

she could not succeed. She was away for three days, and when she returned the nervous dread had all disappeared; but in its place there was what seemed to me quiet, hopeless, uncomplaining despair.

"Is it not almost time the South Africa mail was in?" I asked Miss Linden one dull December morning.

"It will be here to-morrow," she said; "I saw something about it in yesterday's *Times*."

Only mothers who have sons in a distant land can tell how I waited for the next morning's post. The letters always came while we were at breakfast. The old butler who had been in our family for twenty years and more looked very grave when he entered the room, the letters as usual on the salver. He laid them by my side, and went out quickly. My heart almost stopped beating when I saw the old man's face, but when I raised the thin envelope and saw a strange handwriting I could neither speak nor move.

Clarice ran to my side and took the letter from my hands.

"Do you see?" I gasped at last. "It is not written in Ronald's hand; there is something wrong. Open it quickly, and see what it is."

To my infinite relief I saw the faintest shadow of a smile on her lips as she read the opening lines.

"It is all right, dear Mrs. Thorn," she said—"at least, nearly so. If you will give over trembling I will read the letter."

It was from my son, although another hand had traced it. He had been severely wounded—shot in the arm—and was ordered home. "By the next mail, dearest mother," he said, "you will have your tiresome boy back again."

It was long before I ceased to tremble, or could realize that my Ronald would soon be with me. I am afraid that during the next few weeks I made everybody in Thorndale Hall very miserable with my anxious fidgeting. I should be ashamed to tell how often I had my son's room arranged, or what preparations I made for him.

He came at last. I dare not trust myself even now to speak much of that time. He sent me word at what hour he thought he should arrive. Clarice begged that she might not be present, lest she should disturb our first interview; but I told her that she had been like a daughter to me, and that her place should not be quite usurped. The dear face that I had kissed and blessed two years ago was near me again, bronzed and handsomer than when we parted. I laid my head on my boy's breast and wept blissful tears. I did not notice just then that he threw only one arm round me; the other, although not amputated, was almost useless, and he knew that he could never use sword again.

When Clarice went away that night Ronald said to me—

"Mother, is that lovely girl really your companion? What a beautiful, sorrowful face! What is wrong with her? Is she an orphan?"

Then I told him that I knew really nothing of the young girl's family or antecedents; I referred to her continued and deep sorrow, and to the little scene over the newspaper, which had impressed me so much. Ronald looked grave for a few minutes, and then he said, with a bright smile—

"Whatever sorrow she may have, mother, is not brought on by her own fault; her face is a very sad one, but is as free from guile as is the face of a child."

In a few days we became accustomed to the presence of my dear boy. Ronald was quite an invalid; his arm gave him much pain. He could not for many days together leave his couch. How proud all the old servants were to wait upon "young master, who had been wounded in the wars"! What we should have done without Clarice I cannot tell. She amused my son as I never could have done; she read to him for hours together; and when twilight deepened, before the lamps were lighted, she would sit at the piano and sing to him with unwearied patience.

Rest and our pure country air soon brought Ronald round again. It was a great grief to him to find that his military career was ended. Although the wound on his arm gradually healed, the arm itself remained almost useless—he could not at times even lift up a book.

As he recovered health and strength our lives became more cheerful. Our neighbors were very kind; they never seemed tired of making up little *fêtes* and parties to amuse my son. Clarice always tried to escape them. Sometimes Ronald pleaded so hard that she relented and joined us, but that was not often.

One morning, as we lingered round the breakfast-table, Ronald began to read his letters.

"Mother," he said, looking up from one that he was perusing, "could you put up with a visitor for a day or two?"

"What is it?" I asked, only too pleased to be able to gratify him in any way.

"An old school-friend of mine—Frank Travers. Poor fellow, I am grieved about him."

"What is the matter with him, Ronald?" I asked.

"Oh, it's a long tale, mother, and perhaps will not interest you; but he has lost every penny of what was once a handsome fortune."

"How has he managed that?" I inquired.

"Does he gamble?"

"Nothing of the kind. His father died when Frank was a child, and left him plenty of money—his guardian was an uncle. The money was then invested in mining shares which paid a pretty good dividend. His uncle was anxious

to do the best he could for him, and sold the shares, investing the proceeds in the London bank that has lately smashed—Graham & Co.—you know the case, I dare say—the papers have been full of it. All poor Frank's fortune is gone; there will not be one penny left. The banker himself has been prosecuted and sentenced to penal servitude. Frank speaks of coming on Tuesday, if that will be convenient; he can remain only for one night."

