

MARCH.

SONNET BY HENRY PRINCE.

With herculean form and strength of Mars,
On boreal blasts and tempests fierce and wild;
Behold me! March!—the year's first male-born child,
Equipp'd for strife and elemental wars.

With mighty grasp soon from the Earth I'll fling
This icy armour, belted to her breast;
So birds, song-throated, homeward from the west
May wing their truant flight to welcome spring.

With sun-flush'd shield and spear this wintry gloom
Shall soon be pierced,—and dormant life shall rise
From her long death-like trance, in sweetsurprise,
And thro' a thousand channels blush and bloom.
Like many a hero then must I lie down
To die,—my ears unblest'd with my deserved renown.

JOAN:

A TALE,

BY RHODA BROUGHTON,

AUTHOR OF

"Cometh up as a Flower," "Red as a Rose is she," etc.

PART II.

CHAPTER III.

"How you dazzle one!" cries Lalage, advancing into the room, blinking her eyes, unused, after her long, dark drive, to the light; "how bright you are!—is there any one here that I know, I wonder? I hope, if there is, that he will come and claim acquaintance with me, for I can see nothing!" Then, as her sight suddenly recovers its wonted strength and clearness, she turns her quick, bold eyes round the room. In a moment they have lit upon Joan. "Miss Dering!—is it Miss Dering!—how very absurd!—Anthony, here is Miss Dering!—you do not mean to say that you do not remember Miss Dering!"

There comes no answer of any kind; at least in words. What answer is written on his face, Joan can but dimly conjecture, for her eyes refuse to lift themselves to his. She puts out a small and icy hand in the direction where she feels that he is, and is aware that it is taken for a second into one as cold; then instantly dropped.

"How small the world is!" cries Lalage, lightly; then quickly turning, in answer to an inquiry from her hostess, to a subject that is much nearer her heart: "Famished, my dear? of course we are! do not we look like it? You have kept some dinner for us, I hope—yes?—that is right! And how soon do you think it will be ready? do beg them to make haste!"

"Certainly!"

They have left the room now, and Joan breathes more freely; Lalage still laughing, and talking emphatically and rather loudly about her own hunger, and Anthony dead—dead silent. It is some time before they return; not until after the longed-for and so eagerly-asked-after dinner has been done justice to. In the meantime Joan remains in the corner of the old-fashioned sofa behind the work-table; the same spot where she was when the tones of Lalage's remembered voice first smote her like a sword. Her head is down, bent over her work; all the pretty tools of her trade are spread around her. She has all the air of a persistent industry, and yet is, in effect, absolutely idle. About her goes on the hum of light talk, utterly unheard; a wave that flows round her without reaching or touching her. After a while she becomes aware that the ill-starred millionaire is seated alongside of her.

CHAPTER IV.

Two nights and a day have passed since the arrival of the Wolfersmans. Joan's cheeks and lips and heart have had thirty-six good hours in which to recover themselves; and pretty well righted they are. At least, such is the impression that the outside gives; and, happily for all of us, none can peep inside the machine and see what tricks our wheels and springs are playing us.

Joan has borne Rupert's French, and Faustine's music—the two most trying items of the curriculum—with about as much patience as usual; and now the workman's bell has long and loud rung twelve. The lesson-books are slammed with joyous disrespect. The children's fidgety limbs are released from their chairs.

The children participate themselves through the door, and, throwing themselves on Colonel Wolfersman, drag him into the room. Faustine and Rupert are urging him with imperative small hands, and Montacute by moral pressure. He is in the room now; though (having her back to him) she does not see him, she yet feels it; standing tall and silent by the door. Silent—for it would be useless for him as yet to attempt to speak, such is the Babel of loud little voices that uplifts itself round him.

"It was not my fault!" he says, in a low voice of apology, speaking with an uncertain smile; "I did not mean to disturb you!"

"It—it—is of no consequence!" she says, stammering a little; "you—you are welcome—we have finished lessons."

As she speaks, she turns quickly away, and begins with trembling hands to collect the

grammars, dictionaries, and copy-books, which the pupils, in their laudable eagerness to arrive at a just knowledge of the laws of morality, have forgotten and neglected. They have again seized upon their guest now, rather perhaps to his relief, and have dragged him off to the window, to show him Faustine's canaries, and Monty's scolding bullfinch, who are swinging aloft in gay cages. They keep him there, engaged in desultory conversation for some minutes.

