

Two Events in a Quiet Life.

BY A. CLAXTON.

CHAPTER I.

It was the third of December, and the fourth was fixed for my wedding-day. For some weeks the weather had been bitterly cold; we had had one heavy fall of snow, then a few days of hard frost, and now the air was again filled with large feathery flakes. At four o'clock, when I went to my own room wearied out both in mind and body, it was nearly dark.

My uncle's house, of which I had been an inmate for some years—for I was an orphan—was in a remote part of Cambridgeshire, five miles from a town, and it may easily be imagined what an event a wedding was in such a quiet village. Every one, including myself the bride elect, had to work hard for days beforehand, and my aunt had little sympathy for the weak or the idle.

Two or three guests had arrived, and as there now seemed nothing more to be done excepting to entertain them, I was sent up-stairs to rest until seven o'clock, when my intended husband and his groomsman were expected. The dog-cart was to be sent to meet them at Eldon station, about three miles off.

I found the unusual luxury of a bright fire burning in my grate, with an easy-chair cozily drawn up to it. For a moment or two I warmed my frozen fingers, and then I went to the window, and leaning my cold forehead against the colder pane, looked out upon the dreary landscape. Now the moment was come in which to realise my position.

For weeks I had been in a dream—a passive, hopeless creature, carried along, as it seemed, by the will of others to a certain end—now on the eve of my wedding-day I felt miserably awake. Could there then be no respite—nothing to hope for?

"Ah, Harry! Harry!" I exclaimed, "where are you now? Why this long, long time without a line, without a word? Have I not, in spite of taunts and entreaties, waited the seven years I promised, and more? Was it not only when the bread of charity grew too bitter, and no means permitted me for earning my own livelihood—when no hope remained of seeing you again—that I gave way?"

"Twice I had refused Mr. Denton's hand. What could I do when he offered it the third time? I mean, Heaven knows I mean to make him a good wife. I am grateful to him, for why should he choose me—a girl without a penny, and no heart worth having? They say I have a pretty face; I suppose it was that. Harry used to like my blue eyes and wavy hair years ago."

"This is the last night I may think of you, Harry, the bonny lad I loved so well! Where are you now? Still beyond the wide Atlantic, striving for the money to enable us to marry? Or, as they would wish me to believe, dead? I am in sore distress, Harry. Surely, bound up as we were in one another, my spirit can hardly thus be moved without stirring some chord in yours, wherever you may be—whether in far America, or in that still stranger and more unknown country from whence no traveller returns."

"God help me," I cried in my anguish; "God help me, I sorely need it!"

Then I opened the window, and looked out over the flat country lying so still in its white shroud; and I gazed up into the grey, stony sky, but it was obscured by the flakes of snow, which came down thicker and thicker until at last nothing else was to be seen in earth or heaven.

"Miss Nellie! Miss Nellie!" said the warning voice of the old housekeeper, "what are you doing, my dear? Trying to catch your death of cold? and to-morrow your wedding-day!" She drew me away, and closed the window, "I've got a nice cup of tea for you: come and sit down love, and drink it. I don't wonder you feel anxious like, for it's awful weather."

Then the good old soul sat down by the fire, and told me various stories, which she assured me were authentic, of similar snow-storms under similar circumstances, and how when her own mother was married, in Staffordshire, the wedding party had to walk to church over the tops of the hedges on frozen snow.

Then my aunt came in; she was naturally a stern, managing woman, and we had never been very good friends; but she spoke kindly to me then, and told me not to be anxious if the train were delayed a little. My uncle soon followed her, and gave me a kiss, saying, "Cheer up, Nellie! they'll be here sooner or later."

Ah! what a hypocrite I was! None of them knew my dread of the coming morrow; how I had prayed like a criminal for a reprieve. And yet, to do myself justice, I did honor Mr. Denton, I meant to obey, and hoped in time to love him. But the hours passed on, and even I began to grow anxious for his safety.

Ten o'clock came, and the groom had not returned from the station. Old Wilkie, the gardener, who had managed to struggle in from his cottage, about a hundred yards' distance, gave it as his opinion that they would not come that night.

"Lor' bless you, sir," he said, "James knows what he's about, and he'd never risk crossing Eldon Moor such weather as this; it's as much as their lives are worth."

