lives, and would not have it done up for the world."

"No, dear, I dare say not," Black-and-White answered, with the nervous little laugh that had now and then something almost sad in its sound; "my nephew has often spoken of it, and said how he liked it because of its wildness. And there was the cat's grave, I have often heard of that, too," and she laughed again.

"Here it is, Miss Mildred, under this tree." She stopped under the shady boughs, and looked half-wistfully half-sorrowfully up into the old maid's face. It had been a pretty face once, and showed evidence of past summers still; but there were lines, hard sad lines, around the eyes and the gentle simple-looking mouth. Perhaps, she had had her history, too, Dorothy thought, as she stood still, longing to throw her arms round Black-and-White's neck, and ask her if she thought whether by any wild chance George Blakesley would ever see or care for her again; but this was impossible. Half mechanically she sat down, and then rose, as if ashamed of her momentary forgetfulness.

"I should like to rest a minute, too, if you don't mind," Black-and-White said, pleadingly. So they sat down, but neither seemed inclined to talk. Dorothy's face was turned towards her companion, but her eyes wandered to the mists beyond gathering over the pleasant fields of Hampstead, and her memory went back with a bound to the different phases her life had known in sight of them; and then she thought suddenly of George Blakesley, who was probably on board the ship which was to take him, oh! so far away, and with almost a start her eyes dropped to Black-and-White. There was a look in her face that somehow made Dorothy droop her head down on to her shoulder.

"What is the matter, my dear? You looked so sad just now, and yet, you know, you ought to be very happy," she added, with the nervous laugh again, "for George told me he thought you were engaged to Mr. Fuller, and that he knew he was very fond of you. Dear George was so glad, for he thought you had always liked him." Dorothy raised her head, and answered Miss Mildred almost passionately, "I am not engaged to Mr. Fuller, Miss Mildred—I never was and never shall be. It is all a mistake."

"But are you not fond of him?" "No, certainly not; oh, no, no, no!" and then her excitement died away, and the tears filled her eyes.

"Why didn't you tell George this? He might not have gone to America then." "He doesn't care for me now," exclaimed