

"The World, The Flesh and The Devil."

By MAY AUSTIN.

CHAPTER V.

"I hope you are happy here."

One of Agnes's favourite walks was past the smithy. She thought the blacksmith typical of what a blacksmith should be, since Longfellow had given to her mind that living portrait of "The Village Blacksmith."

Martin Maynard was a man of somewhat over thirty, with a strongly built, tall, broad frame. His hair was thick and straight and black; eyes blue, light blue; and the brows above them were as black as his hair, and met above his high, straight nose. His skin had that weather-beaten appearance which such dark men often have, and which seems so much to add to their manliness.

Agnes had always been interested in forges since the days of her childhood, when her greatest privilege was the pleasure of accompanying her pony to the smithy to watch the process of his shoeing. She had first been interested in this man on account of his occupation. This turned to a deeper interest when she discovered the affection existing between himself and Alminere.

Alminere never spoke of him, but Agnes had met them together on several occasions, and there was no mistaking the tenderness of his whole manner, or the light in Alminere's face when he was near.

It was a lovely September evening; the sun had set, leaving the sky unbroken in its blue; there was a slight north wind, enough to give eagerness to the air, exhilaration to Agnes Power's spirit.

She came down stairs with a scarlet shawl over her arm. Maxwell walked out of the library and took possession of the shawl and, metaphorically, of her.

"You are too fond of walking alone."

However fond she was of walking alone, she had no objection to such a charming companion.

It was dark when they retraced their steps over the bridge. The flame-lighted face of the post office clock shone like a descended moon, and showed the big dark hands pointing to half past seven.

Turning the corner, they almost ran against a couple apparently engrossed with each other. "That Lajeunesse girl and her lover," said Maxwell, when they had passed.

Agnes instinctively felt there was something of contempt in his tone.

"She is a beautiful girl."

"As far as beauty goes, yes! but there is a good deal of the devil in it; for my own part, I fancy all women should be fair."

The lamplight fell just then on Agnes's head and reached that band of dead white hair. He noticed then the sad droop about her eyes and the pain-set mouth, and presently he spoke.

"I hope you are happy here."

"I am not as unhappy as I might be; but no woman could be content in a dependent position. I was thinking just now of a sad little story of Besant's 'Katherine Regina.' I sat up to read it last night, and it has impressed me much, it is so true. There are so many girls fitted to meet the world fairly in the position birth had placed them, and unfitted to grace it when fallen into poverty. Besant suggests a remedy in 'the taxation of bachelors!' But a better preventative is for every girl to be brought up in the thorough knowledge of one branch of art or study."

Maxwell threw back his head with his own peculiar gesture, "Poverty isn't half the trial these sensational people try to make it out."

"Isn't it?" said Agnes quietly.

She felt how utterly useless would be the task of trying to make this happy-minded and moneyed young man comprehend the cruel cramp of poverty. But there was something wonderfully winning about this careless-hearted man. He had the way about him that most women love. There was always a tender infection in his voice, a smile in his eyes when he turned to them. Agnes did not wonder at his mother's worship. But she did wonder that such a woman should have a child with so much light in his nature. Nature was all flaws to Mrs. Melville's far-seeing eyes; kindness but the cover to some selfish cause; disinterested motive, senseless gush; and the man who touched anything stronger than Adam's primeval drink, a creature to be abhorred. Mercy was for the good. But how then could it be called mercy? For mercy means the conduct of one towards another who merits something else!

When Agnes and Maxwell reached the house, Mrs. Melville was in bed, groaning, in one of her "attacks."

Agnes was for ever dreading them; but now, when they came, she knew exactly what was to be done.

It was past midnight before the moans subsided, and Mrs. Melville feebly announced she was better. Agnes was pale and tired. The strain of ministering to a person whose moans increased at every movement you made to alleviate that suffering, the constant running up and down stairs with poultices, the stifling atmosphere, had all told on her. A feeling of intense gratitude towards Maxwell rose within her, when he drew her aside and whispered she was to go to rest.

"I will look after mother, and she will be all right in the morning."

Tired out in body and spirit, Agnes fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

CHAPTER VI.

"But I kept myself good."

It had been a dull day.

