

of his rooms over the hairdresser's in the Place d'Armes. But did he go there? No; he sauntered into the billiard saloon of the "Golden Lion," and played pool and carabole with choice spirits, and drank more absinthe than was good for him. And those who watched his glittering eye and steady hand as he calculated, with unerring accuracy, the angles of the most complicated carabole, and pocketed, with faultless stroke, his adversary's ball at pool, wondered what had roused him from his usual listless apathy, and thought, for the first time in their lives, that Tom Burton might be a dangerous man to cross. So, if Fanny's information had made Laura seem an angel in Tom's eyes, it transformed him almost into a demon in the eyes of others.

"Why didn't she die, this sickly wife of his?" That was the one idea that possessed him as he went home. She had disease of the heart, he knew, and Dr. Coulesang had told him it might carry her off at any time. There she lay peacefully sleeping, this weak, faded, weary, useless wife of his; and there was the pleasing alternative that she might live for years. But any sudden excitement, the doctor said, would be fatal.

Why shouldn't it carry her off now? A diabolical idea struck him—struck him with a clearness and suddenness which would have been called inspiration had the thought been a good one, and having once conceived his crime, all the materials seemed to offer themselves to his hands with the facility that temptations to evil always do present themselves.

The accessories of the little plot were soon collected. Some phosphorus, which the hairdresser's son had used to smear his mask with at the carnival—nay, the hideous visage itself, grimy and unheeded—lay in a cobwebby corner of the room at the back; a piece of glittering beading from the untasteful wall, a white sheet from his own bed, a mahogany slat black with age, which had once formed the flaps of a little work table; these were all he needed.

Molelessly and deftly he made his preparations. He smeared the mask with the glowing phosphorus, and wrote with the same fiery substance the words, "This night shall thy soul be required" on the slat, draped himself in the white sheet. Standing at the foot of the bed, where the moon beams shone through the uncurtained window, he passed the elastic fastening of the fiery visage over his head, clutched the emblazoned warning in his hand, and raising the glittering staff, stabbed it at his wife's breast.

With a startled spring the body of the sleeper rose half erect; the smiling lips unclenched with a spasmodic gasp; the heavy eyelids were raised and the blue eyes stared with a vacant, frightened glance. Then came a horrible convulsion and distortion of the features; and as a terrific shriek rang through the house, with a great bounding leap and wild tossing upward of the arms, the body of the victim fell back upon the pillows.

The experiment had succeeded. She was dead! Huddling out of sight the hideous paraphernalia of his disguise, Burton rushed out shirt-sleeved and hatless to the "Lion D'Or," where he found Dr. Coulesang just putting up his cue (a private cue, marked with his initials, and kept under lock and key) previous to going home, told him his wife was in convulsions, from the effects apparently of some horrible dream. Hastening to the bedside, where the corpse lay ghastly and outstretched, the doctor pronounced life extinct, certified the cause—disease of the heart;—and two days afterwards all that remained of the beautiful but unfortunate Lottie was deposited some six feet beneath the soil of a Continental cemetery.

CHAPTER IV.

Fanny Prince, in her next letter to her sister gave her a full account of her meeting with Tom and Lottie's sudden death.

"Poor Tom," she wrote, "of course, is incommunicable. His ghastly accident maddens him. I am afraid at times he will commit suicide or some other dreadful thing. The other day I saw him with a tumbler of cognac, which he would have swallowed but for my intervention. In my eagerness to mitigate his affliction, I have ventured to hint that he should look forward for solace to his meeting with you, which must happen in a few months, for he is to travel home with us. Laura, was I wrong in this? I know you were cruel to him once only to be kind, but, Laura, dear, it was a mistaken kindness. I am sure you will never be cruel to him any more. You must marry him some day, Laura darling, and I am sure you will make him happier than poor Lottie ever did."

The remainder of the letter was about fashions and dresses and little conjugal matters, and a world of little private frivolities and secret intelligences which it would be at once a waste of time and a breach of trust to expose.

But we, who are behind the scenes, know that it was not grief alone which rendered Tom Burton wretched. We know that a terrible secret weighed him down, a terrible secret, the weight of which, nerves shattered by the excesses and debaucheries of a stormy youth were little calculated to endure; and it was only by a constant recourse to stimulants or narcotics that he did endure the phantom that haunted him.

