

CHAPTER II. "LOVED AT LAST."

As soon as their marriage was duly solemnized, Alice wrote to her parents: but no answer came; again and again she covered sheets of paper with petitions for pardon, but they all fell, or at least seemed to fall, unheeded, and at last she gave up writing, or speaking of her old home, trying hard to give up thinking too. But thought is not so easy of control, and many a bitter tear ran down the young wife's cheek in the silent watches of the night; tears that, alas! soon began to have a two-fold meaning, for already the spell was breaking. Collego terms had begun again, Derwin had taken his wife with him, and domiciled her carefully out of the way of the usual haunts of the collego-men. He had encountered Shifner, and a somewhat stormy altercation had been the result, Charley's code of honour and Mr. Derwin's not exactly agreeing; so that when his old friend did his duty, (all honour to him, a very painful one,) and called upon the bride, he knew very well by whose orders she was "not at home," and never repeated the experiment.

No one else called; for, although it was pretty well known that Derwin had married, he never spoke of it, or in any manner acted like a married man; and his friends resented this want of cordiality by pretending to ignore his marriage, the boldest now and then taking their revenge by chaffing him about his caged beauty.

And yet, though acting with such false pride towards his acquaintances, Derwin was not as yet an unkind husband; the gloss of first love had not worn off, and Alice was all that man could desire in a wife. The first vacation they went to a south-coast bathing-place, and there the trials that were afterwards to crush out every hope and joy began. Derwin met some old friends, and did not introduce his wife,—they were sure to patronise, and then laugh at her and him, he reasoned to himself; therefore he determined to leave the place, but not before he had promised to spend a fortnight with his friends at their country place. The prospect was a pleasing one. So he took Alice to London, and leaving her in lodgings, went to fulfil his engagement.

He had told her he would be a fortnight away, but the fortnight became four, five, then six weeks, and there had come neither letter nor tidings; and although horrible visions of railway accidents and sudden death in every imaginable form filled Alice's mind, she still waited, and dreading lest she might act contrary to her husband's wishes, or offend against the customs of the world, she made no inquiry. At last a new trial came upon her, she was without money; the landlady grew first impatient, then suspicious, and finally turned Alice out, upbraiding her with disgracing her house.

Alice was bewildered; there seemed only one alternative, and that was to go to Derwin's uncle's house, the address of which she fortunately remembered, and there obtain some intelligence of her husband.

The man-servant looked at her rather suspiciously as she asked whether he knew where Mr. Derwin had gone, and half closed the door as he replied:—

"Yes, ma'm, he's gone to Australia; his uncle got him an appointment, and he sailed three weeks ago, all of a hurry; hadn't time to leave any P.P.C.s."

How Alice bore the intelligence—how she concealed the death stroke, and managed to walk quietly away from the eye of the curious domestic—was one of those mysterious feats of self-command now and then accomplished by those whom the world looks on as the weakest,—women. The shock, though it fell suddenly, had struck deep into her heart; she never doubted its truth; something catching at her heart, and throbbing in her brain, told her it was even as the man said, and that he was gone. But why? wherefore had he not seen her—written to her? what business could have been urgent enough to drag him away without giving him space to bid her farewell? Very, very slowly she began to see the truth.

Wandering aimlessly from street to street, un-

conscious of time, and startling night revellers with her ghastly face and despairing eyes, she passed the night; and when morning dawned, cold, misty, and, in the great deserted streets of London, indescribably lonely, she began fully to comprehend the weight and depth of her husband's villainy, and her own desolation. Deserted by him for whom she had disobeyed and left her father and mother—what could she do? Suddenly the commandment she had broken flashed upon her, "Honour thy father and thy mother, and thy days shall be long in the land." She had dishonoured them, why should her days be prolonged? surely it was God's will that they should not be long; death would come soon, and if it did not come of itself, could she not seek it?

Starting up from the doorstep upon which she had half fallen, she walked hurriedly down the street, remembering that but a short time before she had passed a bridge, below which ran the broad dark merciful road to death, and crouching by the parapet, she tried to say her childish prayers, the same she had repeated at her mother's knee. Her mother! what was there in the word to cause such a thrill through the girl's frame, and send a wild sensation of life and tenderness pulsing in her veins?

Tears came rushing from her eyes, and bitter sobs mingled with the half wild, but wholly penitent prayer:—

"God forgive me if I thought of murdering my unborn baby, and spare me strength for its sake."

Poor people of every degree seem to cheat themselves into a belief that London is the very El Dorado of work and wealth—that you have but to say "Give me work," and employment stands ready. Alas! how many an aching heart, how many starving lips have mourned, too late, the terrible delusion!

Alice begged from house to house for work, and at last, wearied by disappointment, and conscious that her woman's time of trial was coming, she sought the last refuge of the homeless, and the baby, whose life had saved her life, was born in the lying-in ward of a city work-house.

