

"The World, The Flesh and The Devil."

By MAY AUSTIN.

This was in the large drawing-room, both the doors were shut, but Agnes became conscious of an altercation in the hall. She paused in astonishment; a voice, stern and shrill, was raised in fury.

"Hold your tongue—hold your tongue!"

There was the sound, too, of a foot brought down in anger on the polished floor, then retreating steps, and all was calm again.

Agnes went on with her dusting, but she was disturbed, perplexed; she was alone in the house with Mrs. Melville and the servants. No servant would dare speak like that, yet was she to believe those rasping tones emanated from the thin, curved lips of gentle, timorous Mrs. Mat Melville.

When the dusting was over, and to day she had dusted with even greater diligence than usual, for Mrs. Mat Melville had that morning addressed her smilingly:

"You are not a good duster, Miss Power; I always have to dust your legs." Mrs. Mat was very fond of the personal pronoun. It afforded Agnes some amusement.

When every bit of furniture, every book, bric-a-brac, etc., had been most carefully done there, and Agnes on her way upstairs, she heard low and prolonged moaning, as of some one in mortal agony. These sounds issued from Mrs. Melville's bedroom. She paused, and then gave a gentle knock at the door, and, receiving a faint "come in," pushed the door open and entered. Mrs. Melville lay stretched on her back on the broad sofa, her eyes half closed, tears trickling in a weak way down her cheeks, while her little hands were clasped loosely before her.

"You are ill," said Agnes, with kind concern. "What can I do for you?"

"It is one of my attacks coming on. Oh, Miss Power, you dusting, and me might have died. You should never lose sight of me; they come on me so suddenly. Find the poultice bags, make me some poultices, and boil me some water in the spirit lamp; and do so quick, Miss Power."

"Where shall I find the bags," said Agnes, timidly. A certain nervousness of incapability had seized her, the sense of helplessness which comes in an emergency quite unlooked for.

"The idea of asking me, a sick woman! Find them—look for them, but do so quick: don't let me die: if Rosie were only here, she knows how to do everything."

Agnes answered nothing. She was on her knees before some half-opened drawers, trying to guess by inspiration which held the needed bags. Hurriedly, with trembling, nervous hands, she sought through bundles of rags, scraps of cotton, bunches of cotton wool, till at last she came upon them. She was outside the door when a word from Mrs. Melville recalled her.

"Make the poultices yourself; don't disturb Bridget, and make them in the old dog-can."

It was well that Agnes was out in the hall by this time, for she lost control of her facial muscles, and could not prevent a little burst of laughter.

She was turning the steaming linseed into one of the bags, when Rosie ran in from the yard.

"Is mamma sick?"

"I'm afraid so."

"What has she been doing? She does too much. It is too bad you should let her get sick, Miss Power."

Words of defence rose on Agnes Power's lips, but, thought of the mother she meant to help restrained their utterance.

"We will make her well soon, Rosie; you run up to your mother, and I will follow with this as soon as possible."

This attack of Mrs. Melville's lasted all day. Dr. Maitland was sent for, but he merely felt her pulse and ordered poultices. Agnes ran up and down stairs continually, applying hot ones, taking out cold ones to be reheated, at Mrs. Melville's instigation.

Bridget insisted upon giving her assistance after some time, but it could be clearly seen this was from a sense of duty, not compassion for the sufferer.

"Nasty, dirty, smelly stuff," she reiterated, as she shovelled it out with an old greasy spoon and a long face.

"It's enough to make well folks sick to their stumicks."

It was five o'clock in the afternoon before Mrs. Melville volunteered she was "easier."

"Rosie might run away and play now, and you might get your work, Miss Power, and sit by me; it's too bad, a whole day wasted from the mending, and so much to be done."

"Take great care of my illy dilly muddie," Rosie lisped with pretty concern as she kissed her mother.

"Promise not to leave her for one second, Miss Power."

Agnes gave the enforced promise, and Rosie went with seeming reluctance from the room; but her pace quickened once she was down the stair, and developed into a run as she reached the gate.

Agnes glanced out of the window as she crossed the room for a chair. The world was so beautiful without, and it was the first time she had looked out that day. The atmosphere of the house was oppressive. Every door and window was tightly closed, and this was in August.

"Don't you think it might do you good to let a little fresh air in now," suggested Agnes, gently.

