

with fright at the stern set face looking so awful in its rigidity. It was the sense of his weakness that wrung the groan and sent up the voiceless cry,—“Blot out my sin; remember it not against me.” The tempter’s power was gone, and Brandon’s wife lay on a brother’s breast.

All down that long, long hill the horses sped, seeming to gather strength instead of spending it. “Fools!” ejaculated the coachman as some hay-makers rushed to the hedge, and with loud cries flourished their forks in wild confusion. But their folly caused the men, buried out of sight as to what was coming on them, to leap as one man from their trench. The horses gained the gate as it swung to with a loud crash.

“To think not one of us is hurt,” cried the bewildered coachman, staring about in amazement. “Only my hat gone. My Lord, it’s a miracle.”

“Ought I to show my penitence is real by confessing to Brandon and Noel my sin?” was a question that long troubled the peace of Lord Somerset. But Noel’s answer when putting the requirements of confession generally before him, that if a man had not injured another, whatever the sin was, it was between himself and Maker alone, to keep the secret and repentance in his own breast. So none ever guessed how nearly shipwrecked the young Lord had been. His thankfulness knew no bounds when he saw his madness had not been understood by Violet; the terror of their situation was not a time to open her eyes to anything beyond it, and he, with the knowledge of the heart’s deceitfulness, was stronger himself—more helpful all through his life to others.

Scarcely had the one year of the two allotted to Noel for his absence gone by when the once secure house of Brandon Bros. began to show signs it was not invincible. With no one to curb his natural bent for speculation, Brandon had by little and little been drawing nearer the vortex. He had overstepped the rules and customs of so many years standing, and, once infringed, it was easy to kick them aside altogether. Unfortunately for himself as well as others, his daring ventures realized more than he expected, and full of elate pride he thought how he would show his way right and astonish Noel on his return with the wonders of his brilliant achievements; but when at the very pinnacle of success, the tide began to turn, losses followed more quickly than success had done, and whispers floated around that Brandon Bros. was shaky. Ruin was so dangerously near that without a successful venture it must come. With the despairing throw of the gambler with his last chance to retrieve, he risked all—and lost.

Never did man suffer as Brandon Travis suffered when the dread consequences of his insane folly were no longer to be evaded. The ruin to himself he could at least have faced, but to have dragged Noel down with him drove him to the utmost depths of despair. See them again he would not; reason tottered on her throne; the heavens had no little rift to let in a ray of comfort. He had steeled himself into the belief that the thoughtful reasoning he had brought to bear upon the principles of truth was a proof of a higher mental superiority than those who were content to *accept and believe* possessed. With his own hand he had closed the door against One who proved to Noel “a very present help in trouble.” Noel had implicitly obeyed the rules the doctors laid down; his wife and children demanded this at his hands, and business was not to be thought of until the symptoms causing so many anxious fears had entirely disappeared. It rested with himself whether he regained or lost his life. With no care about the business, feeling it was as sure in the keeping of Brandon as himself, never giving a thought to the old speculative tendency which seemed to have died out altogether, he gave himself up to the task of recruiting his failing energy. The first months brought sportive letters from Brandon full of all sorts of absurdities and oddities of what they were doing, and how the old ship was floating; and when Noel in the same strain told him either to be sober and give right information or none at all, he received a laughably pompous production that not until Noel saw in the flesh for himself what was going on would he write another letter on business, unless anything turned up requiring his or Uncle Ralph’s judgment. All this was written in the first flush of success, and when beset on every side, Hope whispered all might come right without alarming them. It was well for the hereafter of Brandon the trusted manager of the firm had summoned up courage to telegraph Noel to return. By some mysterious instinct, as Noel read the despatch from Mr. Claxton, he felt sure what it betokened. Handing it to his wife, he said “Beatrice, we are ruined.”

“My dear Noel,” she exclaimed, “why jump to such a hasty conclusion? ‘Come at once’ surely may mean something imperative without disaster.”

“It may, but I have no hope.”

“If your fears should prove true, how good God has been to us, Noel dear, in giving you the exchange of health, though you lose wealth.”

“And a dear comforting wife also—yes, I shall think of His mercies as I go along, and it will brace me up to bear the losses.”

It was when dark thoughts were shaping themselves into darker acts, that Noel stood like a spectre before Brandon Travis.

“Brandon, nothing can alter the past. I know all; you and I must manfully face the future.”

“Noel, Noel, curse me, but do not look like that—I can bear all your reproaches, but not your forbearance.”

Noel Brandon in being a Christian had not parted with his feelings as a man, and it took the twenty-four hours travelling to be able to see in Brandon the instrument “permitted” to try what manner of soldier he was when called into the battle-field. As soon as he could look through the cloud and hear with the ear of faith. “What thou knowest not now thou shalt hereafter” he was no longer at the mercy of the tempter whispering his torturing doubts, but with a firmer hold on the hand ever stretched out to those who cry for help. Noel could face his difficulties and not flinch at the consequences.

