

HOW IT ALL CAME ROUND.

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

CHAPTER XV.—MR. HARMAN'S CONFIDENCE.

All through dinner, Hinton had felt that strange sense of depression stealing upon him. He was a man capable of putting a very great restraint upon his feelings, and he so behaved during the long and weary meal as to rouse no suspicions, either in Charlotte's breast or in the far sharper one of the Australian uncle. But, nevertheless, so distressing was the growing sense of coming calamity, that he felt the gay laugh of his betrothed almost distressing, and was truly relieved when he had to change it for the gravity of her father. As he went from the dining-room to Mr. Harman's study, he reflected with pleasure that his future father-in-law was always grave, that never in all the months of their frequent intercourse had he seen him even once indulge in what could be called real gaiety of heart. Though this fact rather coupled with his own suspicions, still he felt a momentary relief in having to deal to-night with one who treated life from its sensible standpoint.

He entered the comfortable study. Mr. Harman was sunk down in an arm-chair, a cup of untraced coffee stood by his side; the moment he heard Hinton's step, however, he rose, and going forward, took the young man's hand and wrung it warmly.

The room was lit by candles, but there were plenty of them, and Hinton almost started when he perceived how ill the old man looked.

"Charlotte has told you what I want you for to-night, eh, Hinton?" said Mr. Harman.

"Yes; Charlotte has told me," answered John Hinton. Then he sat down opposite his future father-in-law, who had resumed his arm-chair by the fire. Standing up, Mr. Harman looked ill, but sunk into his chair, with his bent, white head, and drawn, anxious face, and hands worn to emaciation, he looked twenty times worse. There seemed nearly a lifetime between him and that blithe-looking Jasper, whom Hinton had left with Charlotte in the dining-room. Mr. Harman, sitting by his fire, with fire-light and candle-light shining full upon him, looked a very old man indeed.

"I am sorry to see you so unwell, sir," began Hinton.

"I am not well—not at all well. I don't want Charlotte to know. But there need be no disguises between you and me; of course I show it; but we will come to that presently. First about your own affairs. Lottie has told you what I want you for to-night?"

"She has, Mr. Harman. She says that you have been good and generous enough to say you will take away the one slight embargo you made to our marriage—that we may become man and wife before I bring you news of that brief."

"Yes, Hinton; that is what I said to her this morning; I repeat the same to you to-night. You may fix your wedding-day when you like—I dare say you have fixed it."

"Charlotte has named the twentieth of next June; sir; but—"

"The twentieth of June! that is four months away. I did not want her to put it off as far as that. However, women, even the most sensible, have such an idea of the time it takes to get a trousseau. The twentieth of June! You can make it sooner, can't you?"

"Four months is not such a long time, sir. We have a house to get, and furniture to buy. Four months will be necessary to make these arrangements."

"No, they won't; for you have no such arrangements to make. You are to come and live here when you marry. This will be your house when you marry, and I shall be your guest. I can give you Charlotte, Hinton; but I cannot do without her myself."

"But this house means a very, very large income, Mr. Harman. Is it prudent that we should begin like this? For my part I should much rather do so less."

"You may sell the house if you fancy, and take a smaller one; or go more into the country. I only make one proviso—that while I live, I live with my only daughter."

"And with your son, too, Mr. Harman," said Hinton, just letting his hand touch for an instant the wrinkled hand which lay on Mr. Harman's knee.

The old man smiled one of those queer, sad smiles which Hinton had often in vain tried to fathom. Responding to the touch of the vigorous young hand, he said—

"I have always liked you, Hinton. I believe, in giving you my dear child, I give her to one who will make her happy."

"Happy! yes, I shall certainly try to make her happy," answered Hinton, with a sparkle in his eyes.

"And that is the main thing; better than wealth, or position, or anything else on God's earth. Happiness comes with goodness; you know, my dear fellow; no bad man was ever happy. If you and Charlotte get this precious thing into your lives you must both be good. Don't let the evil touch you ever so slightly. If you do, happiness flies."

"I quite believe you," answered Hinton. "Well about money matters. I am, as you know, very rich. I shall settle plenty of means upon my daughter; but it will be better for you to enter into all these matters with my solicitor. When can you meet him?"

"Whenever convenient to you and to him, sir."

"I will arrange it for you, and let you know."

"Mr. Harman, may I say a word for myself?" suddenly asked the young man.

"Most certainly. Have I been so garrulous as to keep you from speaking?"

