FORREST HOUSE.

BY MARY J. HOLMES.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WHAT THE PEOPLE SAID AND DID.

Before bed-time half the people in Rothsay knew of the marriage, and that Mrs. Dr. Rider had seen and talked with the lady, who was reported as very beautiful, and young, and stylish, and cultivated, and travelled, and a Bostonian, whose family had been on the most intimate terms with the Bigelows. She was also a friend of Bee Belknap, who had spent a summer with her, and probably knew of the marriage, which was a sort of escapade gotten up on the spur of the moment, and kept a secret at first because Everard was not through college, and feared his father's displeasure. But why it was not made public after the judge's death was a question which even the wise ones could not answer; and so the wonder and excitement increased.

The next morning, which was Sunday, dawned clear and bright. The rain was over, and at the usual hour the Rothsayites betook themselves to their accustomed place of worship. Trinity church was full that morning, for though the people hardly expected Mrs. J. E. Forrest herself, they did expect Mrs. Markham, and hoped to hear something more from her. Mrs. Markham was not there, and the large, square pew which the Forrests had occupied for many years, and which was far up the middle aisle, was empty until the reading of the Psalms commenced, when there was heard outside the sound of rapidly approaching wheels, which stopped before the door, and a moment after there entered a graceful figure clothed in black, with the prettiest little Paris bonnet perched on the golden hair, the long crape veil thrown back, disclosing the fair, blonde face, which was a little flushed, while the blue eyes had in them a timid, bashful expression as they glanced quickly around in quest of the sexton, who, having fulfilled his duties at the bell, had gone to the organ loft, for he was blower as well as bell-ringer, and left to others the task of seating strangers. Josey did not have to wait long, for four men,—two young, one middle-aged, and one white-haired and old,—simultaneously left their pews and made a movement toward her; the youngest reached her first and asked if she would have a seat.

"Yes, thank you. Please show me Judge Forrest's pew," was the reply and every head was turned as her long skirts went trailing up the aisle, and the air was filled with the costly and delicate perfume she carried with her, and which was fresh from Pinand's.

What a long time she remained upon her knees, and how devout she was after she had risen, and how clearly and sweetly she sang the "Gloria," and how wonderfully her overskirt was looped, and how jauntily her jacket fitted her, with such a pretty stand-up collar, and how white her neck was about it, and how beautiful the wavy hair under the lovely bonnet. All these details, and more, were noted by every woman in church who could get a view of her, while even the clergyman, good, conscientious man as he was, found it difficult to keep his eyes from straying too often to that crimson cushioned pew and the black-robed figure whose responses were so audible and clear, and who seemed the very incarnation of piety and innocence. He had heard of Mrs. J. E. Forrest, and he guessed who the stranger was, and when service was over he came down to speak to her. Mrs. Rider, however, was there before him, and was shaking hands with the lady, whom she presented to the rector, and to his wife, and to several others who sat near, and who involuntarily moved in that direction.

And Josephine received them with a modesty of demeanor which won their sympathy, if not their hearts, at once. Not the slightest allusion did they make to her husband, but she spoke of him herself, naturally and easily She had hoped to find him at home when she came and have him present her to his friends, but unexpected business had called him away, she believed. However, he would soon return, as Miss Hastings had telegraphed for him, and then she should not feel so much alone.

How very gentle and gracious she was, answering all questions with great modesty, and without seeming to volunteer any direct remarks, adroitly managing to drop a good many scraps of information with regard to herself and her past life, all of course highly advantageous to herself. Of Everard she said very little, but when she did speak of him it was always as "My husband, Mr. Forrest."

She should certainly expect him on the morrow, she said, and then she should not feel so much like a stranger, possibly an impostor, and she laughed a little musical laugh, and her blue eyes sparkled so brightly and her lips curled so prettily that every heart was won, and the whole bevy of ladies followed her to the carriage telling her they should call and see her very soon, stood watching her as she drove away, and talked together of her and her recreant husband, in whom there must be something wrong, or he would long ago have acknowledged this peerless woman as his wife. And so the talk increased and every conceivable story was set afloat, and poor Everard stood at rather a low ebb in public opinion, when the six o'clock train came in the next day and left him standing upon the platform, bewildered and confounded with the words which greeted him as he left the car, and which gave him the first intimation of what he was to expect. The editor of the Rothsay *Star* was standing there, and hitting Everard on the shoulder exclaimed:

"Hallo, Forrest. A nice trick you've been playing upon us,—married all this time, and not let us know."

"Married! What do you mean?" And Everard turned white to his lips, while his friend replied:

"What do I mean? Why, I mean that your wife is up at Forrest House, and thunder to pay generally."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

EVERARD FACES IT.