As soon as Alice was able, she left the union, and by the help of one of the nurses, obtained work in shirt-making for a cheap out-fitting shop, badly paid enough, and requiring close sitting far into the night to make it bring in the barest livelihood, but work was no toil now; the tiny little creature, kicking and sprawling upon the floor beside her, gave her new energy; she was not stitching for her own life, but for the life of the child of whom God in his inscrutable wisdom and wise mercy had made her mother. As months passed into years the child thrived and grew; Alice worked harder and harder, early and late, but with a new sense of enjoyment and life springing up in her heart,—a sort of vague fore-shadowing that the child would somehow restore the husband of her youth, and bring back her past happiness.

Eight years had gone by since Derwin left her, when in passing a newspaper shop she stopped to pick up some torn scraps of paper, thinking there might be something to read to her boy. Almost the first name that met her eyes was that of her husband; it formed part of a sentence something about a death, and the succession of an unlooked-for heir. Staggering rather than walking into the shop, Alice pointed to the words, and asked the man if he could get her a newspaper with the paragraph complete. The man happened to be good-natured, and seeing the woman's distress, took some pains to hunt up a paper of corresponding date. Armed with this, Alice hurried home, and there read a curious story, the story of her husband's life, the portion mixed up with herself only left untouched; the first part she knew, but the part dating from his departure for Australia, was all new. He had, it seems, succeeded at first; and then by one of those crushing strokes of Providence, his good fortune had deserted him, all his newly-acquired wealth was swallowed up by unlucky speculations, everything he put his hand to failed, when, reduced to beggary, he left the colony and returned to England, there to find himself next

heir to one of the finest estates in Wales. Thither he had gone, welcomed and received as a sort of hero, and worshipped for the very troubles he had known.

"Has he ever sought me?" was Alice's first thought, as after reading the story nearly a dozen times over, she laid down the newspaper. "Has he tried to find me?"

Then she remembered how fruitless such a search would be. Who knew her? How could he trace her? She must write, and tell him where she was, and how she had suffered. So write she did, not once, but many times, hoping growing fainter each time. No answer came, and there seemed but one thing left,—to seek him out, and give him up his child, then hide herself away and die. Despair gave her renewed energy, and supported her during all the long weary journey; when footsore, hungry, and weary, she begged from cottage to cottage for the food and shelter necessary to support life: at last the trial was drawing to a climax; she heard the old familiar tongue again, and fancied every voice was that of an old friend.

But when she saw the house he had inherited, her heart sunk. How dare she, a beggar in rags, go up to that stately home and claim the master as her husband? In all her trouble and anxiety, no thought such as this had entered her mind, now it came with overwhelming force, crushing down every ray of hope. Irresolute, she stood by the lodge-gate, then turned away, only however to return, and gaze wonderingly again.

The lodge-keeper came out and she hid her boy's face in her shawl; then convinced, mother-like, that to see the child's face once was to remember him for ever, she took him down the road, and had him wait for her, and went back alone to question the old woman; but the gates were closed, and as she stood uncertain whether to ring or not, the quick trot of a horse upon the gravel of the avenue caught her ear; peering through the iron bars of the gate it needed no glance to tell her that the rider was her husband; and then, utterly powerless, deaf, blind, and only conscious that he was coming to her there, and that they were to meet, she stood clinging with both hands to the gate.

The lodge-keeper, hurrying out, thrust her angrily away, and as one side of the heavy iron gate swung open, Alice's agony burst forth, and a long inarticulate pent-up cry came from her lips, as, her hold relaxing, she fell almost under his horse's feet.

Derwin had seen the white face through the bars, and knew it again as instantly: and as he sat there, apparently waiting the opening of the gate, a thousand old long-buried feelings welled up, and beat fiercely at his heart. He saw himself in his true light: he knew he had been a blackguard—that the death-like face staring at him with such wild eyes might for all he knew be that of a mad woman, more, a mad wife, wretched, maddened by his crime. He dared not recognise her, and he dared not pass her; fascinated and spell-bound, he heard her cry and knew it was his name that rang out like an appeal to an avenging God. Then he saw the old lodge-keeper kneel down by her, and heard her cry out that the woman was dying in a fit.

Slowly and mechanically Derwin got down from his horse, and helped to carry the body into the lodge. As they did so, the child came running up, and, throwing his arms round his mother, began crying piteously. Derwin's self-control was leaving him now, and fearful lest he might betray himself he despatched the woman to the house for wine, and looking the cottage door, stood looking at her whom a few years before he had left in the pride of youth and beauty. Derwin was not such a hardened villain as he tried to make and think himself; like many another nature, so long as you kept out of his sight the misery or pain he was causing, he could go on in his own selfish, heartless course; but once bring him face to face with the sight of his crime, and the devil was cast out of him. No thought of his deserted wife had ever materially disturbed the newly-made squire's thoughts, until he kept that watch by what seemed her death-bed, and then he knew what he was and what he had done.