When he and Laura met he found her wasted, thin and pale, but still beautiful. She saw in him the haggard, shattered wreck of what was once a man.

But this did not estrange her affection from him,—nay, it even made her love him all the more, for, with the loving willingness of a devoted woman to blame her—"I for every ill that happens to the beloved object, she laid herself

this was in a great measure her fault, that she had been weak to listen to her mother, and to trust his happiness in another's hands; and she vowed to atone in future by every means in her power for the misery he had undergone.

A little more than a year from the time that the earth had closed on Lottie, Tom and Laura stood before the altar, and at the latter was soon pained to discover that the cheerfulness which he had latterly exhibited in her presence was subject to relapses of the deepest melancholy, which, now that she had opportunities of constant observation, he was unable longer effectually to conceal from her.

"Tom," she urged, again and again, "you have some great sorrow. Tell me what it is, and divide it with me. Our sorrows are only half as hard to bear when they are shared."

And for a long time her pleadings were in vain. In vain to alleviate his pain and win his confidence, as the amusements and little excursions into the surrounding country were powerless to touch him to forget. But one day, as, after a long sail in their own pleasure boat upon the Elbe, they reclined at eventide upon a grassy slope at Blankensee and gazed far away over the beautiful prospect towards Hanover, surrounded by pleasure seekers, and within hearing of music and dancing amid the joyous shouts of youths and maidens, it was a queer time to choose for a confession of murder, wasn't it?

"Husband," whispered Laura, "the sad look is creeping into your eyes again. Tell me what it is that has thus poisoned your existence, that I may know if I can ever forgive myself my weakness in entrusting your happiness to another, instead of always guarding it as jealously as I do now."

"Laura," replied Tom, glancing up at her with a kind of worship as he lay at her feet, "you were indeed weak, for you sacrificed your own happiness for a worthless wretch like me. But where you have been weak I have been criminal, for, to my love for you I sacrificed my wife. Laura," he continued, drawing himself up towards her, and sinking his voice, "they told you that Lottie died and you believed them. I tell you now, and he bled the words in her ear, "that I killed her."

It was an ugly expression certainly, and even Laura, for a moment, turned pale and staggered mentally beneath the blow. But with a woman's deftness she soon drew from him the particulars, and becoming for the nonce a student of medical jurisprudence, constituted herself special pleader against her husband's conscience. She collected and collated cases in public prints, where men had been struck down in anger and had died, in which it had been decided that the cause was heart disease and not the blow.

"The mere fright," she argued, "never would have killed Lottie. It was a foolish trick to play on her darling, but you must not say 'twas this that made her die. And since you have, therefore nothing to fear from any earthly tribunal, let us trust, nay, are we not assured, that after your long penance of remorse and your sincere penitence, Heaven will not be less merciful? Let us live, then, none the less happily that we have a skeleton in the cupboard, for we will keep him there under lock and key, and never air him but for our own private warning; and let us expiate our past folly by teaching by our example, and enforcing by precept when necessary, that to cherish a genuine affection, and to be guided by the holy influence of true love, rather than by the sordid dictates of worldly advantage, is the truest safeguard against temptation, and the surest guarantee for happiness, here and hereafter."

Tom Burton is learning from Laura to make the happiness of others a source of happiness to himself. He is more respected, and, to all outward seeming, as contented as nine-tenths of the mortals that surround us; and, as for Laura, all who know her agree with Tom in pronouncing her but little—a very little—lower than the angels.

A KISS.

BY MARY KYLE DALLAS.

I, Ferdinand Brand, an English soldier, lay between life and death in a foreign hospital, nursed by the Sisters who devote their lives to works of mercy, and who showed no less tenderness to those who differed from them in religion than to the more devout of their own sect.

But all their kindness could not reconcile me to the weary life that lay before me, if I recovered. They gave me no hope that I should not be blind if I lived, and from theaching depth of my sad heart this thought had torn all that made life worth the having. A soldier who could no longer fight for his country; a lover of nature who could never again look upon her again, one who knew, by his tenderness for all women, how well he might some day love one woman; can you wonder that all courage died within my breast? Thus suicide was a temptation I could not have resisted, had it been possible for me to accomplish it.

The days glided on sadly and slowly. The night, no darker than they, followed them.

As in a sort of dreary dream, I listened to the groans of the suffering men about me—often the gasping breath of the dying—to the raving of fever's delirium—to the murmured prayer beside the dead—to the slow tramp of those who bore away the tenant of some now useless pallet to a yet more narrow resting-place.

