

## TALKING IT OVER.

BY JOSEPHINE POLLARD.

"How long do you say it is, mother, since I drove Zacharia away, with never a blessing to help him? Just ten years ago to a day? And we have been favored with plenty of this seldom that many enjoy an easier lot; and I wonder if the years have gone hard with the boy?"

"He was willful and proud, you remember, and I was as quick as a flash, and stern in those days, for I fancied, that boys needed plenty of lash. I've thought of it over and over, and grieved not a little for Zach. Poor boy! do you think he imagines how my heart has been calling him back?"

"For ten long, long years, I have carried a burden of shame and regret; but if wormwood we drop in the fountain, then bitter is the draft that we get. Though seldom we've spoken together of this, the one grief of our life, you never accused me of harshness, nor vexed with upbraidings, dear wife."

"The graves that are down by the orchard seemed never so narrow and small; 'Twas only our Zach, who was spared us, and grew up so handsome and tall, Ah! he was a lad to be proud of, so manly, and honest, and true! And whenever a man was in trouble, He seemed to know just what to do."

"It must be my sight is much clearer in these fond and foolish old days, for I never had one bit of patience with Zach, nor a word in his praise; I thought every minute was wasted. He didn't keep steady to work, and ruled—don't shake your head, mother—like some old tyrannical Turk."

"But I have grown older and wiser, and see, in a sort of amaze, the many great sins I committed in those unregenerate days; and if ever the dear boy should enter these doors—how my glasses grow dim!—Right down on my knees I'd go, mother, A begging forgiveness of him!"

There came a swift step through the entry, the door was thrown speedily back, and flooding the room with his sunshine, came the handsome young prodigal, Zach! No longer the old folks remember the past, with its sorrows and cares, but feel that—in talking it over—into heaven they slipped unawares.

## MY COMPANION.

By the Author of "Lady Hutton's Ward," "A Terrible Christmas Eve," &amp;c.

## CHAPTER I.

I hardly thought in my old age to write a story, but I know one that is, I believe, worth the telling. I am a great admirer of quiet heroism and patient endurance; I found both in this little incident that I venture to relate.

About fifteen years since I was living quite alone at my residence, Thorndale Hall. My husband had been dead many years. My only child, Ronald, was away at the Cape with his regiment. I had many acquaintances, but few friends. My own relatives lived in the Highlands of Scotland. My health had been long in a precarious state, so that I was unable to avail myself of the really good society in my neighborhood.

Many people wondered that my only son should have left me alone and in ill-health; but it happened in this way. Ronald always wished for a military life; and his father, anxious to gratify the boy's longings, presented him with a commission as soon as he was old enough to enter the Army.

Three weeks after my dear husband's death the regiment was ordered to the Cape. The service that was expected from it was known to be of some danger, for rebellion was rife among the Kaffirs. Ronald would have thrown up his commission but for this. In the face of danger he could not endure the thought of resigning; nor would I ask him to stay. I heard all that was said of one young lieutenant who had sold out on account of ill-health when he knew the destination of his regiment. I should not have liked the same to be said of Ronald; so I bade him good-bye, with a smile on my lips and something as bitter as the anguish of death in my heart.

I could not help being anxious about him; the reports from the Cape were not cheering, and more than one brave young officer who had gone forth bravely to the fight was numbered with the dead. To this day I remember the faint, cold sickness of dread that seized me when I knew that the South Africa mail was in. I hardly dared to read the paper, lest I should see there that one name that was everything to

me. Suspense and fear preyed upon my mind until I became seriously ill. Then my dear son wrote to soid me; he said that I must not give myself to a solitary life full of melancholy thought, and that if I did not feel well enough to mix much in society I had better try to find a companion. I was charmed with the idea, and wondered much why I had not thought of it before. I did not consult any of the ladies in the neighborhood. I knew that many of them always had a list of governesses and companions on hand, and would be much offended if I did not take the one they recommended. I advertised. I do not like to remember the number of answers I received. My heart was sore and heavy for many days after reading those patient records. After all, I found that plan would not suit. I formed in my own mind an ideal of the lady I should like to live with me, but I could not tell if any of the writers approached it. I determined to go to London and advertise again, requesting this time a personal interview. I went to my old lodgings—nice lofty apartments near Hyde Park. I requested all applicants to call there between twelve and two on a certain morning.