Joan blesses them for it. For a little while she is not aware of what is passing. There is a sort of thickness in her hearing; but, by-and-by, she is herself again. She hears Rupert's voice successfully lifted above those of his brother and sister, and apparently engaged in giving a fragmentary biography of his family.

"My papa is a very nice gentleman," he is saying, boastfully; "and he has a beautiful dog-cart; and when he dies it will be mine!"

"But you would rather have your papa than the dog-cart, would not you?" suggests Wolfersman, mildly.

"Y—s" (very hesitatingly and doubtfully, "but" (with great alacrity and animation)—but it is a beautiful dog-cart!"

"There is papa!" cries Faustine, pricking up her ears at the sound of distant voices; "he is talking to mamma."

In a moment they have all sped away on this fresh track; out of the room, along the passages, down the stairs, their six feet go flying and pattering. They take noise and ease with them—they leave silence and embarrassment behind.

Deprived of their chaperonage, the two victims, whom they have led into this snare and then left to make the best of their way out of it again, stand stupidly mute; Anthony by the window, Joan by the table. But for the shrilling of the canaries and the little hopping noise of the sleek bullfinch from perch to perch, there would be dead silence. Anthony is the first to regain the power of articulation:

"So—so—this is your kingdom!" he says, suddenly and awkwardly, snatching a hurried glance at the face from which he has, for the last two days, been averting his eyes as if it were some unpleasant sight.

"Yes, this is my kingdom!" she answers, laughing nervously.

Then there is silence again. To both it seems as if, in the whole range of language, there were nothing else left to say.

"They are kind to you, I suppose?" he says abruptly; "they treat you well?"

She draws a long breath, and passes her hand over her eyes as one that awakes from a trance.

"Yes," she says, with almost her usual composure, smiling quietly. "I am afraid that I cannot pose for an ill-used governess. I have not one single slight or insult to boast of. I can only hope that Faustine will be as slow as she can in growing up; I shudder to see how tall she is already!"

"They treat you quite like one of the family, in fact?" he says, with a bitter, short laugh. "How kind of them! Well" (with an impatient toss of his head), "we all know that it is a topsy-turvy world. When I think—when I remember—"

"When you remember the old Dering days?" she says, with a sad tranquility; "the days when they were plain Smiths, before they had effloresced into Deloraines: when I used to ask them to my mixum gatherum parties, and think myself very condescending for shaking hands with him! Well" (with a slightly ironical smile). "I have my reward. Now that the tables are turned, he very seldom forgets to bid me 'good-morning,' or 'good-evening.'"

She says it with a matter-of-fact composure that her auditor is unable to emulate. Neither voice nor face is well under his command. He turns away and leans out of the window, round which the clematis-sprays and the flushing Virginia creeper make a thick and pleasant frame. Questions that he could not allow himself while he was facing her, he can put now.

"Are you happy?" he asks, in a sudden quick voice, so low that she can scarcely catch the words, which seem to be addressed rather to the birds and the flowers, than at least, might certainly answer "yes," than to her.

She starts a little at the unexpected question, and sighs.

"Happy?" she repeats with a lingering accent of reflection; "it is a question that I never ask myself; which, I suppose is an argument that I am happy—as no one never asks one's self whether one is alive. I have moderate, healthy work that is not disagreeable to me, and that is quite within my powers; I have no pain of mind or body; I have no desire to hurry or retard the days as they go—quite content that they should slide on smoothly thus to the end. Yes—surely I am happy!" There is a tone of involuntary inquiry and appeal in her last words. She has certainly no intention of making him the judge of the measure of her content, and yet there is a note of indecision and questioning in her speech. He makes, however, no comment on it. He has stretched out his arm far down, to pluck from the house-wall a golden-hearted Marshal Niel rose, that, with the giant clematis and the flaming creeper, makes a glorious trinity of colors. "And you?" she says, by-and-by, seeing that he continues silent, and speaking with an accent of quiet, grave interest.

He draws his arm in again, and it falls inertly to his side. Then he wheels back into his former position, and their sad eyes once more meet.

"You know that the Abbey is let?" he goes on, presently, casting down his eyes and speaking in a tone of sullen dejection; "it has been in our family for three centuries and a half, and it has never been let before. Do you think that that is a bitter pill to swallow? or will one grow used to that, too?"