When Everard was interrupted in his interview with Rosamond, his first feeling was one of regret, for he had made up his mind to tell her everything. He had held her in his arms for one blissful moment, and pressed his lips to her forehead, and the memory of that would help him to bear the wretchedness of all the after life. But, before he could begin his story, Lawyer Russell came in, and the opportunity was lost, He could, however, write, and he fully meant to do so, and after his arrival at Dighton he began two or three letters, which he tore in pieces, for he found it harder than he had expected to confess that he had a wife to the girl he had kissed so passionately, and who, he felt certain, loved him in return. He had seen it in her eyes, which knew no deception, and in the blushes on her cheek, and his greatest pain came from the knowledge that she, too, must suffer through him. And so he put off the writing day after day, and employed his leisure moments in hunting up the laws of Indiana on divorce, and felt surprised to find how comparatively easy it was for those whom Heaven had joined together to be put asunder by the courts of man. Desertion, failure to support, uncongeniality, were all valid reasons for breaking the bonds of matrimony; and from reading and dwelling so much upon it, he came at last to consider it seriously as something which in his case was excusable. Whatever Rossie might think of it, he would be happier to know the tie was broken, even if the whole world disapproved; and he at last deliberately made up his mind to free himself from the hated marriage, which grew tenfold more hateful to him when there came to his knowledge a fact which threw light at once upon some things he had never been able to understand in Dr. Matthewson.

He was sitting one evening in the room devoted mostly to the use of gentlemen at the hotel where he was stopping, and listening in a careless kind of way to the conversation of two men, one an inmate of the house, and the other a traveller just arrived from western New York. For a time the talk flowed on indifferent topics, and drifted at last to Clarence, where it seemed that both men had once lived, and about which the Dighton man was asking some questions.

"By the way," he said, "whatever became of that Matthewson, he called himself, though his real name when I first knew him was Hastings. You know the Methodist Church got pretty well bitten with him. He was always the tallest kind of a rascal. I knew him well."

Everard was interested now, and while seeming to read the paper he held in his hands, did not lose a word of all which followed next.

"Matthewson? Oh, yes, I know," the Clarence man replied. "You mean the fellow who was so miraculously converted at a camp-meeting, and then took to preaching, though a bigger hypocrite never lived. I dont know where he is now. He dabbled in medicine after he left Clarence, and got "Doctor" hitched to his name, and has been gambling through the country ever since. The last I heard of him, somebody wrote to Clarence asking if he had a right to marry a couple, by which I infer that he has been doing a little ministerial duty by way of diversion."

"I should hardly think a marriage performed by him valid, though I dare say it would hold in court," the Dighton man, who was a lawyer, replied; adding, after a moment, "Matthewson is the name of his aunt, which he took at her death, together with a few thousands she left him. His real name is John Hastings. I knew him when he was a boy, and he was the most vindictive, unprincipled person I ever met, and his father was not much better, though both could be smooth as oil, and ingratiate themselves into most anybody's favor. He had a girl in tow some two or three years ago, I was told; a very handsome filly, but fast as the Old Nick himself, if, indeed, she was not worse than that

Here the conversation was brought to a close, and Everard went to his room, where for a time he sat stunned and powerless to move. Like a flash of lightning it came upon him just who Dr. Matthewson was, and his mind went back to that night when, with a rash boy's impetuosity, he had raised his hand against the mature man who, while smarting under the blow, had sworn to be revenged. And he had kept his word, and Everard could understand now why he had seemed so willing and even anxious that there should be a perfect understanding of the matter so as to make the marriage valid.

"Curse him!" Everard said to himself. "He meant to ruin me. He could not have known what Josey was, but he knew it was not a fitting match for me, and no time or way for me to marry, if it were; but that was his revenge. I remember he asked me if I did not fear the man whom I had punished, and said people like him did not take cowhidings meekly; and he is Rossie's half-brother; but if I can help it, she will never know how he has injured me, the rascal. I'll have a divorce now, at all hazards, even though it may do me no good, so far as Rossie is concerned. I'll see that lawyer to-morrow and tell him the whole story."

But before the morrow came, Everard received Mrs. Markham's telegram, which startled him so much that he forgot everything in his haste to return home and see if aught had befallen Rosamond. It had something to do with her he was sure, but no thought that it had to do with Josephine entered his mind, until he stepped from the car and heard that she was at the Forrest House. For an instant his brain reeled, and he felt and acted like a drunken man, as he went to claim his traveling-bag. Then, without a word to any one, he walked rapidly away in the darkness, with a face as white as the few snowflakes which were just beginning to fall, and a feeling like death in his heart as he thought of Rossie left alone to confront Joe Fleming as his wife. And yet it did not seem very strange to him that Josephine was there. It was rather as if he had expected it, just as the murderer expects the day when his sin will find him out. Everard's sin had found him out, and as he sped along the highway, half running in his haste to know the worst, he was almost glad that the thing he had dreaded so long had come at last, and to himself he said:

"I'll face it like a man, whatever the result may be."

