

"The World, The Flesh and The Devil."

By MAY AUSTIN.

There was a dumb ache in Agnes's heart as she stood once more in the well-loved home. It was as dear to her to-day, dearer than on the day when she had left it; but how shabby it had grown, and her mother had become thinner, paler, smaller. The brown hair, whose brownness had been Agnes's pride, was plentifully streaked with grey. The black gown she wore was more brown than black from constant wear, and there was a neat darn in each elbow; her quick eye took it all in. The carefully laid tea table, the coloured mat put so as to hide a patch in the table cloth, the chipped butter dish, the broken knives.

A bitterness rose now as she contrasted Mrs. Melville's luxury with her mother's poverty. Why should things be so? Her mother was good, and kind, and unselfish, and made the best of what life gave her, while Mrs. Melville turned all things into a misery.

She was, for the time, too oppressed with the sense of poverty to see the compensation which showed form in her thought.

Things seemed even worse the next day, when her sister Katherine closeted her in her room and laid their affairs fully before her eyes.

There were bills owing and no money due; things had never been at such a low ebb before.

"Why! I ever hate to go out walking," said Katherine, vehemently. "I feel just as if all those unpaid bills were posted on my back, plain to everybody's sight. How is it going to end? Oh! Agnes, do you believe it is possible that there are people happy enough to have no debt pressing upon them?"

There is no doubt that though other sorrows may be more acute, there is no greater trial than this of inadequate means; the constant sense of pressure upon an empty purse; the hundred and one miseries and mortifications which follow poverty as closely as an eagle his prey.

"The older we grow, the more we realize that life is a struggle for existence," said Agnes.

"I won't accept that," Katherine answered petulantly. "Something must turn up; there is always matrimony before us,—the probability of some man being idiot enough to wish to encumber himself with a penniless wife."

Agnes flushed at the mention of matrimony. She would not view it as a way out of pecuniary difficulties. But yet, if she cared for some one, looked up to and respected him, would it not be a comfort to have him to stand between her and the world?

She smiled just then, for she thought of Maxwell Melville.

CHAPTER XII.

"Did you think I would let you go?"

When one is in misery, every moment mounts upon it. Things get worse and worse. Your spirits sink lower and lower, but there must be a reaction!

The reaction set in with the Powers about a month after Agnes's home-coming. That morning the last straw had been added to Agnes's cup of bitterness. She had gone to get some groceries, and they had refused to let anything more go out of the shop into their hands until some money was forthcoming.

The grocer, a tall, black-bearded Irishman, blanched as he spoke, and Agnes, even in that first moment of overpowering humiliation, realized the man had right on his side. As he spoke, the words cut into Agnes's spirit like cruel knife stabs.

"Indeed, I am sorry Miss."

What was the man saying?

An advertisement of Pears' Soap took huge proportions and danced before her eyes.

"Use Pears' Soap."

The letters seemed alive!

"Use Pears' Soap."

"The bill has been running now three months or more, Miss."

"Use Pears' Soap."

What a farce it all was!

"Three months, Miss; that isn't business."

Agnes brought herself to with a strong effort and hurried out, throbbing with pain. Her mother was ill and worried. This must be kept from her.

There was a new ten dollar note upstairs in her box. She had laid it away for Christmas presents!

When the grocer saw this note, when his greasy fingers closed over its crispness, he smiled complaisantly. Was there nothing else she wished for? The things would go over at once!

Agnes did not go straight home. She went for a walk instead, not into the fashionable portion of the town, but down a narrow side street in the east end,—a street about which something of the country still clings.

Here bright-eyed French girls fling laughing words at each other from door-step to door-step, and pinafores children play by the roadside without danger of death.

There was a forge in this street. Agnes stopped at the door to watch the smithy holding a horse's hoof against his worn leather apron as he pounded in the nails, and the fire flamed in the furthest corner, where the sparks flew as the hammer descended upon a red-hot wheel. Clip! Clip! Clip! It made her mind revert to Martin Maynard and Alminere. When we are suffering, it lessens that suffering to think of others!

When she returned home she was calmed. A peep into

the pantry satisfied her the groceries had come. She went on up to her room and then came down to do some practising. She must not neglect her music, as she was trying to get pupils. She was at the piano in the little drawing-room when a ring came at the door bell, and then someone marched right in and confronted her.