Agnes Power sped down to the bridge, as was her wont after tea; only to-night she did not pause to watch the water, she went at once up the hill and then stopped to look back at the town lying in the valley beneath.

Homesickness was heavy on her heart to-night, it seemed to her as though the longing to see her dear ones must overcome her.

As she stood there, a moan from within the thicket to her right approached her ear. Stepping through the trees and shrubs in its direction, she was amazed to come upon Alminere. She was sitting on a fallen tree, her head bent backward, her eyes fixed on the sky, whose light lay in her features and revealed suffering, which filled Agnes's soul with pity and alarm.

"Alminere!" she cried, and was by the girl's side in an instant. "What is the matter, Alminere?"

She could hardly believe the evidence of her senses. What suffering was this that looked out from Alminere's eyes.

A determination dawned in the girl's pain-stricken face. "You are good; I will tell you."

Agnes passed one arm round the girl and felt she was trembling.

"Perhaps, dear, you had better not talk; you will tell me some other time if you wish to."

"No. Now! now! It will be such a relief. I have kept it so long—so long." Oh! the dull ache in each word. "Once I was wicked; it was long ago. I was young then. I—I did not realize the sin of it—and I loved him."

"Hush, dear, hush."

Agnes spoke very gently; she knew all now. This was a fallen sister whose heart beat hard against her own; but she did not shrink from her; her clasp tightened more closely around the trembling form. "I know now, dear."

"No, you don't know; you don't know how, when it was too late, I knew the wickedness and turned from it. How I went all day with the weight of sin upon me and spent the night in tears; how I shrank from every woman I met, feeling unworthy even to touch her hand, knowing the gulf that lay between us; how the bright sun was a reproach to me and the night a despair. But I kept myself good, and sometimes it seemed as if it might somehow come right in the end."

Agnes Power was crying now, silently.

"I thought all this was my punishment, this! Oh! God."

The girl flung up her arms in an action of despair, then she went on again in the same dull, even tone:

"Martin Maynard loves me." There was a pulsing of the full red lips, a sudden soft gleam in the wild, dark eyes, then it went out and misery took its place.

"He—asked—me—to—be—his—wife;—me!" The words came in short, quick gasps. "He asked me yesterday, and I am to answer him this afternoon. I think the fallen angels must feel so before God. I love him, honour him, and yet I must never be near him again."

To a girl like Agnes Power, who had never come in contact with shame and shame's suffering this ordeal was terrible; but she felt no revulsion against the girl, only a divine pity. What could she say to comfort her? There was nothing to say. What good to whisper of the forgiven Magdalen—she spent her after days in penitence and prayer. And this woman wanted something more—less than the forgiveness of God—the *mercy of man!*

Alminere broke down here and sobbed wildly, and Agnes, feeling it might do her good, let her cry as she held her closely and caressed with tender touch the heavy, black, waving hair.

"Does he think of all he robbed me of?" she cried.

"The hope of happiness—the love of a pure man."

"Poor thing; poor thing!"

"Don't pity me; what good does it do? The world was such a beautiful place. I was so happy, so glad of living, and now—now—" She broke off and buried her face in her long-fingered, nervous hands.

When she went on her excitement was gone, her words came again in dull, level tones: "Are they conscious of their blessings, those women who have done no wrong—never been tempted to do wrong? Do they thank God every day that he has kept them good? What is it like to feel happy—to feel no weight pressing, turning on one's mind. I used to think I would be happy if I could only forget—forget for a little while; but I want more than that now, I want to be worthy of Martin's love, to be his wife, the mother of his children."

The voice fell into a whisper here at that dim picture of pure motherhood; a soft light loomed in her eyes, but it went out in a flash and mad misery leapt in its stead.

"There is nothing before me," she cried. "Oh! God, there is nothing before me."

Agnes Power was as pale as the miserable woman in her arms. She possessed one of those acutely sympathetic natures which realize in the hearing the feeling of the narrator.

A woman is always sympathetic, unless she be something not worthy of the name of woman. With men it is a rare quality. The mediocre man does not possess it in even the smallest degree.

To be sympathetic a man must either possess feminine weakness or God-like greatness.

As Agnes Power listened to the girl's miserable story

her whole soul was stirred. What would she say to comfort her? What could she say to comfort her?