From the windows of Rossie's room a faint light was shining, but it told him nothing of the sick girl lying there, so nervous and excited that bright fever spots burned on her cheeks, and her hands and feet were like lumps of ice as she waited and listened for him, hearing him the moment he struck the gravel-walk beneath her window, for he purposely turned aside from the front piazza, choosing to enter the house in the rear, lest he should first encounter the woman, who, like Rossie, was waiting and watching for him, and feeling herself grow hot and cold alternately as she wondered what he would say. Like Rossie, she was sure he would come on that train, and had made herself as attractive as possible in her black cashmere and jet, with the white shawl around her shoulders, and her golden hair falling on her neck in heavy masses of curls. And then, with a French novel in her hand, she sat down to wait for the first sound of the carriage which was to bring him, for she did not dream of his walking that cold, wet night, and was not on the alert to see the tall figure which came so swiftly through the darkness, skulking like a thief behind the shrubbery till it reached the rear door, where it entered, and stood face to face with old Aunt Axie, who in her surprise almost dropped the bowl of gruel she had been preparing for Rosamond. She did spill it, she set it down so quickly, and putting both her hands on Everard's shoulders she exclaimed:

"Oh, Mas'r Everard, praise de Lord you am come at last! I couldn't b'ar it much longer, with Miss Rossie sick up sta'rs, and that woman below swashin' round wid her long-tailed gowns, an' her yaller ha'r hangin' down her back, and sayin' she is your wife. She isn't your wife, Mas'r Everard,—she isn't?" and Axie looked earnestly at the young man, who would have given more than half his life to have been able to say, "No, she is not."

But he could not do that, and his voice shook as he replied:

"Yes, Aunt Axie, she is my wife."

Axie did not cry out or say a word at first, but her black face quivered and her eyes filled with tears, as she took a rapid mental survey of the case as it stood now. Everard's wife must of course be upheld for the credit of the family, and, though the old negress knew there was something wrong, it was not for her to inquire, or to let others do so either; and when at last she spoke, she said:

"If she's your wife, then I shall stan' by her."

He did not thank her or seem to care whether she stood by his wife or not, for his next question was:

"You said Rosamond was sick. What is the matter?"

"Sore throat and bad cold fust, and then your wife comed an' took us by surprise, an' Miss Rossie fainted cl'ar away, and has been as white, an' still, an' slimpsy as a rag ever since."

Something like a groan escaped from Everard's lips, as he said:

"Tell Miss Rossie I am here, and ask if I can see her,—at once, before I meet anybody else."

"Yes, I'll tell her," Axie said, as she hurried to the room, where, to her great surprise, she found her young mistress in her pink dressing-gown and shawl, sitting in her easy-chair, with her head resting upon pillows scarcely whiter than her face, save where the red spots of fever burned so brightly.

In spite of Mrs. Markham's remonstrance Rossie had insisted upon getting up and being partly dressed.

"I must see Everard," she said. "You can't understand, and I can't explain, but he will come to me, and I must see him alone."

"Yes. Tell him to come up; I am ready for him," she said to Aunt Axie.

And Everard advanced, with a sinking heart, and knocked at Rossie's door just as a black-robed figure, with a white wool shawl wrapped around it, started to come up the stairs.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

EVERARD AND ROSSIE.

The voice which said "Come in" did not sound like Rossie's at all, nor did the little girl sitting in the chair look much like the Rossie he had last seen, flushed with health and happiness, and the light of a great joy shining in the eyes which now turned so eagerly toward him as he came in. On the stairs outside there was the rustling of skirts and he heard it, and involuntarily slid the bolt of the door, and then swiftly crossed to where Rossie's face was upturned to his with a smile of welcome, and Rossie's hands were both outstretched to him as she said:

"Oh, Mr. Everard, I am glad you have come; we have wanted you so much.

He had thought she would meet him with coldness and scorn for his weakness and duplicity, and he was prepared for that, but not for this; and forgetting himself utterly for the moment, he took the offered hands and held them tightly in his own, until she released them from him and motioned him to a seat opposite her, where he could look into her face, which, now that he saw it more closely, had on it such a grieved, disappointed expression that he cried out:

"Kill me, Rossie, if you will! but don't look at me that way, for I cannot bear it. I know what I've done and what I am, better than you do."

Here he paused, and Rossie said:

"I am sorry, Everard, that you did not tell me long ago, when it first happened. Four years and more, she says. I've been thinking it over, and it must have been that time you came home when your mother died and you were so sick afterward. You were married then."

How quietly and naturally she spoke the words "married then," as if it was nothing to her that he was married then or now, but the hot blood flamed up for a moment in her face, and then left it whiter than before, as Everard replied:

"Yes, if that can be called a marriage which was a mere farce, and has brought nothing but bitter humiliation to me, and been the cause of my ruin. I wish that day had been blotted from my existence."

"Hush, Everard," Rossie said. "You must not talk that way, and your wife here in the house waiting for you. I have not seen her yet, but they tell me she is very beautiful."

