

HOW IT ALL CAME ROUND.

(L. T. Monk, in "Sunday Magazine.")

CHAPTER XX.—TWO CHARLOTTE'S.

It was a week after the very day, in fact on which Hinton was to give up his present most comfortable quarters for the chances and changes of Mrs. Home's poor little dwelling. That anxious young wife and mother, having completed her usual morning duties, set off to Regent's Park to meet Miss Harman. It was nearly March now, and the days, even in the afternoon, were stretching, and though it was turning cold the feeling of coming spring was more decidedly getting into the air.

Mrs. Home had told her children that she was going to meet their pretty lady, and Harold had begged hard to come too. His mother would have taken him, but he had a cold, and looked heavy, so she started off for her long walk alone. Won by her husband's gentler and more Christ-like spirit, Mrs. Home had written to Miss Harman to propose this meeting; and in agreeing to an interview with her kinswoman she had effected a compromise with her own feelings. She would neither go to her nor ask her to come to the little house in Kentish Town. The fact was she wanted to meet this young woman on some neutral ground. There were certain unwritten, but still most stringent, laws of courtesy which each must observe in her own home to the other. Charlotte Home intended, as she went to meet Miss Harman on this day of early spring, that very plain words indeed should pass between them.

By this it will be seen that she was still very far behind her husband, and that much of a sore and angry sensation still lingered in her heart.

"Miss Harman will, of course, keep me waiting," she said to herself, as she entered the park, and walked quickly towards the certain part where they had agreed to meet. She gave a slight start, therefore, when she saw that young woman slowly pacing up and down, with the very quiet and meditative air of one who had been doing so for some little time. Miss Harman was dressed with almost studied plainness and simplicity. All the rich furs which the children had admired were put away. When she saw Mrs. Home she quickened her slow steps into almost a run of welcome and clasped her toil-worn and badly gloved hands in both her own.

"How glad I am to see you! You did not hurry, I hope. You are quite out of breath. Why did you walk so fast?"

"I did not walk fast until I saw you under the trees, Miss Harman. I thought I should have time enough for I imagined I should have to wait for you."

"What an unreasonable thing to suppose of me! I am the idle one, you the busy. No: I respect wives and mothers too much to treat them in that fashion." Miss Harman smiled as she spoke.

Mrs. Home did not outwardly respond to the smile, though the gracious bearing, the loving, sweet face were beginning very slowly to effect a thaw, for some hard little ice lumps in her heart were melting. The immediate effect of this was, however, so strong a desire to cry, that, to steel herself against these untimely tears, she became in a manner harder than ever.

"And now what shall we do?" said Charlotte Harman. "The carriage is waiting for us at the next gate; shall we go for a drive, or shall we walk about here?"

"I would rather walk here," said Mrs. Home.

"Very well. Charlotte, I am glad to see you. And how are your children?"

"Harold has a cold. The other two are very well."

"I never saw sweeter children in my life. And do you know I met your husband? He and your children both spoke to me in the park. It was the day before I came to your house. Mr. Home gave me a very short sermon to think over. I shall never forget it."

"He saw you and liked you," answered Mrs. Home. "He told me of that meeting."

"And I want another meeting. Such a man as that has never come into my life before. I want to see more of him. Charlotte, why did you propose that we should meet here? Why not in my house, or in yours? I wanted to come to you again. I was much disappointed when I got your note."

"I am sorry to have disappointed you; but I thought it best that we should meet here."

"But why? I don't understand."

"They say rich people are obtuse. I did not want to see your riches, nor for you to behold the poverty of my land."

"Charlotte!"

"Please don't think me very hard, but I would rather you did not say Charlotte?"

"You would rather I did not say Charlotte?"

"Two large tears of surprise and pain filled Miss Harman's gray eyes. But such a great flood of weeping was so near the surface with the other woman that she dared not look at her."

"I would rather you did not say Charlotte," she repeated, "for we call those whom we love and are friendly with by their Christian names."

"I thought you loved me. You said so. You can't take back your own words."

"I don't want to. I do love you in my heart. I feel I could love you devotedly, but for all that we can never be friends."

Miss Harman was silent for a moment or two, then she said slowly, but with growing passion in her voice, "Ah! you are thinking of that wretched money. I thought love ranked higher than gold in the world over."

"So it does, or appears to do, for those who all their lives have had plenty; but it is just possible, just possible, I say, that those who are poor, poor enough to know what hunger and cold mean, and have seen their dearest wanting the comforts that money can buy, it is possible that such people may prefer their money rights to the profession of empty love."

"Empty love!" repeated Miss Harman. The words stung her. She was growing angry, and the anger became this stately creature well. With cheeks and eyes both glowing she turned to her companion. "If you and I are not to part at once, and never meet again, there must be very plain words between us. Shall I speak those words?" she asked.