"Let some air in!" reiterated Mrs. Melville. "Do you know what you are saying? You don't understand my extreme delicacy, Miss Power, that is it; you don't under-

stand. Why! one breath of air might bring back my attack; air is all very well for big strong people, but for me—"

She had risen in her earnestness, and now sank back seemingly exhausted, and Agnes worked on after this in silence. And oh! the bitterness and heartache that went into the mending of that table cloth!

After tea, though, release came for a time. Some members of the family strolled in, and while they were with Mrs. Melville Agnes made her escape.

"Might I go for a walk?" she asked.

Mrs. Melville smiled—a pretty, plaintive, weak smile.

"Go, Miss Power; you must want a stretch. Take a good long walk, and don't mind me; I shall be all right till you come back; or go for a walk in the garden—perhaps you would like that better."

Agnes sped away, but not to the garden; there would still be that sense of suffocation there. She turned her steps down the village toward the water, but it could not be reached. No tempting paths led to its edge. There was only a wide stretch of swampy grasses and wet sand. So Agnes looked at it from afar and thought of her home lake which lay as bright as a gem in the summer sun, reflecting high blue mountains, and now carrying spotless silver on its breast. Then she was wont to steal down to its edge and let the waters lap against the very stone she sat on as they sang to the rhythms of her sweet girlish dreams, but this was all done with now. They had been but dreams, and this was the awakening.

"It will be better by and-by," thought Agnes. A cool breeze crept over the river and reached her. Such small things inspire or strengthen young hearts with hope, and Agnes Power's heart was young. Our spirit is young just so long as we are free from wrong-doing.

Two or three people she had met while they called on Mrs. Melville passed her as she stood on the bridge. Each one stopped. Each one supplemented the customary words of conventional greeting with earnest enquiries about Mrs. Melville's state of health.

"She had had one attack," said Agnes, in answer to all enquiries, "at least she had been threatened with an attack."

Agnes had already learned to be very minute over particulars concerning Mrs. Melville. It seemed as though the air was impregnated with her position. Even here she might not throw off her bondage.

The sun was sinking slowly to sleep in a huge dark cloud which augured ill for the morrow; it had almost disappeared. One of these strange, unaccountable ideas, which will at times overpower all reasoning faculties, infested Agnes's mind. She must reach the summit of the hill before the sun entirely disappeared. It would signify there was still brightness in store for her; if not—

She was no longer Mrs. Melville's companion—she was a child! Free! She flew with light feet over the hedge, pressed panting up the hill. The sun was almost gone; the cloud was greedy of its glory! Faster! Faster still! The summit was reached; she leant against a tree, her breast heaving, her eyes sparkling from the race, the bright colour burning in her cheeks and a smile of victory curving the corners of her mouth. She had won. There was still a golden rim above the heavy cloud! Agnes returned to the house with a happier heart.

Mrs. Melville smiled a warm welcome on her as she entered. There was an open letter in one of her small white hands. Agnes felt the smile was due to this epistle. She had not long to wait for the confirmation of this idea.

"I have just had a letter from my boy, Maxwell." She smoothed it out between her soft white hands. "He is coming home: he is on his way."

"I am so glad," cried Agnes. A weight was already lifted from her shoulders. Mrs. Melville would, no doubt, be better, brighter, when her boy was at hand.

Agnes sat willingly enough by the bedside to listen to a long eulogy of this self-same son. "How noble he was—how tender—how truthful—how thoughtful of her; he had nursed her through many illnesses with the devotion and care of a woman."

"And your eldest son, is he not coming, too?"

"Oh! Hugo!" There was a visible change in face and tone. "Hugo seldom sends me word of his wanderings—he is fishing somewhere, I suppose; he is not a home boy like Maxwell."

Even after her assertion that she was completely indifferent to the society of the male sex, Agnes, it must be confessed, looked forward with considerable eagerness to Maxwell's advent. It would mean a certain freedom to her; he, no, doubt, would take his mother's thoughts from their present narrow channel of ill health.

The days ran on in their usual routine for a fortnight after this, and then a telegram came that Maxwell would arrive that night.

Agnes was just on the border-land of sleep when a vigorous pull at the door-bell aroused her. There were hurried footsteps along the passage. The sound of welcoming voices in the hall, mixed with loud manly tones. The strong tread on the stairs made her smile to herself, it was such a relief. Every one in "The Grey House" was wont to go about on tiptoe, and she had acquired the habit.

Agnes fell asleep, still with that smile on her lips, and never wakened till the morning sun stole in through the open window and fell on her face. Then she jumped up with the joyous consciousness of having fallen asleep with a happy thought, and then the thought burst upon her.