"Listen to me," she cried, tremulously. "Listen to me, you must tell Martin everything—everything, and perhaps he will forgive you!"

"Tell him! How could I tell him? He loves me—I love him!"

"By that love he has a right to know."

"He will despise me," moaned Alminere.

"No; he will not despise you. It may kill his love for you, but he will pity you; he is a good man."

It was beautiful to see the light that came into Alminere's face. She crouched no longer, but drew merely to her full height and stood in silence for a moment, then she fell at Agnes Power's feet and kissed them again and again.

"Oh! don't—don't—you mustn't kiss my feet. Who am I?"

"God's messenger," cried the girl. "God's messenger; yes! I will tell Martin, he shall know everything. She drew in a deep sigh; not the sigh of sorrow, but of relief, gave a swift smile into Agnes's face and flew down the hill towards the village.

Agnes Power followed the girl more slowly. The world was changed since she last went that way. She had had a glimpse into the world many women live and die without guessing at. She had always shrank in thought from any one guilty of wrong-doing, while feeling a sorrow for them; but to-day the knowledge had seized her that sin is its own punishment; the consequence of sin the law's avenger; that nature, who was God in the beginning, thus claims her due, while God in the end stretches forth his hand in tender pity. The girl had done grievous wrong and she had suffered for it. Her words kept echoing through Agnes's mind, "But I kept myself good." Deep in thought she hurried down the hill.

CHAPTER VII.

"It would make it easier."

Alminere made straight for the spot which Martin Maynard had appointed for their meeting. It was a short way past the forge. Alminere could see the blazing fire, hear the measured clip—clap—clip of the hammer falling upon the hot iron as she hurried by. Martin was waiting for her; she saw him before he saw her, for she was in his thoughts and his eyes were fixed on the water below.

This spot was on the highest point of the cliff. Here the wind stirred amongst the maple branches when the leaves in the valley beneath lay longing for a breath; here marvellous mosses beautified the stones and fallen trees, and wild clematis clung closely to low branches, beginning to melt under this close caress. When a crackling branch betrayed Alminere's approach, Martin turned and started forward to meet her with a world of love in his eyes.

"You have brought me my answer, Allie?" Even his eyes of love could not read the girl's suffering. He wondered why she was so pale, trembling, and moved as though to draw her to him, confident of his answer. But she shrank from the caress and spoke in gasps.

"Don't—don't—touch—me! I—want—to—tell—you—something"

But she didn't tell him; she broke off and asked a question instead:

"Do you love me, Martin?"

"Do I love you?" he repeated, and each word was an affirmation.

"You love me because you think I am good—because I have never been wicked. Oh! Martin, I have been wicked."

She wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were fastened on the ground, but she saw nothing. She feared to look up, to meet condemnation in his eyes, but she had not anticipated this.

He caught her in an iron grasp; his face might have been chiselled in stone.

"You have deceived me. You have let me love you—led me on to love you. Woman! you have ruined my faith, my life."

The words fell on her soul just as the sledge hammer in the forge below in the valley was falling upon the burning iron. Clip! clap! clip! The sound came up to them through the stillness of the summer air, and she could not speak, could not say a word to recall his tenderness, his affection. What had Miss Power said? Something about pity. Pity! Was this pity? What a strange word it was—pity! Did it mean anything—was there meaning in anything?

After a great mental ordeal, which has absorbed every faculty of feeling, there comes this lull of sensibility, when the real and the unreal war with each other, and it is a question of sanity, which conquers.

Martin woke her from her mental haze.

"Tell me his name, that I may kill him."

"His name! No, no! I have done harm enough; but you shall do nothing wrong for me, it hurts so afterwards—afterwards." Then in a low, strained, far off tone: "What good would it do if you hunted the whole world over and then killed him? Would it give me back my innocence, my happiness, or increase your honour?" Martin, dear, dear Martin—don't mind my calling you that just for the last time—you—you will forget me—forget me because I am not worthy to be remembered. Only, by-and-bye, Martin, remember I have—she caught her breath hard—I have always tried to do right—since—and—I didn't try to make you love me, though I was glad when you did. And—and I hope you will forget me and love some good woman."

(To be continued.)