Maxwell Melville! looking very fair, and very big and broad, in that dingy room.

"You! You!" she cried as she shook hands with him.

Here Maxwell imprisoned one of her slender hands.

"Did you think I would let you go darling?"

"Mr. Melville!"

"You know that I love you."

Both hands were his now.

"Max! Max!"

"And that you are going to marry me."

His arm was around her. His cheek pressed close to hers; but she did not draw herself away. She yielded to his warm embrace, and his hot, passionate kisses. So he was answered.

Mrs. Power found them sitting together on the sofa when she came downstairs. There were explanations at once.

Maxwell looked very tall and manly as he stood before Mrs. Power and asked for her consent. But her consent was a mere matter of form. He was sure of it before he asked. And had he not Agnes's promise.

Katherine was in high glee. This was the turn of the tide! She told Maxwell so openly! She thought it was the jolliest thing in the world to get married. She wished she was going to be; but Agnes was next best!

Of course Maxwell spent the day with them, and then he put up at an hotel near by. He could hardly tear himself away from Agnes's side, and it was decided she would marry him in a month. The next morning's mail brought a letter with a foreign stamp for Mrs. Power. Katherine received it at the door and carried it in hot haste to her mother.

"More good fortune," she cried, and her prophecy was a true one.

The letter was from a distant cousin of her father's. He was an old bachelor and rich. He had only just heard of their father's death and the pecuniary loss to them. In all these years why had they never written.

"I'd have written to the dear old boy like a shot," broke in Katherine here, "only, unfortunately, I had never heard of his existence."

"Their interests should henceforth be his," he wrote. "He was on his way to them, and he enclosed a cheque."

They all cried over that cheque. It meant so much to them. The freedom from debt. Comforts long undreamed of.

"And your trousseau, Agnes dear," cried Mrs. Power. She always thought of her girls first.

"What a delicious old darling he must be," said Katherine. "Perhaps I shall marry him."

It wasn't very funny, but they all laughed. They were easily moved to tears and laughter just then.

Old Major Power arrived in time for Agnes's wedding, and took Mrs. Power and Katherine metaphorically under his wing. They all lost their hearts to him at once—he was so cheery and kind, and had such plans for the future.

"Tut! tut!" he would say, when they ventured to remonstrate at his generosity. "I have more money than I know what to do with, and it pleases me to make you happy. So self is at the bottom of this as it is at the bottom of much so-called generosity."

Dr. Maitland and his bride came down for the wedding. Hugo sent his excuses and a present to the bride—knives, forks and spoons! They were very handsome ones, but Katherine turned up her pretty nose when Agnes expressed her appreciation of the gift.

"Nasty, uninteresting things," she exclaimed. "If ever anyone gives me such a pokey present I will—cut them!"

Then she went off laughing at her own wit! She had changed again into the happy child she had been before the deadening influence of poverty had made itself felt.

Agnes said her cup of blessing was full to overflowing. She was overjoyed at her mother's good fortune as well as at her own happiness.

The wedding day dawned as brightly as wedding days should dawn, according to tradition, for the welfare of the bride. It was a very lovely bride, too, that the sun shone on.

Major Power's present to her had been a cheque for a large figure, and this she had taken for her wedding things. Her dress was plain white velvet. It fitted to perfection her rounded, graceful form, and fell plainly from her waist, to lengthen out into soft, rich folds, and the veil that fell back from her face made a pretty background for the outline of her pure, fair features. She would have no orange blossoms; but in her hand she held a huge bunch of white China asters!

Mrs. Power gave her away, and it was to her mother she gave her last smile and glance as "Agnes Power."

Just as the clergyman pronounced them "man and wife," the sun glinted in through a high window and slanted down on the bride's bent head, turning that white band of hair, waving from the left temple, to brightest silver. It fell on her eyes, too, and dazzled them, so that she could not see clearly when she turned to her husband at the conclusion of the sacred service. And then she started. She had never seen Maxwell look like Hugo before.

"I am not going away from you for so very long," said Agnes out of the car window to her mother. She, Major Power and Katherine had come to the station to start them

on their wedding journey. "It is so good of Max promising I shall come to you whenever I wish to. Why, it will hardly seem like separation from you, dear mother."