My uncle kissed me again. "Never mind,

Nellie; they won't hurt in the station for one night, with a big fire, and we'll have them over the first thing in morning;" and so at last we retired for the night.

To bed, but not to sleep. A new hope had sprung up, which I hardly dared acknowledge to myself. If the storm would only continue until after twelve o'clock the next day, so as to make the wedding impossible, who could tell what might happen next? I might be taken ill; had I not pains in all my limbs, and was not my head burning already?

I rose several times during the night, and looked out. Still snowing heavily, as far as I could see. In the morning there was no change, and a very gloomy and depressed party met at the breakfast-table. A few unsuccessful attempts were made to be cheerful during the meal, but when it was over all was silence, except an occasional whisper from one of the anxious faces at the windows, trying vainly to peer through the thick white veil.

That it was useless to dress, all had agreed, and wrapped in a large shawl, I lay on the sofa by the fire, with my eyes fixed on the clock. Ten o'clock—eleven. At the half-hour my heart almost stopped beating. Twelve o'clock at last

came, and then my uncle tried to lead me away.

I understood now how it was. "He is dead!" I said, and I fell heavily on the stone floor.

CHAPTER II.

It is nearly two years since I wrote anything in my diary, for I seem now too busy to attend to it, and yet things have altered very much in the last two years. My surroundings are changed, and I trust there is a change for the better in myself. During my long illness, which followed that awful snow-storm, my aunt heard of the death of her son-in-law in India, my cousin Edith's husband, and it was arranged for the widow and her only child to return to the old home. This rendered my presence even less necessary than ever, and made it all the more easy for my dear old friend and doctor to propose a scheme he had formed for the mutual benefit of his wife and myself, as he kindly put it.

It was for me to live with them as companion, housekeeper, and in fact daughter, for they

will happen in the chances and changes of life, but I shall never forget him. He will choose some other wife, and I hope they will be happy, but she will not love him better than the Nellie of old.

Here I was interrupted by a ring at the bell, and a note. To my great surprise it was from Mrs. Leedon (Harry's mother), asking me to call upon her in the afternoon. What could she want? Nine years ago she and my aunt broke off the engagement between Harry and me.

Ah! it was a hard and cruel time! We were, as they said, foolish, penniless young creatures; but then we loved each other, and he was willing to work, and I to wait. But that was all over now.

After our early dinner I made the invalid comfortable for her afternoon nap, and started for my two-mile walk.

A bright winter afternoon, clear pale sky, hard roads, and glittering hoar-frost lying on trees and hedges. I soon reached Mrs. Leedon's cottage. She looked, I thought, much aged, and there was an unusual nervousness in her manner.

After a little attempt at conversation she said, "Ellen, I hope in what happened some years ago you gave me, at least, credit for conscientious motives."

"Mrs. Leedon," I replied hastily, "that time is long past, and I have no wish to recall it."

"But, my dear, you must see now what an imprudent thing an engagement would have been."

I rose to go. "It is all over, Mrs. Leedon, I repeat. Right or wrong what was then done can never be undone."

"Stay a moment, Ellen. What I have to tell you is of such importance, that I must beg you to hear me patiently." She took my hand and drew me to the sofa by her.

"At that time I acted, as I still think, for the best; but two years ago I fear I made a mistake—that is, your aunt and I. Soon after your engagement to Mr. Denton, I received a letter from my son, considerably after date, enclosing one for you. He told me that he purposed coming home in a few months, and as he had now an appointment which would enable him to marry, he hoped to persuade you to return with him as his wife. As your uncle had forbidden any correspondence, he enclosed the letter for you in mine."

I sprang to my feet. "And why did I not have that letter?"

"Be calm, Ellen. Indeed, my dear, I am now very sorry. I took my letter to show to your aunt and aunt, and by their advice destroyed the enclosure. They thought you were at last settled in your mind, and happy; and of course, wished to avoid such a terrible upset as a renewal of the past would have caused."

"It was a shameful breach of trust, Mrs. Leedon," I exclaimed vehemently, "and cruel, very cruel! I was no young child to be treated so," and I buried my face in my hands. Where now was my boasted self-possession? I was sobbing bitterly. At last I raised my head.

"And what did Harry say when he heard of it?"

"My poor child," said Mrs. Leedon, "he said nothing—only that there was now no reason for his return to England."