"Not at all, sir; you have been more than generous. You have been showing me the rose-color from your point of view. Now it is not all rose-color."

"I was coming to that; it is by no means all rose-color. Well, say your say first."

"You are a very rich man, and you are giving me your daughter; so endeavoring, that any man in the world would say I had drawn a prize in money, if in nothing else."

Mr. Harman smiled.

"I fear you must bear that," he said. "I do not see that you can support Charlotte without some assistance from me."

"I certainly could not do so. I have exactly two hundred a year, and that, as you were pleased to observe before, would be, to one brought up as Charlotte has been, little short of beggary."

"To Charlotte it certainly would be almost beggary."

"Mr. Harman, I have some pride in me. I am a barrister by profession. Some barristers get high in their profession."

"Undoubtedly some do."

"Those who are brilliant do," continued Hinton. "I have abilities, whether they are brilliant or not, time will show. Mr. Harman, I should like to bring you news of that brief before we are married."

"I can throw you in the way of getting plenty of briefs when you are my son-in-law. I promise you, you will no longer be a barrister with nothing to do."

"Yes, sir; but I want this before my marriage."

"My influence can give it to you before."

"But that was against our agreement, Mr. Harman. I want to find that brief which is to do so much for me without your help."

"Very well. Find it before the twentieth of June."

After this the two men were silent for several moments. John Hinton, though in no measure comforted, felt it impossible to say more just then, and Mr. Harman, with a face full of care, kept gazing into the fire. John Hinton might have watched that face with interest, had he not been otherwise occupied. After this short silence Mr. Harman spoke again.

"You think me very unselfish in all this; perhaps even my conduct surprises you."

"I confess it rather does," answered Hinton.

"Will you oblige me by saying how?"

"For one thing, you give so much and expect so little."

"Ay, so it appears at first sight; but I told you it was not all rose-color; I am coming to that part. Your pride has been roused—I can soothe it."

"I love Charlotte too much to feel any pride in the matter," replied Hinton with some heat.

"I don't doubt your affection, my good fellow; and I put against it an equal amount on Charlotte's part; a noble and beautiful woman, and plenty of money, with money's attendant mercies. I fear even your affection is outweighed in that balance."

"Nothing can outweigh affection," replied Hinton boldly.

Mr. Harman smiled, and this time stretching out his hand he touched the young man's.

"You are right, my dear boy; and because I am so well aware of this, I give my only girl to a man who is a gentleman, and who loves her. I ask for nothing else in Charlotte's husband, but I am anxious for you to be her husband at once."

"And that is what puzzles me," said Hinton. "You have a sudden reason for this hurry. We are both young; we can wait; there is no hardship in waiting."

"There would be a hardship to me in your waiting longer now. You are quite right in saying I have a sudden reason; this time last night I had no special thought of hurrying on Charlotte's marriage. Her uncle proposed it; I considered his reasoning good—so good, that I gave Charlotte permission this morning to fix with you the time for the wedding. But even then delay would have troubled me but little; now it does; now even these four short months trouble me sorely."

"Why?" asked Hinton.

"Why? You mentioned my health, and observed that I looked ill; I said I would come to that presently. I am ill; I look very ill. I have seen physicians. To-day I went to see Sir George Anderson; he told me, without any preamble the truth. My dear fellow, I want you to be my child's protector in a time of trouble, for I am a dying man."

Hinton had never come face to face with death in his life before. He started forward now and clasped his hands.

"Dying?" he repeated, in a tone of unbelief and consternation.

"Yes; you don't see it, for I am going about. I shall go about as much as usual to the very last. Your idea of dying men is that they stay in bed and get weak, and have a living death long before the last great mercy comes. That will not be my case. I shall be as you see me now to the very last moment; then some day, or perhaps some night, you will come into this room, or into another room, it does not a bit matter where, and find me dead."

"And must this come soon?" repeated Hinton.

"It may not come for some months; it may stay away for a year; but again it may come to-night or to-morrow."

"Good God!" repeated Hinton.

"Yes, Mr. Hinton, you are right, in the contemplation of such a solemn and terrible event, to mention the name of our Creator. He is a good God, but His very goodness makes Him terrible. He is a God who will see justice done; who will by no means cleanse the guilty. I am going into His presence—a sinful old man. Well, I bow to His decree. But enough of this; you see my reasons for wishing for an early marriage for my child."

Mr. Harman, I am deeply, deeply pained and shocked. May I know the nature of your malady?"