"Yes, with that cursed beauty which lures men, or rather fools, to their destruction; and I was a fool!" Everard answered, bitterly—"an idiot, who thought myself in love. Don't call her my wife, Rossie. She has never been that; never will be. But I did not come here to abuse her. I came to tell you the whole truth at last, as I ought to have told it years ago, when my mother was on her death-bed. I tried to tell her, but I could not. I made a beginning by showing her Josephine's picture, which she did not like. The face was pretty, she said, but not the face of a true, refined woman, but rather of one who wore dollar jewellery," and here Everard laughed sarcastically as he went on; "then I showed the picture to Bee, who said she looked as if she might wear cotton lace. But you, Rossie, said the hardest thing of all, and decided me finally not to tell, for I had almost made up my mind to make you my confidante."

"I, Everard? I decide you? You must be mistaken. When was it, Everard?" Rossie exclaimed, her eyes growing very large and bright in her excitement.

"Do you remember I once showed you a picture of a young girl?" Everard said. "You were watering flowers in the garden; and you said she was very beautiful, but suggested that the jewellery, of which there was a superfluity on her neck and arms, might be a sham, and said she looked like a sham, too. How could I tell you after that, that she was my wife? I couldn't, and I kept it to myself; and mother died, and I went crazy, and you cut off your hair and sold it to pay what you believed to be a gambling debt, and you wrote to Joe Fleming, and I did not open my lips to undeceive you.

"I will have my say out," he continued, fiercely, as Rossie put up her hands to stop him; "I deserve a good cudgelling, and I'll give it to myself, for no one knows as well as I do just what a sneaking coward I have been all these years, when you have been believing in me, and keeping me from going to the ———. No, I won't swear; at least before you, who have been my good angel ever since you knew enough to chide me for my faults. Oh, Rossie! what would I give to be put back to those old days when I was comparatively innocent, and you, in your cape sunbonnet and long-sleeved aprons, were the dearest, sweetest little girl in all the world, just as you are now. I will say it, though I am killing you, I know, and I am almost wicked enough not to care, for I would rather there were no Rossie in this world than to know she lived to hate and despise me."

"No, Everard, never that, never!" and Rossie again stretched toward him her pale little hands, which he seized and held while he told her rapidly the whole story of his marriage, beginning at the time he first saw Josey Fleming and went to board with her mother.

One item, however, he withheld. He did not tell her that it was her half-brother who had married him, nor did he give the name of the clergyman. He would spare her all pain in that direction, if possible, and let her think as well as she could of the brother she could scarcely remember, and who, she believed, must be dead, or he would ere this have manifested some interest in her.

Of Josephine he spoke very plainly, and though he did not exaggerate her faults, he showed conclusively, in what he said, that his love for her had long since died out, and he went on from one fact to another so rapidly, that Rossie felt stunned and bewildered, and begged him to stop. But he would not. She must hear him through, he said, and at the close of his story she looked so white and tired that he bent over her in alarm, chafing her cold hands, and asking what he could do for her.

"Nothing but to leave me now," she said. "I have heard so much and borne so much that none of it seems real. There's a buzzing in my head, and I believe I'm going to faint again, or die. How could you do all this, and I trusted you so?—and, oh, Everard, where are you? It grows so dark and black, and I'm so sick and faint," and with a sobbing, hysterical cry, Rossie involuntarily let her tired, aching head fall upon the arm which held it so gladly, and which fain would have kept it there for ever.

Rossie did not faint quite away, as she had done when the news of Everard's marriage reached her, but she lay still and helpless in Everard's arms until she felt his hot kisses upon her forehead, and that roused her at once. He had no right to kiss her, she no right to suffer it, and she drew herself away from him to the safe shelter of her pillows, as she said, with her old childish manner:

"Everard, you must not kiss me like that. It is too late. Such things are over between us now."

She seemed to accept the fact that he loved her, and though the love was hopeless, and, turn which way she would, there was no brightness in the future, the knowledge of what might have been was in one sense very sweet to her, and the face which Everard took between his hands and looked earnestly into, while his lips quivered and his eyes were full of tears, seemed to him like the face of an angel.

"Heaven pity me, Rossie," he said. "Heaven pity us both for this which lies between us." There was a knock outside the door, and a voice Rossie had never heard before, said:

"Miss Hastings, if my husband is with you, tell him his wife will be glad to see him when he can tear himself away. I have waited an hour, and sure'y I may claim my own now."

There was an unmistakable coarseness of meaning in the words which brought the hot blood to Rossie's cheeks, but Everard was pale as death, as, with a muttered execration, he stepped back from Rossie, who said:

"Yes, go, Everard. She is right. Her claim is first. Say I am sorry I kept you. Go, and when I have thought it all out, I'll send for you, but don't come till I do."

She motioned him to leave her, and with the look of one going to the rack, he obeyed, and unbolting the door, went out, shutting it quickly behind him, and thus giving the woman outside no chance for more than a glance at the white-faced little girl, of whose personal appearance no impression could be formed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MR. AND MRS. J. E. FORREST.

It had been Josephine's intention to try and make peace with her husband, if possible, in the hope of winning him back to at least an outward semblance of harmony. And to do this she relied much upon her beauty, which she knew had not diminished in the least since those summer days in Holburton, when he had likened her to every beautiful thing in the universe. She knew she was more attractive now than then, for she had studied to acquire an air of refinement and high breeding which greatly enhanced her charms, and when she saw herself in the long mirror, with her toilet complete, and the made-up expression of sweetness and graciousness on her face, she felt almost sure he could not withstand her.