Never shall I forget that morning while I live. The number of ladies who waited upon me was most formidable. Some were old and some were young; some bright with youth's best gift, hope; others worn, haggard, and weary; some still fair and pleasing, others old before their time, and wrinkled with many an anxious care. I wondered then what would, and I wonder now what has, become of them all.

I did not see one face that I thoroughly liked—not one that I felt I could bear to see in Roland's place, opposite to me, at the table, or at the fire-side. I am difficult to please—my ideal was not among them. I dismissed the applicants kindly, feeling somewhat disappointed at my non-success. Just as the little ormolu clock was chiming two, another ring sounded through the house. I was going upstairs, when I heard a sweet musical voice inquiring if the lady who had advertised was still to be seen. I ordered the new comer to be admitted and shown upstairs.

I liked her at first sight, she seemed so gentle, so graceful, and so timid. She spoke for a few minutes before she threw back the thick veil that covered her face. I was almost startled at its fair delicate loveliness; yet there was something strange about it—something so quiet and so still that one felt an involuntary awe in speaking to her. I discovered afterwards what it was. In the face before me there was no hope; there was patient endurance written in every feature—in the clear sad eyes and the sweet sad lips—but there was no hope. She seemed as though she had struggled long and heavily, but had given in at last. She did not smile as other girls do, with a light in the eyes and a dimpled curve in the lip—there was no heart in her smiles. The very way in which she folded her little hands indicated the manner of one who knew what it was to feel resigned. I could have well imagined that, if I had told her that I had already concluded an engagement, no line or shadow would have deepened on the patient face—she would have gone out from me as quietly and hopelessly as she had entered.

"You are very kind, madam," she said, "to consent to see me. I am behind the time named."

I told her that it was of no consequence, that I was quite at leisure, and, as I had not succeeded with any of the other applicants, that I was pleased she had applied. A few kind words encouraged her. She said that she believed she had the requisite qualifications for fulfilling the duties of the situation. And so she had. I felt like a dunce beside her. She could speak French, German, and Italian; she could play both harp and piano well, and also sing; she could sketch from nature; finally, she could read aloud well—a rare and great accomplishment itself. I wondered how one so young could have found time to learn so much.

"You have had a very excellent education," I said, perhaps rather rudely.

"Yes," she answered; "no expense was spared to make me fit for what I have to do."

"Have you been engaged in teaching?" I asked.

"No," she replied; "this is my first application for a situation."

"You have never taken one before?" I said, in some surprise.

"No," she answered, and a hot flush for a moment colored her pale face.

"I should prefer some one accustomed to the duties of a companion," I said, hesitatingly.

"Try me, madam," she requested; "I will do my best. I shall learn what my duties are very quickly, and try to discharge them faithfully."

That she would I felt sure. Then I explained to her what a quiet, dull life she would have with me, a melancholy invalid. She looked intensely relieved when I told her how little I went into society, and how few were the visitors I entertained. She smiled when I told her what her duties were to be. I could think of nothing except that she must read to me and talk to me, and in general sort of way be very kind to me. I knew that Morris, my maid, who had lived with me from my childhood, would not allow any interference with her peculiar duties; indeed I have a strong impression that if any one had asked Morris what her occupation was, she would have replied, "Managing her mistress."

"I return to Thorndale shortly," I said.

"When can you come to me, if we arrange matters?"

"If you think I could be useful to you on the

journey," she answered, "I will accompany you."

"You will wish to consult your friends," I said, "before deciding."

"I have no one to consult, madam," she explained, a deep shadow falling over her face—"I am alone in the world."

So young, so sad, and so lonely! Poor child, I wondered what sorrow had blighted that fair youth, and turned its day into deepest night. All at once it flashed into my mind that I must know her name and ask for a reference.