How much longer Ronald would have continued talking I cannot say, but, looking round, I saw poor Clarice lying, a white senseless heap upon the ground.

No word escaped her when, an hour afterwards, she opened her eyes and saw me at her bedside; a low moan broke from her lips.

"Dear Mrs. Thorne," she said at last, "I give you too much trouble. I feel so ill, I must go," she continued, wildly—"I am a burden instead of a companion to you."

"Gently, Clarice, my dear," I said; "you shall never leave me. I do not think you are ill—I think you have some great sorrow. Is it not so?"

"Yes," she moaned—"yes—oh so great!"

"Well, my dear, I will not tease you; when you know and love me well enough, perhaps you will tell me what it is."

She clung to me with a despairing grasp. I shall never forget that poor, wistful, quivering face.

"You are very good," she said. "Some day you will hate me."

Then I kissed her, and told her that nothing could alter my love, once given.

All old ladies have fancies. I imagined that Clarice had some unfortunate love affair, and, as she had fainted when Frank Travers' name was mentioned, I thought it possible that by some strange coincidence he might be the hero of her little romance. So I looked forward with something like curiosity to the arrival of my son's friend.

"Will you run away from our coming visitor, Clarice," I asked her, with a smile, "as you do from all others, or will you dine with us, and help to entertain our guest?"

"I will remain with pleasure," she said, "if you think I can be of any use."

I was surprised, for I thought that she would perhaps try to avoid him. I had pictured to myself a romantic meeting, reconciliation, &c. My vanity and faith in my own powers of perception received a severe blow, for I found when Clarice and Frank Travers stood face to face, that they were entire strangers, and evidently met for the first time; so that I had not discovered my companion's secret after all.

Mr. Travers seemed depressed at his loss of fortune; he rallied a little when Ronald said that he thought he could get him a good appointment abroad. He was a simple, honest, open-hearted young man; he told us all about his troubles after dinner; he saw that he had a sympathizing audience, and more than once I saw him raise his handkerchief to his eyes.

"You see, Mrs. Thorne," he said, "I was to have been married in three months. She is a dear girl, and will not give me up now that I am poor; but goodness only knows how many years we shall have to wait."

"It is a scandalous thing," broke out Ronald—"homes broken up, men ruined, and hopes destroyed. I wish I had that banking fellow here—I would—"

"Hush, Ronald, my dear," I said, "vengeance is not in our hands. Clarice, will you sing for us?"

But Clarice had risen, and she was silently quitting the room; and some instinct or other warned me not to call her back.

CHAPTER III.

The beautiful season came and went, and peace and happiness reigned at Thorndale Hall. Ronald had recovered his strength—that is, as far as he could ever recover it. Something else had come with the summer sunbeams—I had long since seen its shadow creeping on.

It was only another version of the sweet old story told in all times, sung in every clime and in every tongue—the story that sometimes ends in joy and sometimes in madness, and sometimes never ends at all. I saw that my son—my brave, handsome Ronald—had given the whole love of his noble, generous heart to the beautiful sorrowful girl whom I had long looked upon as my own child. I was delighted at it, for the longer I knew Clarice Linden, the better I liked and the more I esteemed her. Her honorable, high principles, her earnest, thoughtful character, and her amiable disposition had endeared her to me.

It had a great charm for me, this quiet watching of the growth of love. I was at times puzzled about Clarice. Ronald's honest ardent love was shown in every word and look; his eyes followed her every movement; he seemed to drink in every word that fell from her lips; he never wearied of watching her fair, sad face—I believe he knew every change in its expression. But about Clarice I did not feel so sure. When she was sitting with me, and Ronald's footsteps sounded in the corridor, or outside the door, I have noticed her cheeks flush and her lips quiver. Once, too, when he was reading that gem of all poetry, the pardon of King Arthur to the fair Guinevere, I saw her eyes fastened on his face with a wistful, yearning look that was pitiful to see. She neither sought his society nor avoided it. She had none of those little playful ways that many young girls seem to think so bewitching. I was puzzled—I could not tell whether Clarice Linden loved my son or not.