She had heard from Lois that Everard was in the house, and as the moments went by and he did not come, the sweetness left her face, and there was a glitter in her blue eyes, as she walked impatiently up and down her chamber, listening for his footsteps.

At last, as she grew more and more impatient, she went down to the dining-room, thinking to find him there; but he was still with Axie in the kitchen, and so she waited until she heard his step as he went rapidly up the stairs.

Swiftly and noiselessly she glided into the hall and followed, but was only in time to see the shutting of the door of Rossie's room and hear the sliding of the bolt, while her quick ear caught the sound of Rossie's voice as she welcomed Everard. For a moment Josephine stood shaking with rage, and feeling an inclination to kick at the closed door, and demand an entrance. But she hardly dared do that, and so she waited, and strained her ear to catch the conversation carried on so rapidly, but in so low a tone, and so far from her, that she could not hear it all, or even half. But she knew Everard was telling the story of the marriage, and as he grew more earnest, his voice naturally rose higher, until she could hear what he said, but not Rossie's replies. Involuntarily clenching her fists, and biting her lips until the blood came through in one place, she listened still more intently and knew there was no hope for her, and felt sure that the only feeling she could now inspire in her husband's heart was one of hatred and disgust.

At last, when she could endure the suspense no longer, she knocked upon the door and claimed "her own" and got it, for her husband, whom she had not seen for more than two years, stood face to face with her, a tall, well-developed man, with a will and a purpose in his brown eyes, and a firm-set expression about his mouth, which made him a very different person from the boy lover whom she had swayed at her pleasure.

Everard was a thorough gentleman, and it was not in his nature to be otherwise than courteous to any woman, and he bowed to Josephine with as much politeness and deference as if it had been Bee Belknap standing there so dignified and self-possessed, and with an air of assurance and worldly wisdom such as he had never seen in Josephine Fleming. For a moment he looked at her in surprise, but there was no sign of welcome in his face, no token of admiration for the visible improvement in her. He had an artist's eye, and noticed that her dress was black, and that it became her admirably, and that the delicate white shawl was so knotted and arranged as to heighten the effect of the picture; but he knew the woman so well that nothing she could do or wear could move him now. When she saw that she must speak first, she laughed a little, spiteful laugh, and said:

"Have you nothing to say to me after two years' separation, or have you exhausted yourself with her?" nodding towards Rossie's door.

That roused him, and he answered her:

"Yes, much to say, and some things to explain and apologize for, but not here. I will go with you to your room, they tell me you are occupying my old quarters."

He tried to speak naturally, and Josephine's heart beat faster as she thought that possibly he might be won to an outward semblance of friendship after all, and it would be better for her every way. So, when the privacy of her chamber was reached, and there was no danger of interruption, she affected the loving wife, and laying her hands on Everard's arm said, coaxingly and prettily:

"Don't be so cold and hard, Everard, as if you were sorry I came. I had nowhere else to go, and I'm no more to blame for being your wife than you are for being my husband, and I certainly have just cause to complain of you for having kept me so long in ignorance of your father's death. Why did you do it? But I need not ask why," she continued, as she saw the frown on his face, and guessed he was not to be coaxed; "the reason is in the apartment you have just quitted."

Josephine got no further, for Everard interrupted her, and sternly bade her stop.

"So long as you censure me for having kept my father's death a secret from you I am bound to listen, for I deserve it; but when you assail Rosamond Hastings you have gone too far. I do not wish to quarrel with you, Josey, but we may as well understand each other first as last. You had a right to come here, thinking it was still my home, and I am justly punished for my deceit, for which no one can hate me as I hate myself. If I had been candid and frank from the first, it would have saved me a good deal of trouble and self-abasement. You heard of my father's death——"

"Yes, but no thanks are due to you for the information. Mr. Evarts, whom I met in Dresden, told me of it. At first I did not believe him, for I had credited you with being a man of honor, but he convinced me of the fact, and in my anger I started home at once, and came here to find that girl the mistress of the house, and, they tell me, your father's heir. Is that true?"

"I've nothing, but what I earn," he said, "but I think I have proved conclusively that I can support you, whatever may come to me, and I expect to do so still, but it must be apart from myself. I wish that distinctly understood, as it will save further discussion. You could not be happy with me; I should be miserable with you after knowing what I do, and seeing what I have seen."

Here she turned fiercely upon him, and with flashing eyes and dilated nostrils demanded what he meant.

"I will tell you when I reach it," he replied; "but, first, let me go over the ground from the beginning ——"

"No need of that," she replied, angrily. "You went over the ground with her,—that girl whom I hate with deadly hatred. I heard you. I was outside the door."

"Listening!" Everard said, contemptuously. "A worthy employment, to which no lady would stoop."