"I came here that our words might be very plain," answered Mrs. Home.

"They shall be," said Charlotte Harman.

They were in a very quiet part of the park. Even the nurses and children were out of sight. Now they ceased walking, and turned and faced each other.

They were both tall, and both the poor and the rich young women had considerable dignity of bearing; but Charlotte Home was now the composed one. Charlotte Harman felt herself quivering with suppressed anger. Injustice was being dealt out to her, and injustice to the child of affluence and luxury was a new sensation.

"You came to me the other day," she began, "I had never seen you before, never before in all my life even heard your name. You, however, knew me, and you told me a story. It was a painful and very strange story. It made you not only my very nearest of kin, but also made you a victim of a great wrong. The wrong was a large one, and the victim was to be pitied; but the sting of it all lay, to me, not in either of these facts, but in this, that you gave me to understand that he who had dealt you such a blow was—my father. My father, one of the most noble, upright, and righteous of men, you made out to me, to me, his only child, to be no better than a common thief. I did not turn you from my doors for your base words. I pitied you. In spite of myself I liked you; in spite of myself I believed you. You went away, and in the agony of mind which followed during the next few hours I could have gladly died for ever from the sight of all the wide world. I had been the very happiest of women. You came. You went. I was one of the most miserable. I am engaged to be married, and the man I am engaged to came into the room. I felt guilty before him. I could not raise my eyes to his, for again I tell you, I believed your tale, and my father's bitter shame was mine. I could not rest. Happen what would I must learn the truth at once. I have an uncle, my father's brother; he must know all. I sent my lover away and went to this uncle. I asked to have an interview with him, and in that interview I told him all you had told to me. He was not surprised. He acknowledged at once the true and real relationship between us; but he also explained away the base doubts you had put into my head. My father, my own beloved father, is

all, and more than all, I have ever thought him. He would seem to be unjust, to rob any one. You have been unfortunate: you have been treated cruelly; but the injustice, the cruelty have been perpetrated by one long years now in his grave. In short, your father has been the wicked man, not mine."

Here Mrs. Home tried to speak, but Miss Harman held up her hand.

"You must hear me out," she said. "I am convinced, but I do not expect you to be. After my uncle had done speaking, and I had time to realize all the relief those words of his had given me, I said, still an injustice has been done. We have no right to our wealth while she suffers from such poverty. Be my grandfather's will what it may, we must alter it. We must so act as if he had left money to his youngest child. My uncle agreed with me; perhaps not so fully as I could wish, still he did agree; but he made one proviso. My father is ill, I fear. I fear he is very ill. The one dark cloud hanging over his whole life lay in those years when he was estranged from his own father. To speak of you I must bring back those years to his memory. Any excitement is bad for him now. My uncle said, 'Wait until your father is better, then we will do something for Mrs. Home.' To this I agreed. Was I very unreasonable to agree to this delay for my father's sake?"

Here Charlotte Harman paused and looked straight at her companion. Mrs. Home's full gaze met hers. Again, the innocent candor of the one pair of eyes appealed straight to the heart lying beneath the other. Unconvinced she was still. Still to her, her own story held good; but she was softened, and she held out her hand.

"There is no unreasonableness in you, Charlotte," she said.

"Ah! then you will call me Charlotte?" said the other, her face glowing with delight.

"I call you so now. I won't answer for the future."

"We will accept the pleasant present. I don't fear the future. I shall win your whole heart yet. Now let us drop all disagreeables and talk about those we both love. Charlotte, what a baby you have got! Your baby must be as an angel to you."

"All my children are as that to me. When I look at them I think God has sent me three angels to dwell with me."

"Ah! what a happy thought, and what a happy woman. Then your husband, he must be like the archangel Gabriel, so just, so righteous, so noble. I love him already; but I think I should be a little afraid of him. He is so—so very unearthly. Now you, Mrs. Home, let me tell you, are very earthly, very human indeed."

Mrs. Home smiled, for this praise of her best beloved could not be but pleasant to her. She told Miss Harman a little more about her husband and the children, and Miss Harman listened with that appreciation which is the sweetest flattery in the world. After a time she said—

"I am not going to marry any one the least bit unearthly; but I see you are a model wife, and I want to be one like-wise. For—did I not tell you—I am to be married in exactly two months from now."

"Are you really? Are you indeed?"

Was it possible after this piece of confidence for these two young women not to be friends?

Charlotte Home, though so poor, felt suddenly, in experience, in all true womanly knowledge, rich beside her companion. Charlotte Harman, for all her five-and-twenty years, was but a child beside this earnest wife and mother.