I gave her my card, and told her that I believed it was customary to give a reference before completing an engagement. She said that the Rev. Mr. Mason, the vicar of the parish where she had lived, had wished her to refer to him as to character and ability.

"That will do," I said, cheerfully; "and now tell me by what name I am to know you—in all probability—future companion."

"My name is Clarice Linden," she answered; but I could not help noticing a slight hesitation before she spoke.

"It is a very pretty and very uncommon one. I will write to Mr. Mason this evening, and, if his reply should be satisfactory, there need be no further difficulty. Will you call again the day after to-morrow about three?"

She assented gladly. I wrote to the Rev. Mr. Mason, and by return of post I received a reply.

The reverend gentleman spoke very highly of Miss Linden. I noticed even then that he made no mention of her family—nor did he allude in any way to her circumstances; but he said that she was a lady who in every sense of the words merited the highest confidence I could place in her. I quite believed him when I recollected the truthful, patient expression on her face.

So, when Miss Linden called the following afternoon, we arranged our little business affairs, neither of us dreaming then of all that would spring from that engagement.

"I returned to Thorndale this evening," I said, "and shall be glad of your society, Miss Linden, if you can be ready so soon."

"I have but to take a cab and bring my boxes," she replied; "then I shall be quite at your service."

We left by the five o'clock train. I am not the most observant person in the world, but I could not help noticing the air of intense relief with which when we left smoky London behind us, my companion threw back the thick veil that covered her face, and leaned eagerly forward, as though to inhale freedom with the fresh air.

"Are you pleased to leave London?" I asked.

The expression on her face was one of mingled pain and pleasure as she answered me.

"I am pleased and pained both; but on the whole I am glad—nay, thankful to get away."

I did not ask why; there was something in the quiet, gentle dignity of her manner that forbade all curious questioning. So, while the train sped on, I sat opposite to her, and watched the light and shade on the fair young face, and wondered who she was and all about her.

Like many other women, I am not inattentive to little things. From Miss Linden's manner I felt sure that she had always moved in high society. There was something about her that I can express by no other word than "thoroughbred." It drew me nearer to her, for, above all other things, I love and prize refinement in a woman—without it, she is simply disagreeable.

Twilight had deepened before we reached the little station at Thorndale. The carriage was waiting for us.

"What a grand old place!" cried Miss Linden, as we caught sight of the Hall through the broad avenue of trees.

"I hope you will like it, my dear," I said, "and find a comfortable home there for many years."

She thanked me so prettily when I showed her the two nice rooms I had had prepared. Tears stood in her eyes when I kissed her, and told her that I knew I should love her, and that she must try to be a daughter to me.

I found great comfort in having a companion when the wind moaned through the great trees round the Hall; I no longer fancied that I heard my son's voice calling to me in each wall. I found that the house was brightened by the light of a fair young face, and gladdened by the tone of a young voice.

"I hope you have been particular, my dear Mrs. Thorne," whispered Lady Flogate to me. "In these times one ought to pay great attention to references, and all that kind of thing, before bringing a total stranger into the sanctity of one's home."

Miss Linden was putting some music together at the other end of the drawing-room.

"Look at the sweet face, Lady Flogate," I whispered, "and see if you cannot read sufficient reference there."

But her ladyship shrugged her shoulders, and said—

"I am a practical woman, my dear Mrs. Thorne, and you are—pardon me—sadly romantic. I hardly understand that kind of thing myself."

None the less happily was my companion installed in her new home.

## CHAPTER II.

I grew strangely interested in Clarice Linden. She gave me the idea of one who had naturally a joyous, happy nature; but it seemed now repressed by some great abiding sorrow. When

she was what I called on duty—that is, attending to me, either reading, singing, or talking to me—her face wore an air of busy occupation, never of pleasure or amusement. It was very seldom that a smile rippled over those beautiful lips or lighted up the depths of the sad, dark eyes. But, when off her guard, I have watched often and often the look of brooding heavy care that came like a cloud over her features. I wondered then what the shadow was. I know now.