"Who said I was a lady?" she retorted, stung by his manner and the tone of his voice, and forgetting herself entirely in her wrath. "Don't you suppose I know that it was because I was not a lady according to your creed that your father objected to me, and that you have sickened of me. A poor, unknown butcher's daughter is not a fit match for you; and I was just that. You thought you married the daughter of Roxie Fleming, who kept a boarding-house, and so you did, and something more. You married the daughter of the man who used to deliver meat at your grandfather's door in Boston, and of the woman who for years cooked in your mother's family. I knew this when you first came to us, and laughed in my sleeve, for I know how proud you are of family blood and birth, and I can boast of blood, but it is the blood of beasts in which my father dealt, not the blue veined kind which shows itself in hypocrisy and deliberate deception of years. I told your father when I met him at Commencement, that mother was present at his wedding, and she was. She made the jellies and ices, and stood with the other servants to see the ceremony. Wouldn't your lady mother turn over in her coffin if she could know just whom her boy married?"

"Was she a woman, or a demon?" Everard wondered, as he replied:

"If possible, I would rather not bring my mother into the conversation, but since you will have it so, I must tell you that she did know who you were."

"How! did you tell your mother of the marriage, and have you kept that from me, too?" Joseph ne asked, and he replied:

"I did not tell her of the marriage, although I tried to, and I made a beginning by showing her your picture, and telling her your name and that of your mother, whom she at once identified as the Roxie who had lived in her father's family so long."

"And of course my fine lady objected to such stock," Josephine said, with a sneer in her voice.

"Josephine," and Everard spoke more sternly than he had ever spoken to her in his life, "say what you like to me, but don't mention my mother in that tone or spirit again. She did not despise you for your birth. No true woman would do that. She said that innate refinement or delicacy of feeling would always assert itself, and raise one above the lowest and humblest of positions. Almost her last words to me were of you, in whom she knew I was interested, for I had confessed as much.

"If she is so good, and womanly, and true, her birth is of no consequence—none whatever," she said. So you see she laid less stress upon it than do you, who know better than she did whether you are good, and womanly and true."

Here Josephine began to cry, but Everard did not heed her tears, and went on:

"There is in this country no degradation in honest labor; it is the character, the actions, which tell; and were you what I believed you to be when in my madness I consented to that foolish farce, I would not care though your origin were the lowest which can be conceived."

Here Josephine stopped crying, and demanded sharply:

"What am I, pray? What do you know of me?—you, who have scarcely seen me half a dozen times since I became your wife."

"I know more than you suppose—have seen more than you guess," he replied; "but let me begin with the morning I left you in Holburton, four years ago last June, and come down to the present time."

When he hinted that he knew more of her life than she supposed, there instantly flashed into Josephine's mind the memory of all the love affairs she had been concerned in, and the improprieties of which she had been guilty, and she wondered if it were possible that Everard could know of them, too. But it was not, and, assuming a calmness she was far from feeling, she said:

"Go on, I am all attention."

Very rapidly, Everard went over with the events of his life as connected with her up to the time of his father's death and his own disinheritance, and here he paused a moment, while Josephine said:

"And so it was through me you lost your money. I am very sorry, and I must say I think it mean in that girl to keep it, knowing as she does how it came to her."

"You misjudge her," Everard said, quickly. "You know nothing of her, or how she rebelled against it and tried to give it back to me. But she cannot do it while she is under age, and I would not take it if she could. I made her believe it at last, and then counselled with Miss Belknap as to my future course ——"

"Miss Belknap, indeed!" Josephine exclaimed, indignantly. "Don't talk to me of Miss Belknap, the tricky, deceitful thing, to come into our house, knowing all the time who I was, and yet pretending such entire ignorance of everything. How I hate her, and you, too, for sending her there as a spy upon my actions."

"You are mistaken," Everard said. "Bee was no tale bearer, and no spy upon your actions. Neither was she sent to you, for I did not know she was there till she wrote me to that effect. She had the best of motives in going to your mother's house. She wished to see you for herself, and—pardon me, Josey, if I speak very plainly—she wished to find all the good there was in you, so as to know better how to befriend you, should you need it."

"Which, thank Heaven, I don't, so she had her trouble for her pains," was Josephine's rejoinder, of which Everard took no notice, but simply went on:

"Beatrice has been your best friend from the moment she first heard of you, and after father's death she advised me to go straight to you and tell you the whole truth, and offer you a home such as I could make for you myself—in short, offer you poverty and protection as my acknowledged wife."

"Strange you did not follow her advice with your high notions of morality," Josephine said, with a sneer; and he replied:

"I started to do it in good faith, and went as far as Albany without a thought that I should not do it, but there I began to waver, for I saw you, myself unseen and my presence unsuspected, so that you acted and spoke your feelings without restraint."