Joan sighs.

"At least it is not sold!" she says, "at least it is yours still; was it quite—quite unavoidable? was there no help for it?"

"We might have gone on living there, if we had lived very quietly," he replies gloomily, not raising his eyes; "if we had sent away half the servants and foregone society; but" (shaking his head) "that, of course, was a sacrifice that one could not ask of any woman!"

"I suppose not," she answers, with slow and dubious assent; but against even such assent her whole soul rises up within her in rebellious outcry.

"So it is let!" he repeats, with the same depressed intonation. "I am no longer Wolfersman of the Abbey; I am Wolfersman pure and simple—Wolfersman on his own merits, and I find" (laughing ironically) "that it makes a good deal of difference!"

A great wave of compassion rushes over her heart as she looks in his good and sobered face, out of which the young jollity, the happy, causeless hilarity, foolish, yet beautiful, too, have forever disappeared.

"I am sorry!—oh, sorry!" she says, in a sighing whisper under her breath. Then, a moment later, raising eyes in which a steady light is burning: "And yet," she says, with a spirited look of courage and faith, "as I told you long ago, I have always thought that unbroken good luck is a doubtful boon to any one; it is what God gives to his choicest ones!"

"You know," he says, "that it is hard to learn one's alphabet when one is grown up. Well, that is just what I am doing: I am learning my A B C, like a great overgrown dunce. No cockney that ever lived all his life within the sound of Bow Bells knew less about the management of an estate than I did, so late in the day as it is—do you know" (with a fleeting smile) "that I have struck thirty?—I have put myself to school to my own agent. No!" (seeing her questioning look), "not at Helmsley! I do not know what heights of heroism I may yet climb by-and-by; as yet the wound is too raw; as yet" (wringing a little and flushing painfully) "I do not think I could make up my mind to leave cards at the Abbey, and ask permission to drive through the park."

He has finished, and she makes for the moment no comment. She would find it, indeed, rather difficult to do so, for the picture he has drawn of his present life, set side by side with that of his past, which is standing out so vividly and in such glorious gay colours, against the background of her memory, makes her utterance uncertain and her throat choked.

CHAPTER V.

Down-stairs they are dancing—dancing to a piano in the hall. Faintly, but yet clearly, the sounds of the oft-repeated waltz come merrily stealing through the shut doors and along the passages. Joan does not even lift her heavy head to listen. What good news or heart-lightening could any air bring her? An utter discouragement of soul is pressing her to the earth; pressing down and slaying the gentle valor of her usually steady spirit.

She presses her forehead harder still down upon her small wrists, until the strong pressure is painful, and pinches her lips tight together, to keep in the pain-cry that seems as if it must issue from them.

Who is it that thus inopportunely seeks her?—that, in this her time of freedom, when she is utterly defenceless and off guard, cruelly intrudes himself upon her? And in what plight is she to meet any curious face? any prying light? She will make no answer at all; and so perhaps the unwelcome visitor will conclude that the room is empty, and will go away.

So she lies quiet as any partridge in a furrow. But the knock is a third time repeated; and, since it is still unanswered, the door opens softly; a river of light streams in—a river which does not reach her, as she is at the farthest end of the room; and on that river, lit by that sudden flame, a man's tall figure—a man's inquiring face—make themselves seen.

"Is there any one here?" asks the man's voice, uncertainly. Joan makes no answer. Even had she not resolved to be mute, that voice, striking in so opportunely among her thoughts, would have made her dumb. "Is there any one here?" he repeats rather more loudly; "surely" (straining his eyes into the gloom), "surely I see some one!"

Concealment is no longer to be hoped for. Joan has risen to her feet.

"Yes, I am here!" she answers, in a voice which she tries to believe is tolerably firm and unfeared, trusting to the shortness of her sentence not to betray her.

"You are in the dark" cries Anthony in a tone of surprise, advancing gropingly with hands outstretched before him, a pace or two nearer to her.

"So it seems!" she answers, trying to laugh. "Were you asleep?" he asks, and, by the noise he makes in stumbling over an intervening chair, she knows that he is still approaching her. "I knocked three times, but you did not answer!"