Four months passed, and we were very happy together. I had become as much attached to my companion as though I had known her all my life. I called her Clarice, and felt almost as much pitying love for her as if she had been my own child. In manners, in accomplishments, in personal beauty, in intellectual powers, she was infinitely superior to any of the ladies in my neighborhood. There was nothing, so to speak, of the paid dependant in Clarice Linden. She was, in every sense of the word, a thoroughly refined lady.

My health improved considerably. Once again I began to entertain my neighbors; but, if ever Clarice could make any excuse to avoid seeing visitors, she did so. It was strange that one so young and so well qualified to adorn society should shun it as she did.

The summer passed, and winter began to draw near. One evening—I shall never forget it—after we had dined together, I asked Miss Linden if she would read the morning paper to me; we had been so busily engaged all day that it had been forgotten.

"Do not wade through it, my dear," I said; "select what you think will amuse me."

She took the paper from my hand and drew a chair near to me. I was lying on my favorite couch near the fire. I saw her turn the paper over and over again to find something that would suit me. I remember closing my eyes and waiting for the first sound of her voice. There were a few minutes of dead silence, and then I was aroused by something that sounded like a moan of unutterable anguish from the lips of my companion. I looked at her in alarm. Every vestige of color had fled from her face—it was ghastly white; and the dark eyes were fixed upon the paper with an agonised look. Something like a moan came from the white lips, and then my companion sat pale and motionless as one dead.

"Clarice," I cried, springing from my seat; "what is it? What is the matter?"

She neither heard nor saw me. I tried to take the paper from her hand, but it was clenched so tightly that I could not remove it.

"Are you ill, Clarice?" I cried again, in alarm. "What is the matter, darling?"

I kissed her white rigid face, and then the dark eyes lost their fixed stare, the lips quivered, the paper fell from her hands.

"Oh, horror, horror!" she cried, clasping her hands before her face.

"My dear child, what is the matter?" I asked. "You terrify me beyond measure."

Then she seemed to recollect herself and looked in my face.

"I beg your pardon, dear Mrs. Thorne," she said; "I have frightened you. I felt very ill—I feel ill now. Will you let me go to my own room?"

"Is that all, Clarice?" I asked. "I thought you had read some bad news."

"My head was giddy," she said; "I seemed to lose both sight and hearing. If you will allow me to leave you now, I shall be well in the morning."

I saw that the poor girl was longing to be alone; every nerve seemed quivering. I kissed her and told her to go and rest.

She left me, but I could not forget the scene; it was no mere physical illness that had blanched her face and deadened her senses. I felt sure that it was more than that. I took the paper and searched it carefully, to see if I could find any clue whatever to her distress. I remember every item of the news.

There was a long political discussion, and an account of a railway accident in which one person was killed and several injured—the name of Linden, however, was not in the list. There was a description of Lady Forrester's fête, the particulars of an execution at Newgate, the trial and sentence of an eminent banker for fraudulent dealing, and the general report of the sessions. I saw nothing more. I read every paragraph carefully, but I gave up the task at last, for I could find no clue whatever to anything which might be likely to cause the scene I had witnessed.

An hour afterwards I went to see Clarice and take her a little wine. I found that she had thrown herself undressed upon the bed; her face was swollen with weeping, and wet with tears. I did not tease her with questions; I saw that whatever her secret might be she wished to keep it. I made her drink the wine, and bade her good night, but I could not sleep for thinking of that white wild face and those dark frightened eyes.

I did not expect to see her in the morning, but there she was, punctual as usual, and ready to attend to my little wants. I did not refer to what had passed. There was something in the quiet, hopeless look of her sad face that forbade all questions. I could only pity and love her the more.

That evening she asked me if I could spare her during the following week to go up to London for a few days. I willingly consented. Until the time of her departure came she was in such a state of nervousness and constant seeming dread that I began to fear she would be really ill. I saw how she tried to control herself and go about her duties as cheerfully as usual, but