"It is unnecessary to discuss it, and does no good; suffice it to know that I carry a disease within me which by its very nature must end both soon and suddenly; also that that there is no cure for this disease."

"Are you telling me all this as a secret?"

"As a most solemn and sacred secret. My brother suspects something of it, but no one, no one in all the world knows the full and solemn truth but yourself."

"Then Charlotte is not to be told?"

"Charlotte! Charlotte! It is for her sake I have confided to you all this, that you may guard her from such a knowledge."

John Hinton was silent for a moment or two; if he disliked Charlotte having a secret from him, much more did he protest against the knowledge which now was forced upon him being kept from her. He saw that Mr. Harman was firmly set on keeping his child in the dark; he disapproved, but he hardly dared, so much did he fear to agitate the old man, to make any vigorous stand against a decree which seemed to him both cruel and unjust. He must say something, however, so he began gently—

"I will respect your most sacred confidence, Mr. Harman; without your leave no word from me shall convey this knowledge to Charlotte; but pardon me if I say a word. You know your own child very well, but I also know Charlotte; she has lived for all her talent and her five-and-twenty years, the sheltered life of a child hitherto—but that is nothing; she is a noble woman, she has a

noble woman's heart; in trouble, such a nature as hers could rise and prove itself great. Don't you suppose, when by-and-by the end really comes, she will blame me, and even perhaps you, sir, for keeping this knowledge from her?"

"She will never blame her old father. She will see, bless her, that I did it in love; you will tell her that, be sure you tell her that when the time comes; please God, you will be her husband then, and you will have the right to comfort her."

"No, for you cannot see it with my eyes; that child and I have lived the most unbroken life of peace and happiness together; neither storm nor cloud has visited us in one another. The shadow of death must not embitter our last few months; she must be my bright girl to the very last. Some day, if you and she ever have a daughter, you will understand my feeling—at least in part you will understand it."

"I cannot understand it now, but I can at least respect it," answered the young man.

CHAPTER XVI.—"VENGEANCE IS MINE."

When Hinton at last left him, Mr. Harman sat on for a long time by his study fire. The fire burnt low but he did not replenish it, neither did he touch the cold coffee which still remained on his table. After an hour or so of musings, during which the old face seemed each moment to grow more sad and careworn, he stretched out his hand to ring his bell.

Almost instantly was the summons answered—a tall footman stood before him.

"Dennis, has Mr. Jasper left?"

"Yes, sir. He said he was going to his club. I can have him fetched, sir."

"Do not do so. After Mr. Hinton leaves, ask Miss Harman to come here."

The footman answered softly in the affirmative and withdrew, and Mr. Harman still sat on alone. He had enough to think about. For the first time to-day death had come and stared him in the face; very close indeed his own death was looking at him.

He was a brave man, but the sight of the cold, grim thing brought so close, so inevitably near, was scarcely to be endured with his equanimity. After a time rising from his seat he went to a bookcase and took down, not a treatise on medicine or philosophy, but an old Bible.

"Dying men are said to find comfort here," he said faintly to himself. He put one of the candles on the table and opened the book. It was an old Bible, but John Harman was not very well acquainted with its contents.

"They tell me there is much comfort here," he said to himself. He turned the old and yellow leaves.

"Vengeance is mine. I will repay." These were the words on which his eyes fell.

Comfort! He closed the book with a groan and returned it to the bookshelf. But in returning it he chose the highest shelf of all and pushed it far back and well out of sight.

He had scarcely done so before a light, quick step was heard at the door, and Charlotte, her eyes and cheeks both bright, entered.

"My dearest, my darling," he said. He came to meet her, and folded her in his arms. He was a dying man, and a sin-laden man, but not the less sweet was that young embrace, that smothered cheek, those bright, happy eyes.

"You are better, father; you look better," said his daughter.

"I have been rather weak and low all the evening, Lottie; but I am much better for seeing you. Come here and sit at my feet, my dear love."

"I am very happy this evening," said Charlotte, seating herself on her father's foot-stool, and laying her hand on his knee.

"I can guess the reason, my child; your wedding day is fixed."

"This morning, father, I said it should be the twentieth of June; John seemed quite satisfied, and four months were not a bit too long for our preparations; but to-night he has changed his mind; he wants our wedding to be in April. I have not given in—not yet. Two months seem so short."

"You will have plenty of time to prepare in two months, dear; and April is a nice time of year. If I were you, I would not oppose Hinton."