"Mother," said Ronald to me one day, his handsome face flushing as he spoke, "I have been wanting to speak to you. Do you not think that it is time I settled in life, as you matrons call it?"

"In plainer English, Ronald," I said, dryly, "you wish to ask me whether it isn't time that you thought of getting married."

"That is it, mother," he rejoined. "I have been thinking about it for some time. You see, dear," he continued, with the air of one about to use a convincing argument, "I have plenty of money; I need not look for fortune in a wife. I have position, and all that kind of thing. I should like to marry for—"

"For love," I supplied.

"Yes, for love. I have made my choice, mother. I hope you will approve it. You must remember that I have been thrown into constant companionship with one of the most beautiful and noble-minded girls in the world. I only await your permission to ask Clarice Linden to be my wife."

"You have it, Ronald, and, if you win her, you will have a fortune in your wife. She is the girl that I should have chosen from all the world for you if the choice had rested with me."

Ronald embraced me most gratefully, and for some minutes we were very happy together.

"Perhaps," he said, "when she is married, and all the world is fair and bright before her, she will get rid of her melancholy—I cannot think that it is natural to her."

Then something like a cold foreboding rushed into my heart. I looked at the bright, animated face before me, and wondered how my boy would bear a disappointment should such be his fate. Ronald, who was watching me, saw my altered face.

"You think she cares for me, don't you, mother? She is always so kind."

I thought to myself that kindness and love were not quite the same thing.

"If she were to refuse me," he continued, "it would be a deathblow to me. I never cared about any one in all my life before; all my love, my heart, my hopes, my wishes are centered in her. So, mother, wish me success."

That I did most warmly. I saw Ronald follow Clarice down the Lime Walk, and I knew that the words which would make or mar his life's happiness were to be spoken then. When the dinner-bell rang, Clarice sent to ask if I would excuse her, and Ronald dined alone with me. I had no need to ask him how he had fared; the brightness was all gone from my son's face; the very tone of his voice was changed. He pretended to eat, but I saw that he could not, and did not press him to do so. When the servants had retired, and we were left alone, he came and threw himself, as he had been used to do when a child, on the ground at my feet.

"Poor Ronald!" I said, gently laying my hand on the chestnut curls that clustered so thickly round his head.

"Mother," he cried, "I cannot understand it. I am sure she loves me. Just for one moment, when I first spoke, there came a light into her face that was almost divine. I asked her to be my wife, and she began to weep so violently that I was alarmed for her."

"But what did she say, dear?" I asked. "We must naturally suppose any young girl would be agitated."

"Ah, no," he said, "it was not that. She shrank away from me, and said, 'Never—no, never!' in such a voice that I cannot forget it. I told her that my life was in her hands, that I did not care to be without her, that you loved her as though she were your own child, and that the dearest wish of your heart was to see her my wife. She gave but that answer—'Never—no, never!' There is some mystery about her. I asked her if she loved any one else, or if in time she could learn to love me. She looked so white and so despairing that I was miserable; but I shall not give her up."

He paused for a few minutes, and then went on—

"No, I shall never give her up, mother. There is a mystery; and I will solve it; there is a secret, and I will find it out. I love her better in her sorrow and sadness than I could love any other; I will live and love her, or die and forget her."

"Hush, my dear boy," I said—"you talk wildly. We must see what can be done. I will speak to her myself, and try if I have any influence."

"Do, mother," he cried. "If she has any trouble, I wish she would confide in us—we could help her. I wish that I could go somewhere until it was settled; three days of such suspense would unnerve me."

Before retiring to my own room, I decided to seek Clarice. It has struck me since as strange that, although the young girl was a perfect stranger to us, of whose family or antecedents we were perfectly ignorant, and whose references had been of the vaguest possible kind, yet neither of us for one moment ever doubted her, in spite of all the mystery that surrounded her. As I sat listening to Ronald's footsteps—it seemed as if he would never stop pacing the room—I remembered that I had never heard her mention home or friends, brother or sister, father or mother; that I had never heard her mention her youth or any of the events of her past life; and yet not the faintest shadow of a doubt respecting her ever crossed my mind.

I went to her room, determined to see if there was any hope for my dear son. She did not seem surprised to see me. I drew a chair near the fire, and asked her to come and talk to me for a short time.