There were happier sounds at times; the chat of two convalescents; the pleasant speech of the Sisters; the hymns they sang at the vesper hour; but my heart never lightened, my future never lost its terror. To live seemed more terrible than to die.

One day had seemed more bitter than any of its predecessors, darker, crueler. A comrade had breathed his last very near me. Almost with his latest breath, he had cried:

"Ah, it is cruel that I may never see my wife and child again!"

Could I have given him my remaining years—years that they had promised me of late—how happy should I have been. I did not want life; he did. And I lived, and he died. Ah, how ungrateful was I then to a merciful Providence! A blackness of darkness was upon me. I could not rest. I could not sleep. I could not taste the food they urged me to partake of. I even wept in my bitterness of soul—I, a soldier.

Then I prayed to die. I prayed silently. God, who knew my misery, forgave me.

In the midst of that prayer a strange thing happened to me. I felt a form bend over me. I inhaled the perfume of a breath as sweet as new-mown hay. Two lips softer than rose-leaves pressed a kiss upon my closed eyelids, and a tear dropped upon my forehead.

Involuntarily I stretched forth my hand; it caught a woman's taper fingers. They wrenched themselves from me, but left in my clasp a ring.

"Who is this?" I cried. "Come back! Tell me; who is this?"

There was no answer. I heard a soft, retreating step, and nothing more. The woman who had kissed me, whoever she might be, was gone.

I slipped the ring on my little finger, and fell into a reverie. Who could this have been? Whose lips had touched my lips? Whose hand had I held? Sister Agatha was large, and stout, and elderly. Sister Estelle was hard and thin, and her hands were always as cold as ice. Then nuns were not given to the wearing of jewelry.

I questioned Sister Agatha after a while, as to who had visited the hospital. "Only the mother of Antoine," she said; but I knew that those juicy lips, that warm, fluttering little hand, were not those of any man's mother.

It was a little incident, but it employed my head for the day. You laugh; but you must be wounded, and weak, and blind, and far from home and kindred, as I said there, to know the value of a woman's kiss and of a woman's pitying tear.

For one or two days I listened for the return of that gentle mystery. For one or two nights I dreamed of her. Then I stopped dreaming. Life dawned anew for me. I opened my eyes one morning and saw a ray of blessed sunlight. I opened them the next, to see faintly and dimly the outline of the long room, the coats ranged down it, and the gliding forms of the gray-robed Sisters as they passed from pillow to pillow. I was no longer blind. I should be myself again.

It had not seemed so much to be myself once. Now how glorious! Hope healed my wounds. I grew well miraculously. It seemed to me that all this dated from that kiss, given to me by those unknown lips. Ere I left the hospital, I told the good Sister Agatha of it.

She looked at me solemnly, and fell to cross-examining herself.

"My child," she said, "it was the Madonna. It is a miracle—a blessed miracle. She has healed you."

"But the ring?" I said. "The Madonna gave roses to Saint Catherine. Why not a ring to you?" she said. "Ah, the beautiful miracle!"

So the story ran about the hospital. I knew that I had held a mortal hand in mine, and that living human lips had touched me; but who would have blighted the nun's pretty faith by persistent contradiction? Madonna, shouldst thou ever leave thy heaven, it might well be to kiss open the sealed eyes of one whose heart was breaking in his blindness.

Five years had passed. The war was over. I was in my native land again. I had almost forgotten my period of suffering in the hospital, but I had not forgotten that kiss. I still wore the ring upon my finger, and I still hoped, absurdly enough, to know one day to whom it had belonged—to know who kissed my blind eyes, who shed for me that pitying, tender tear. I met pretty girls and fine women who might have charmed me but for this haunting thought, but it was as though the ring on my finger was one of betrothal. I was constant to a memory vague as it was beautiful. My heart was adamant to all of them.

About this time my brother Henry married and brought home his wife, a very lovely girl, who won our hearts at once. She had but one living relative, a sister who had been educated abroad, and who was coming to visit her very soon. She was said to be beautiful, and Henry spoke of her often.

"It would be a lucky thing for you if you could win her heart," he said. "She is almost an angel."

I smiled and shook my head. "Not that that would be so easily done," he said. "Laura is a strange girl. She refuses every offer. She is two-and-twenty now, and has had several; but Emma tells me that she will never marry—until she gets over a queer fancy of hers. You'll keep it to yourself, if I tell you, Ferdinand?"