"Perhaps you can recall a concert or opera which you attended with Dr. Matthewson as your escort, and perhaps, though that is not so likely, you may remember the man who seemed to be asleep in the seat behind the one you took when you entered the car, talking and laughing so loudly that you drew to yourself the attention of all the passengers, and especially the young man, who listened with feelings which can be better imagined than described, while his wife made light of him, and allowed attentions and liberties such as no pure-minded woman would for a moment have suffered from any man, and much less from one of Dr. Matthewson's character. I hardly know what restrained me from knocking him down and publicly denouncing you, but shame and disgust kept me silent, while words and glances which made my blood boil passed between you two until you were tired out and laid your head on his arm as readily as you would have rested it on mine had I sat in his place. And there I left you asleep, and I have never looked upon your face since until to-night, when I found you at Miss Hastings' door. After that scene in the car I could not think of offering to share my poverty with you. We were better apart, and I made a vow that never for an hour would I live with you as my wife. The thing is impossible; but because I dreaded the notoriety of an open rupture, and the talk and scandal sure to follow an admission of the marriage, I kept quiet, trusting to chance to work it out for me as it has done at last. And now that the worst has come, I am ready to abide by it and am willing to bear the blame myself, if that will help you any. The people in Rothsay will undoubtedly believe you the injured party, and I shall let them do so. I shall say nothing to your detriment except that it is impossible for us to live together. I shall support you just as I have done, but I greatly prefer that it should be in Holburton, rather than in Rothsay. It is the only favor I ask, that you do not remain here."

"And one I shall not grant," was Josephine's quick reply. "I like Rothsay, so far as I have seen it, and here I shall stay. Do you think that I will go back to Holburton, and bear all the malicious gossip of that gossipy hole? Never! I'll die first! You accuse me of being fond of Dr. Matthewson, and so I am, and I like him far better than ever I liked you, for he is a gentleman, while you are a knave and a hypocrite, and that girl across the hall is as bad as you are:—I hate her,—I hate you both!"

She was standing close to him new, her face livid with rage, while the blue of her eyes seemed to have faded into a dull white, as she gave vent to her real feelings. But Everard did not answer her, and as the dinner-bell just then rang for the third time, she added, sneeringly, "If you are through with your abuse, I'll end the interview by asking you to take me down to dinner. No? You do not wish for any dinner? Very well, I can go alone, so I wish you good-evening, advising you not to fast too long. It is not good for you. Possibly you may find some crackers and tea in Miss Hastings' room, with which to refresh the inner man."

And sweeping him a mocking courtesy she started to leave the room, but at the door she met her sister, and stopped a moment while she said:

"Ah Agnes, here is your brother, who, I hope, will be better pleased to see you than he was to see me. If I remember rightly you were always his favorite. *Au revoir*," and kissing the tips of her fingers to Everard she left the room, and he heard her warbling snatches or some old love song as she ran lightly down the stairs to the dining room, where dinner had waited nearly an hour, and where Aunt Axie stood with her face blacker than its wont, giving off little angry snorts as she removed one after another the covers of the dishes, and pronounced the contents spoiled.

"What's Mas'r Everard? Isn't he comin'?" Aunt Axie asked, as Josephine showed signs of commencing her dinner alone, Mrs. Markham, who ate by rule and on time, having had tea and cold chicken, and gone.

"Mr. Forrest has lost his appetite and is not coming," Josephine replied, with the utmost indifference, and as Agnes just then appeared, the sisters began their dinner alone.

But few words had passed between Agnes and Everard. She had taken his hand in hers and held it there while she looked searchingly into his face and said:

"I didn't want to come, but she would have it so, and I thought you knew and had sent for her. Maybe I can persuade her to go back."

"No, Aggie, let her do as she likes,—I deserve it all. But don't feel badly, Aggie. I am glad to see you, at any rate, and I feel better because you are here; and now go to dinner, which has waited so long."

Agnes was not deceived in the least, and her heart was very heavy as she went down to the dining-room and took her seat by her sister, who affected to be so gay and happy, and who tried to soften old Axie by praising everything immoderately.

But Axie was not deceived, either. She knew it was not all well between the young couple, and as soon as she had sent in the dessert, she started up stairs in quest of her boy, finding him in the chamber where his mother had died, and kneeling by the bed in such an abandonment of grief that, without waiting to consider whether she was wanted or not, she went softly to his side, and laying her hard old hands pityingly on his bowed head, spoke to him lovingly and soothingly, just as she used to speak to him when he was a little boy, and sat in her broad lap to be comforted.

"That, that, honey; what is it that has happened you? Suffin dreffle, or you wouldn't be kneelin' here in de cold an' dark, wid only yer mother's sperrit for company. What is it, chile? Can't you tell old Axie? Is it her that's a vexin' you so? Oh, Mas'r Everard, how could you do it? Tell old Axie, won't you?"