"I must go now," I said faintly, for I felt worn out and miserable. "Do not send for me, or ever speak of it again, please."

Her eyes were full of tears as she accompanied me to the door.

"Try to forgive me, Nellie. I would give much for you to meet each other again. At all events, he knows the truth now. Don't think too hardly of me!"

As I crossed the field which lay between Mrs. Leedon's house and the high road my mind was full of confusion; grief and indignation predominated, and then a wild hope suddenly sprang up, but that brought me to myself. "This is madness," I thought, "I am but laying the foundation for future disappointment and sorrow."

Before I passed through the gate I folded my hands upon it, closed my eyes, and muttered, "Thy will be done;" then I dried my eyes, and walked quickly homewards. As I gazed round on the wide, flat fields, and straight road, I could not help likening the landscape to my life—sameness, monotony, and, when it should please God to take my one kind friend from me, great loneliness. And yet it need not be unhappy. Summer would come in its season to brighten the fields, and even now the hoar-frost was sparkling in the sun. And then I had the privilege of a straight path of duty which could not be mistaken.

The long road seemed to stretch on to the horizon, and straight before me the sun, round and crimson, had just touched the earth.

The road was very lonely, and as I could only see one solitary human being approaching me in the distance, I quickened my steps, for Mrs. Fanshawe was apt to be nervous when I came out late. As he approached I perceived it was a tall man, wrapped in a plaid. My eyes were too much dazzled by the sun for me to see his face, but I thought he was looking earnestly at me. He walked a few steps past me, and then returned, saying, "Will you kindly direct me to Mrs. Leedon's cottage at Earlswood?"

I turned round and looked at him, then I involuntarily held out my hands. They were warmly clasped, and in a moment I was pressed to this breast.

"Harry!"

"Nellie, darling, are you glad to see me again?"



THE PLAYMATES.

—and so the reprieve had come. But hardly had the final stroke sounded when a maid-servant burst into the room.

"Come quick, sir; there is a messenger!" My aunt and uncle followed her quickly. I rose also, but staggered and sank back on the sofa.

"Sit still, Nellie," said my bridesmaid, Mary Lee; "I'll come and tell you all about it," and she ran after them, followed by the other guests.

They seemed a long time away, and at last I got up, and like one in a dream groped my way to the kitchen.

It was a large, gloomy place at any time, and that morning there was no light from without, the panes were so blocked up with snow; only the fire lighted up the group before me. The messenger—a tall, strong navy, but evidently much exhausted—sat by the hearth, the melting snow forming a pool around him. My aunt, seated at the table, looked as if she were fainting, while my uncle questioned the man in a subdued voice. Every face looked pale and horrified.

"What is the matter?" I asked, and my voice sounded to myself as if it were a long way off.

"There has been an accident with the dog-cart, Nellie," said Mary Lee, putting her arm round me.

"Is any one hurt?"

A pause. "Mr. Denton is hurt, my dear," said my uncle.

"Much?" I whispered, for my voice seemed to have gone from me.

I looked from one to the other as no answer

had never had children of their own, and his wife was a confirmed invalid. With this new home health returned both to body and mind. For some years I had lived in a world of my own, with but one object and one end in view. I thought that I tried to do my duty—to bear patiently the monotonous routine of my uncle's house—not to reply to my aunt's often harsh words. I taught in the schools, made flannels for the poor; and yet I lived really and truly for myself, with but little sympathy for those immediately around me.

There was a different atmosphere in Dr. Fanshawe's house. His noble, untrifling work amongst the sick and suffering filled me with wonder and admiration, and so did the patience and unselfishness of his gentle, ladylike wife, who had been confined to her couch with a spinal complaint for many years.

In a few months, however, came a great trial. The strong man fell sick, and died; I nursed him to the last, and I promised never to leave his poor wife. It was a sad blow to her at first, but borne with her usual quiet resignation. Now she is quite cheerful again. I know she thinks her time here will be but short, and the hope of a happy meeting with him she loves is her chief solace. I too am resigned and happy. The doctor's will has removed one source of anxiety as to the future, and I am now eight-and-twenty, and feel that I can settle down thankfully in that state of life in which it has pleased a good God to place me.

I can even write calmly of Harry, who I know is alive and getting on well. Of course he is nothing to me now, and I dare say has almost forgotten me in all these years. Well! such things