I promised.

"The girls are orphans," said Henry, "and

Laura was educated at a convent in—. By some strange neglect she remained there during the whole of this last terrible war. The convent was safe enough, and she had no fear; but it was outrageous. Well, to cut a long story short, there was a hospital at —, and it was filled, of course, with wounded soldiers. The girl, just seventeen then, used at times to go with the nuns, and, protected by their costume, to the hospital, to minister to the wounded men. One, a beautiful young officer, who had lost his sight, attracted her attention. She used to watch him from afar, and think of him when she left him, until she fell in love with him. At last, one day, when he had been suffering very much, and had, as she thought, fallen asleep, her feelings overcame her. The Sisters were busy elsewhere, and she crept up to him and kissed him. He was not asleep, it seems. He caught her hand, and she, in pulling it away, lost a ring from her finger. But though she hid herself among the nuns, she could not forget him. He haunted all her dreams.

"When she next visited the hospital, she looked for him in vain; his cot was empty. The nuns told her that the Madonna had performed a miracle, and given him his sight by a kiss. She knew what that story arose from, but she held her peace. And to this day, Ferdinand, she loves that man so entirely that she can love no one else. The ring she lost has been a betrothal ring in her family for generations. She fancies that some spell attaches to it. Otherwise she is a sensible girl—Ferdinand, what allis you?"

"Brother," I cried, "do you not know, do you not remember, it was I who lay blind in that foreign hospital? It was I she kissed. It is I who wear the ring." And I held before his eyes the emerald that I had worn upon my finger for five long years.

My story is nearly ended. A week after this I went to meet the evening train from London, commissioned to escort Laura Lee to our old home.

When I first spoke to her, she looked at me in a singular way, and her color came and went rapidly. As for me, it seemed that I had known her all my life. How I told her the story I do not know, but tell it I did, on my way home. And the ring that I had snatched from her hand adorned it again—a betrothal ring in very truth—when we crossed the threshold of home together. Fate had united us, and we have always blessed Fate.

Once—a year or two ago—my wife and I visited the continent, and stopping at —, went to its famous hospital. A Sister who was quite unknown to us showed us through it. Over one cot was a little shrine and a picture of the Madonna.

"It is here," said the nun, "that Our Lady graciously performed a miracle. She kissed open the eyes of a blind young English soldier, and left in his hands a ring."

My wife stooped over the pillow and pressed her lips to it. I slipped a purse into the hands of the good Sister.

"A blessed miracle," I said.

"Amen," she said, and lighted us with her sweet smile to the hospital's wide portals.

BOYS AND PUMPKIN PIES.

What John said was, that he didn't care much for pumpkin pie, but that was after he had eaten a whole one. It seemed to him that mince would be better. The feeling of a boy toward pumpkin pie has never been properly considered. There is an air of festivity about its approach in the fall. The boy is willing to help pare and cut up the pumpkin, and he watches with the greatest interest the stirring up process and the pouring into the scalloped crust. When the sweet savor of the baking reaches his nostrils, he is filled with the most delightful anticipations. Why should he not be? He knows that for months to come the buttery will contain golden treasures, and that it will require only a slight ingenuity to get at the buttery as in any part of farming. His elders say that the boy is always hungry; but that is a very coarse way to put it. He has only recently come into a world that is full of good things to eat, and there is on the whole a very short time in which to eat them, at least, he is told, among the first information he receives, that life is short. Life being brief, and pie and the like fleeting, he very soon decides upon an active campaign. It may be an old story to people who have been eating for forty or fifty years, but it is different with a beginner. He takes the thick and the thin as it comes, as in pie, for instance. I know a place where they were not thicker than the poor man's plaster; they were spread so thin upon the crust that they were better fitted to draw out hunger than to satisfy it. They used to be made up by the great oven full, and kept in the dry cellar, where they hardened and dried to a toughness you would hardly believe. This was a long time ago, and they make the pumpkin pie in the country better now, or the race of boys would have been so discouraged that I think they would have stopped coming into the world.

A New York merchant, while recently taking dinner upon one of the Canadian steamers, very innocently took an egg, broke its shell, and emptied its contents, as he supposed, into an egg-cup. After arranging it to suit his taste, he raised the supposed cup, when lo! it was a "China pumpkin-ring."