And he did tell her how the marriage occurred, and when, and that it was this which had caused the trouble between him and his father. He said nothing against Josephine, except that he had lived to see and regret his mistake, and that it was impossible for him to live with her as his wife. And Axie took his side at once, and replied:—

"In course you can't, honey, I seen that the fust thing. She hain't like you, nor Miss Rossie. She's pretty, with them eyes and long winkers, an' she's kind of tetterin' an' soft; but can't cheat dis chile. 'Tain't the real stuff like your mother was. Sposin' I go and paint my face all over with whitenin', I ain't white for all dat. Thar's nobody but ole black nigger under de whitewash, for bless your soul, de thick lips and de wool will show, an' it's just de same with no count white folks. But don't you worry, I'll stan' by you. Course you can't live with her. I'll make you a fire an' fetch you some supper, an' you'll feel better in de mornin',—see if you don't."

But Everard asked to be left alone, that he might think it out and decide what to do. He could not go to bed, and so he sat the entire night before the fire in the room where his mother died, and where his father had denounced him so angrily, and where Rosamond had come to him and asked to be his wife. How vividly that last scene came up before him, and he could almost see the little girl standing there again, just as she stood that day, which seemed to him years and years ago. And but for that fatal misstep that little girl, grown up to sweet womanhood now, might have been his. Turn which way he would, there was no help, no hope; and the future loomed up before him, dark and cheerless, with always this burden upon him, this bar to the happiness which might have been his had he only waited for it. Surely if his sin was great, his punishment was greater, and when at the last the gray morning looked in at the windows of his room, it found him white, and haggard, and worn, with no definite plan as to his course, except the firm resolve that whatever his life might be, it would be passed apart from Josephine.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ROSAMOND'S DECISION.

Rosamond had sent word to Everard that she would see him after breakfast, and he went to her at once, finding her sitting up just as she was the previous night, but much paler, and more worn-looking, as if she had not slept for months. But the smile with which she greeted him was as sweet and cordial as ever, and in the eyes which she fixed so steadily upon him he saw neither hatred nor disgust, but an expression of unutterable sorrow and pity for him, and for herself, too, as well. Rossie was not one to conceal her feelings. She was too much a child, too frank and ingenuous for that, and there was a great and bitter pain in her heart, which she could not hide. Everard had never said in words that he loved her, but she had accepted it as a fact, and when her dream was so rudely dispelled she could no more conceal her disappointment than she could hide the ravages of sickness so visible upon her face.

"I've been thinking it all over," she began, as he sat down beside her, "and though my opinion may not be worth much, I hope you will consider it, at least, and give it some thought before deciding not to adopt it."

He guessed what was coming, and nerved himself to keep quiet while she went on:

'Everard, she is your wife. You cannot undo that, except in one way, and that you must not take, for it is wicked and wrong. You loved her once. You say you were quite as much to blame for the marriage as she, and you know you have been wrong in keeping it a secret so long. She has just cause for complaint, and I want you to try to love her again. You must support her, and it will be so much better, and save so much talk and gossip if you live in the same house with her—in this house, your rightful home."

"Never, Rossie!" he exclaimed, vehemently, "never can I make her really my wife, feeling as I do. It would be a sin, and a mockery, and I shall not do it. You say I loved her once; perhaps I did, though it seems to me now like a child's fancy for some forbidden dainty, which, if obtained, cloys on the stomach and sickens one ever after. No, Rossie, you talk in vain when you ask me to live with Josephine as my wife, or even live with her at all. The same roof cannot shelter us both. Support her I shall, but live with her, never! and I am prepared for all the people will say against me. If I have your respect and sympathy, I can defy the world, though the future looks very dreary to me."

His voice trembled as he spoke, and he leaned back in his chair as if he, too, were faint and sick, while Rossie continued:

"Then, if you will not live with her under any circumstances, this is my next best plan. Forrest House is her natural home, and she must stay there, whatever you may do."

"Here, Rossie! live with you! Are you crazy?" Everard exclaimed, and Rosamond replied:

"I am going away. I have thought it all over, and talked with Mrs. Markham. She has a friend in St. Louis who is wanting a governess for her three children, and she is going to write to day and propose me, and if the lady consents, I—I am going away."

Rossie finished the sentence with a long-drawn breath, which sounded like a sob, for this going away from all she loved best was as hard for her as for Everard, who felt suddenly as if every ray of sunlight had been stricken from his life. With Rossie gone the world would be dark indeed, and for a few moments he used all his powers of eloquence to dissuade her from the plan, but she was quite resolved, and he understood it at last, and answered her:

"Perhaps you are right; but Heaven pity me when you are gone!"

For a moment Rosamond was silent, and then she said, in her usual frank way:

"Yes, Everard. I understand, or I think I do, and it would be foolish in me to pretend not to know—to believe—I mean," and the bright color began to mount to Rossie's cheeks as she went on: "I mean, that I believe that you do care for me some—that if I were dead you would remember me longer than anyone else. I guess you like me a little, don't you, Everard?"

It was the child, Rossie—the little girl of his boyhood—who spoke with all her old simple-heartedness of manner, but the face which looked up at the young man was not the face of a child, for there was written on it all a woman's first tenderness and love, and the dark eyes were full of tears, and the parted lips quivered even after she ceased to speak, and sat looking at him as fearlessly and as little abashed as she had looked at him when she asked to be his wife. And how could he answer