"Am I wanted?" cries Joan, hastily, evad-

ing his question and answering it by another; "does any one want me?"

"They are dancing!" he says, still feeling his way gingerly along by the table; helping himself on by the landmarks of Joan's desk, Monty's high chair, Faustine's work-box.

"And they want me to play for them?" (in a tone of consternation, raising frightened fingers to her own face, to feel her wet eyelashes and her hot and blistered cheeks).

"No, they want you to dance, they are all dancing; I was the only person that was not; that was why they sent me, I suppose; I would not have come" (in a tone of explanation and apology) "if they had not sent me!"

"To dance!" repeats Joan, in a voice of hurried apprehension; "oh, it is out of the question!—quite out of the question!"

There is a little scraping sound; and in a moment the candles are relit. The vanished light has leaped joyfully back again, driving before it the safe convenient darkness. The direction of her voice has guided him very accurately.

"Is this the way in which you generally spend your evenings?" he asks, abruptly.

"No, that it is not!" she cries, emphatically, while a beam of eager light shoots out from the depths of her drowned eyes; "please do not go away with that idea; do not think of me as such a miserably poor creature; it is not once in a twelvemonth that such a thing happens; if you had come yesterday—if you came tomorrow—you would find me rationally occupied like any one else; oh, why"—(with an accent of impatience)—"If you must come at all—why did you not come yesterday, or to-morrow, instead of to-night?"

His eyes are wandering round the room, which looks more of a prison and less of a bower, now that its plain furniture, its globes and maps, are indicated by the little spires of light of the two composite candles, than when they were flooded by the general wash of the royal sunbeams.

"Do you spend all your life within these four walls?" he asks. "Do you never mix with them?"—nodding his head in the direction whence the sound of the merry jiggling company rises in muffled mirth.

"Sometimes," she answers, evasively; "it is as it happens—now and then."

"The children tell me," he says, speaking slowly, and shifting his position to one in which the fullest light the niggard candles give falls upon her, "that formerly—until quite lately—until a few days ago, in fact—you always used to make your appearance every evening in the drawing-room, after dinner."

"The children have very long tongues," she says, petulantly, with an embarrassed laugh.

"Tell me," he cries, stepping yet nearer to her, and fixing his grey eyes searchingly upon her, as if he would, in her despite, pierce through the poor mask of her troubled, disfigured face, and reach the verities of her clean soul—"tell me, is it a coincidence, or have I anything to say to it? We were always honest with each other, were not we? Is there any reason why we should not be honest still?"

"There is no honesty in the matter," she answers with a quiet dignity; "it is a question that you have as little right to ask as I to answer!"

"Then I withdraw it," he answers, gravely; "but, all the same" (shaking his head meaningfully), "it is not only asked, but answered. Well!" (turning slowly away, and beginning to walk toward the door), "you know best—you always know best; except once"—lowering his voice and speaking quickly, yet emphatically—"once I am very sure that you did not know best! I think that now you know it too."

He has reached the door. The handle is already turning in his fingers, when he is aware that she stands again beside him, and is lifting her charming face with a look of pure friendliness, angel-mild, to his.

"You know," she says, in a quiet, moved voice, "that it is not from any ill-will that I bear you; if I could do you any good—if I could be of any use or profit to you at any time of my life or yours—indeed, I would not spare labor or trouble to be so; but you know, as well as I do, that I cannot."

For a moment he looks at her uncertainly without answering; then, taking his resolution in both hands, speaks.

"You were always a just woman," he says, gravely; "to other people you were merciful, too; not to me. No," shaking his head "I cannot say that to me you were merciful; but until now you were always just—now you are not just!"

She is no longer looking full and directly at him. She has turned away, and is standing with her head drooped a little on her chest, and her fair hands clasped.

"I do not understand you!" she says, in a low voice.

"I have done nothing," he goes on, with gathering excitement, "to deserve being skinned and ostracized—will you persist?"—(speaking in a hurried, lowered voice, while a dull-red wave of shame rushes all over his face)—"will you persist in confounding me with that most unhappy madman, who, not well knowing what he did for raging pain, forced himself into your presence like a burglar one midnight, two years and a half ago? No!"—(seeing her put up her hands with a sudden gesture of prohibition and fear)—"no—do not be afraid—I know as well as you do, that it is a subject that will not bear handling; but, in God's name, put out