They talked; and the one relating her very brightest experiences, the other listening, as though on her wedding-day she was certainly to step into the land of Beulah. It was the old, old story repeated again, as those two paced up and down in the gray March afternoon. When at last they parted there was no need to say that they were friends.

And yet as she hurried home the poor Charlotte could not help reflecting that whatever her cause she had done nothing for it. Charlotte Harman might be very sweet. It might be impossible not to admire her, to love her, to take her to her heart of hearts. But would that love bring back her just rights? would that help her children by-

and by? She reached her hall-door to find her husband standing there.

"Lottie, where have you been? I waited for you, for I did not like to go out and leave him. Harold is ill, and the doctor has just left."

CHAPTER XXI.—A FRIEND IN NEED.

For many days after that interview in Regent's Park, it seemed that one of the three, who made the little house in Kentish Town so tri-ly like heaven, was to be an angel indeed. Harold's supposed cold had turned to scarlet fever, and the doctor feared that Harold would die.

Immediately after her interview with Charlotte Harman, Mrs. Home went upstairs to learn from the grave lips of a medical man what ailed her boy, and what a hard fight for life or death he had before him. She was a brave woman, and whatever anguish might lie underneath, no tears filled her eyes as she looked at his flushed face. When the doctor had gone, she stole softly from the sick-room, and going to the drawing-room where Hinton was already in possession, she tapped at the door.

"To his 'Come in,'" she entered at once, and said abruptly without preface—

"I hope you have unpacked nothing. I must ask you to go away at once."

She had her bonnet still on, and, but for the pallor of her face, she looked cold, even unmoved.

"I have everything unpacked, and I don't want to go. Why should I?" demanded Hinton in some surprise.

"My eldest boy has scarlet fever. The other two will probably take it. You must on no account stay here; you must leave to-night if you wish to escape infection."

In an instant Hinton was by her side.

"Your boy has scarlet fever?" he repeated. "I know something of scarlet fever. He must instantly be moved to an airy bedroom. The best bedroom in the house is mine. Your boy must sleep in my bedroom to-night."

"It is a good thought," said Mrs. Home. "Thank you for suggesting it—I will move him down at once; the bed is well aired, and the sheets are fresh and clean. I will have him moved wherever you can go."

She was leaving the room when Hinton followed her.

"I said nothing about going; I don't mean to. I can have a blanket and sleep on the sofa. I am not going away, Mrs. Home."

"Mrs. Hinton, have you no one you care for? Why do you run this risk?"

"I have some one I care for very much indeed; but I run no risk. I had scarlet fever long ago. In any case I have no fear of infection. Now I know your husband is out; let me go upstairs and help you to bring down the little fellow."

"God bless you," said the wife and mother. Her eyes were beautiful as she raised them to the face of this good Samaritan.

The little patient was moved to the large and comfortable room, and Hinton found himself in the position of good angel to this poor family. He had never supposed himself capable of taking such a post with regard to any one; but the thing seemed thrust upon him. An obvious duty had come into his life, and he never even for the briefest instant dreamed of shirking it. He was a man without physical fear. The hardships of life, the roughing of poverty were not worth a passing thought of annoyance; but there was one little act of self-denial which he must now exercise; and it is to be owned that he felt it with a heart-pang. He had never told Charlotte that he was going to live in the house with Mrs. Home. He had not meant to keep this fact a secret from her, but there was still a soreness over him when he thought of this young woman which prevented her name coming readily to his lips. On this first night in his new abode he sat down to write to his promised wife; but neither now did he give his address, nor tell his landlady's name. He had an obvious reason, however, now for his conduct.

This was what Charlotte received from her lover on the following morning—

"MY DARLING,—Such a strange thing has happened; but one which, thank God, as far as I am concerned, need not cause you the least alarm. I moved from my old lodgings to-day and went a little more into the country. I had just unpacked my belongings and was expecting some tea, for I

was hot and came in and taken very other children spread. She one of those not you, Charlotte, and your father I will write a paper; but present. "Ever
This letter Hinton did meant C sons to write to his anxious night with Mr. absolutely to his office not think of a good nurse brave men child liked his presence else soothed on held his One evening eyes, he fix and said slo "I did ki "He me Park; a M and broug Home. "Yes, is little Harol "Very p ing low ove The child them. I fix that of the on and the in that sm From being probable, t had must d seemed al Hinton, lo blinded. I he knew s doubted th pursued he doctor fro "The ch cal man, a very lit "Good s at his fea gauge. "I lives are b know nott nothing I lin better sequen date not d "He would enough fo over." "I call t other advi "My de Think of u use—n "Leave chance of never hav little lad d power. T Do you o "By no noted aut "Then doctor, an Away th fid time was standi Hinton watch bet the little I