"Clarice, my dear," I said, laying my hands

upon the beautiful drooping head, "tell me, is there really no hope for my son?"

"Dear Mrs. Thorne," she answered, "do spare me this; I feel that I cannot bear more suffering."

"It is that we wish to save you from. You would be very happy as Ronald's wife, Clarice; you would not only enjoy all the blessings of fortune, but the truest and noblest heart in all the world would be your own."

She made no reply, but clasped those little white hands of hers together as though holding tightly to some resolution.

"We have been so much like mother and child," I continued, "that you will not mind telling me if you love any one else."

"No," she said, with something like a shudder; "I have never cared for any one."

"Then let me ask you another question, Clarice. If you love no one else, do you not think that in time you might love Ronald?"

She looked at me with her sad, wistful eyes filled with tears.

"I cannot," she murmured; "I must not. Do not torture me so, Mrs. Thorne."

"Think of him a little, Clarice; you are the first he has ever loved or cared for. I believe that every hope of his life is fixed upon you; if you will not try to love him, he will go abroad, and perhaps die there—I shall lose my son again. Oh, Clarice, spare me this!"

Her face had grown white and fixed as I uttered the words.

"I cannot," she moaned, rather than spoke; "I ought never to have come here."

"At least, my dear," I said, "you will tell me why you refuse him. Forgive the question—has any one else a claim upon you?"

"No," she replied, in the same hopeless voice; "I stand alone in the world."

"I wish you would trust me more," I said, almost impatiently; "there seems to me no reason why you should reject my son, yet you do so. Will time change you? If he waits even for years, will you give him hope?"

"I cannot," she cried, springing to her feet; "nothing can alter my determination; I can never be his wife. Pray do not torture me—I cannot bear it."

She looked so wild and so despairing that I could say no more.

"I will leave you then, my dear," I said; "my son must bear the blow like a man. I would have given my life to shield him from it, but he must suffer. I will not tease you again, Clarice, though I am sorely wounded to think that you have not more faith in me."

She kissed my hands, while warm tears rained upon them.

"Good night, my dear," I said; "try to sleep after all this excitement."

As I passed the door of Ronald's room I heard the impatient footsteps still pacing the floor. I went in gently, and put my arms around his neck.

"Ronald," I said, "you must bear it bravely; there is no hope for you."

His dear face grew pale, and he stood quite silent and still for some minutes; then he kissed my cheek, and said—

"I thank you, mother, for trying to help me; I will try to bear it. She may not love me, but nothing can prevent me from loving her as long as I live."

So I left him, grieving sorely for the blight that had fallen on the life of my brave, dear son. I saw that Clarice's refusal was not owing, as I had half hoped, to any girlish bashfulness or fancy; she had some reason which she would not confide to any of us, but which I plainly saw would separate her from Ronald. I little knew, as I lay down to rest that night, what the next morning would bring forth.

CHAPTER IV.

On the morning after my interview with Clarice, I was half an hour later than usual; indeed, it was nearly ten o'clock when I went into the breakfast-room. Ronald was there reading the papers, but I missed the beautiful face that greeted me every morning with a sweet smile.

"Where is Clarice?" I asked Ronald.

"I have not seen her yet," he replied; "I thought that she was with you."

Before I had finished my cup of tea the butler entered with what seemed to be a thick letter lying on the salver.

"Miss Linden wished me to give you this, madam," he said. "She went at eight o'clock."

"Went where?" I cried, in astonishment, while Ronald looked bewildered.

"Went to the station, madam; I thought you knew. There was no message left. Wells drove Miss Linden, and took her boxes."

I said no more, for I did not wish the servants to have anything to gossip over. When we were alone I opened the letter. To this moment I remember the fearful agitation in my son's face as I did so. I give the letter now word for word as I read it then—

"You will forgive me for leaving you, dear Mrs. Thorne, when I have told you my little story. I have often longed to do so, but the fear that you would despise me sealed my lips. I would have given the world last night, when you spoke so kindly to me, to tell you all; but I was a coward, and dared not."

"I can never be your son's wife; but I love him—oh, yes, as much as he loves me! It is because I love him that I have left the shelter of the only home I have in the world; it is because I love him so deeply, and dread my own weakness, that I have fled from you. When you know all, you will say that I did right in refusing to tarnish the lustre of a name that has never known disgrace."