Then there was a whistle! A handful of rice and a slipper from Katherine's pocket. A cry of God speed!—and then they were off!

CHAPTER XIII.

"But if we guessed wrong?"

Six months of married life past happily and uneventfully.

Agnes had always longed for a life like this—a life of luxury.

A library of her favourite authors, fine pictures, music and horses. Everything she could possibly wish for seemed hers. And the hope was before her that gives joy to all good women. Before the autumn she expected to be a mother.

One day, in going over some old books of her husband's, a note fell from between the pages of one, where it had evidently lain long. It fluttered to her feet, and, as she stooped to pick it up, the signature "Alminere" caught her eye, and at the same instant "My own darling Max." Her heart beat like a live, frightened thing, struggling to burst its bondage. Her face was whiter than the paper in her hand.

There are times when the sense of unreality seizes you so deeply that you search for some familiar thought, and then cling to it with all the force of a man who hangs over some deep precipice, and whose grasp of a strong overhanging branch is his only safety. The branch is strong, but has he the power to keep his hold of it?

In this first fearful moment of loss of faith in her husband, Agnes clung to the thought of her dear, patient mother.

"Oh! mother," she moaned, "mother." But there was no gentle voice to answer her. Her words fell unheeded against the curtained windows and the pictured walls!

Max! Her husband! It was he, then! He! She could scarcely comprehend the bitter truth, but this was not to be refuted. She would not read the note. She scorned to do it. She lit it by a gasellier and let it burn in her hand. How it writhed under the flame! Just so was a her spirit writhing within her.

Then she went over to the window and looked mechanically out upon the garden. How she had wronged Hugo. But Maxwell's own words had made her wrong him. He had not only deceived her, but purposely misled her.

It was a dangerous thing, this sudden revulsion of feeling towards one she had for so long harboured hard thoughts against. Strong natures like Agnes's feel acutely; there is no half measure with them. In that one moment all respect for her husband died, and love followed that death. She revolted in spirit against him. She felt she must rush away—home to her mother. Anywhere! so as to leave him. But then the thought of the little child, whose advent she had looked forward to with such joy, restrained and calmed her. She must bear this bitterness in silence. Her life was not her own but her child's! But she changed after this. She yielded to her husband's caresses, but she never responded to them as she had been used; and he, confident of her affection and of his own love, never noticed the change.

"I say, Ag," he said across the breakfast table one morning. "Hugo writes he is coming here for a few days. I was beginning to think he didn't approve of my choice, or that he was jealous, he so persistently refused all my invitations."

Again that cold feeling crept about Agnes's heart that had held it that summer morning when Hugo had left her in the garden. Was she glad he was coming? She knew she was glad when he came, and wondered at it! There was always that consciousness within her that she had wronged him, and from this consciousness grew her infinite kindness.

In the midst of deeper feeling there is a lighter current that runs counter with it. In a mind quick to see the ridiculous, this is always much developed. Agnes had it to a large degree. Above all she felt deeply, light thoughts would thrust themselves. Hugo arrived one morning just before breakfast. She met him in the hall stepping out from behind a heavy portière. They shook hands in silence, and the look in his eyes puzzled her. Was it pity? It was something very tender. Something which made her glad to think of, and then ashamed of being glad.

He and Maxwell kept up a rapid conversation after they sat down at the table, and these were her silent commentaries:

"Maxwell smiles too often; it shows weakness in a man." * * * * "I wonder could Hugo ever guess why I was unkind to him. * * * He has grown quite bald on the temples. How I used to hate bald men!" * * * * "Is life portioned out for us like a ball of twine?—when it has rolled to the end there is an end of it!" * * * * "Hugo doesn't eat so gracefully as Maxwell. Gracious! what a mouthful?" * * * * "What a lot of sacrifice it takes to keep us alive? We are beautifully cultivated creatures, are we not? We have the dear little lambs so deliciously dressed, and talk such pretty sentiment over each mouthful. What do we care if the old mother sheep is bleating in the meadow so long as we don't hear her." * * * * "Oh, if I could only love Maxwell as I used; but we can't cry back a lost affection." * * *