It must be admitted she took even more than usual pains with her toilet; not that she dressed differently, but to-day

dressing was a delight. She looked very fresh, and fair and girlish as she stood, half an hour later, in the dining-room doorway. So Maxwell thought, as he turned from the sideboard at the sound of her voice, giving his mother a morning greeting.

"Maxwell," said Mrs. Melville in dulcet tones, "this is the lady I was telling you about; my son, Miss Power." Breakfast was quite a different thing to what it was before; there were gay voices and gayer laughter. Agnes felt instantaneous friendship for the bright, frank-faced young man who had brought such sunshine into the gloomy house.

"I suppose you have been everywhere already, Miss Power; I have but the pleasure of introducing you to the beauties of my native place."

Agnes's eyes fell before answering, and Mrs. Melville broke in:

"The weather has been so wretched, Max, so far pleasure has not been forestalled; you might take Miss Power for a drive this morning."

How she had misjudged kind little Mrs. Melville. Agnes's conscience smote her as she uttered her thanks; these thanks were all directed to Mrs. Melville. Maxwell twitted her on the subject as they drove through the town.

"What had my mother done that she should merit such a smile from you?"

"What!" cried Agnes, airily, "didn't she suggest this delicious drive?"

"But I was going to."

"How am I to know that?" retorted Agnes, lightly. "Besides, I never throw away a smile."

She was conscious her companion creed was slipping away from her. This was not the manner in which she should speak to her keeper's son.

The keeper's son, nevertheless, found it very entrancing. He bent down to catch a sight of the laughing eyes turned purposely away so as to defeat his object, and just then someone coming out of the post-office waylaid them.

"You! Maxwell," called Mrs. Martin. "Why! when did you come?"

She stretched her hand across Miss Power to take his, and then vouchsafed her a "howdoyoudo," December-like in its frigidity.

"Last night," said Maxwell, in answer to her query, "and I found my mother's health much improved, thanks to Miss Power's kind care."

"You must not interfere with that care." This was said in warning tones. There was no mistaking their meaning.

Agnes Power drew herself up haughtily, and Maxwell brought his whip down on the horse's back, causing it to rear, and Mrs. Martin to beat a hasty retreat.

"Confound the old cat," said Maxwell, savagely. Agnes laughed. This language was a relief to her. She had been living so long in an apparently artificial atmosphere.

Maxwell laughed, too. He was beginning to think he hadn't done such a bad thing in coming home just then. He realized that a summer spent in his mother's home might not be such a slow affair after all.

He pointed out the different places of interest as they went along, the deaf and dumb institute among the number.

Agnes asked, with her chin in the air, "if that was the most interesting place they could boast of? I sometimes wish, though, that I were dumb," she said recklessly.

"Ah!" Maxwell bent again to meet her glance, and this time was successful. "Dumbness would hardly matter with eyes that speak like yours."

She became silent and still after this, and Maxwell felt he had made a mistake; but he dexterously led the conversation to impersonal subjects, and after a time Agnes forgot her displeasure, if it had been displeasure.

"You will come again," said Maxwell, as he held her hand one moment in his after helping her to alight.

"Yes; I shall come again."

She ran up to her room with a song on her lips, and wondered why the air seemed delirious with joy. Then she wrote a long letter to her mother, a letter written in her old gay way, recounting every interesting detail of the morning life, and ending with a glowing description of the morning drive, drawing Maxwell's portrait with a few words.

"He is very fair," she wrote; "so fair as to appear at first almost effeminate, but his features are finely cut, his figure slight but manly, and he possesses the sweetest smile I ever saw on man or woman."

The dear mother at home smiled happily over this letter, happy that her child's life should be brightened by the arrival of this charming young man.

CHAPTER IV.

"They have no feeling."

Agnes Power's love of beauty was something beyond the mere sensation of pleasure which anything lovely to look upon gives to our senses. She loved beauty because it was beauty! Just as she tried to do right for the sake of right alone!

She was passing down one of the side streets leading towards the water, a walk she had not taken before. It was now early in September. Already there were crimson leaves amongst the maples, and a feeling of autumn had come into the air. As Agnes walked along she felt invigorated by the fresh, cool breeze. It was a north wind, and the north wind always filled her soul with delight.

As she passed down the street, giving casual glances at the white-washed cottages, the groups of villagers congregated around each door step, she came to a house smaller