It took all the accumulated labour of so many years to allow Noel Brandon to walk through his native streets an honest though poor man, but a glad thankfulness filled his heart that no man could point at him and say “pay what thou owest.” When a man has once tasted the sweetness of the true riches, he counts not his possessions or life dear in comparison—nothing can rob him of that peace. The world cannot give, cannot take away, secure in this what matters it if the toil of life has to be a little harder, the comforts less plentiful.

Violet rose up strong to think and act, for Brandon was utterly pros-

trated beneath the blow. It was due to Miss Barbara’s plain dealing it did not overwhelm him.

“Brandon, what should you say of the man, who when his house had been burnt to the ground, sat among the ruins and refused any consolation, excepting what he got from contemplating where it had once stood. Should you not say he was more fit for being a candidate as an inmate of a lunatic asylum?”

“I suppose he would be as well off in one place as the other,” he answered listlessly.

“Well, then, do you want us to get out a certificate to place you in one?” was the unexpected rejoinder.

“I see what you mean, but, Aunt Barbara, it is easy for you to blame; you do not know what it is for a man to have climbed to the top of the ladder, and at one stroke to fall to the bottom, and then have to begin again with the prospect of not getting up many steps of it; and mine is a doubly hard case to have pulled another down with myself.”

“Now, Brandon,” said Noel, with a cheerful heartiness, “if you like to lament over your own fall, you need not do it over mine. Beatrice keeps my eyes very fixedly upon so many blessings we still have that she will not give me a chance to look on what is lost. I might have kept the wealth and lost my health. I would very much sooner part with the former than the latter, if I had had to choose, and so long as my wife and children and all our dear ones are round me, I am more than content.”

“That is what I keep trying to make Brandon see, but he will not,” said Violet, with a quivering lip. “There never was a trouble yet but a mercy was linked with it, if we would not persist in dwelling on all the dark side.”

“I am going to be plain with you, Brandon,” and Miss Barbara fired off another broadside which startled them all, and roused at last the recipient into waking up to action. “No one doubts your regret for what never can be recalled; it would prove it conclusively if you acted less selfishly.”

“Oh, Aunt Barbara,” cried Beatrice and Violet simultaneously, and the tears stood in the eyes of both, while Miss Fitzroy and Noel looked equally surprised.

Mr. Ralph Brandon, who had long retired from the firm, was sparing in his words on the subject, beyond informing each. He ought not to have trusted so implicitly, but he kept his heart-burnings to himself. Had it happened before he had been made free as to temporal binding, it would have been “woe betide” Brandon Travis, had he spoken his thoughts it would have been to say “Don’t spare the lash.”

“You need not ‘O Aunt Barbara’ me,” she went on, “I am only stating a fact. Brandon is selfish in airing his remorse, and the sooner he makes a skeleton of it and hides it from general view the better for the comfort of everyone in his vicinity.”

“Would you feel less, Aunt Barbara, if you had wrought such ruin?” he asked passionately.

“If I were you, Brandon, I would start afresh and show if I had been conquered once I was not beaten, but would have another try for victory.”

“Aunt Barbara,” he exclaimed with a new determination “I will.”

“Brandon, you may win, if this time you build on the rock; you see what building on the sand comes to.”

“Aunt Mary, what am I to believe?” he asked desparingly. “Look at Noel, he has walked so uprightly that again and again I have wondered at his firmness, and yet he has not escaped, though he had built on the rock.”

“You have yet to learn to distinguish between *discipline* and *punishment*, my dear boy,” said Miss Fitzroy with such a sweet pathos in her tone. “To Noel it has come as a calamity in which he had no part in causing. Had it come through want of ordinary caution, through carelessness in any form or from want of a strict integrity in his business dealings, he could not call it this—it would be the inevitable result of his own doings. Having striven, as you say, to do the right, he accepts the trial as part of his discipline needed to show his trust in a higher wisdom than his own, so instead of being crushed beneath it, he looks up with renewed strength and love, having a treasure there he knows can never grow less. Now, Brandon dear, you have tested what security you had in yours, and brought your own punishment. I would not mislead you, and say had your trust been the same as that of Noel, this would never have happened, for most assuredly it would. A Christian man is not spared the effects of folly and the misuse of business tactics any more than one of the world, and equally sure it is there comes no lasting satisfaction, no real security to any, unless the blessing of the Lord rests upon their endeavours.”

“And now I have a pleasing duty to perform after that unpleasant one” began Miss Barbara. “As Violet said ‘there never was a trouble yet but had a mercy linked with it,’ so now I am to give this bit of parchment into your hands as a gift from Fitzroy to you and Brandon, with his love.”

Violet looked wonderingly at the paper, and a painful crimson glow spread over her face as she exclaimed “We would not rob him by taking such a gift.”

“Indeed, no,” chimed in Brandon, who leaning over his wife’s shoulder saw Hazlewood had been purchased and handed back to them as owners. “Through my folly it went and I must suffer the penalty. Aunt Barbara, thank Fitzroy for his noble generosity, but give him back this deed.”

“Would you wish me to do such a thing, knowing his sensitive nature?” she asked.

“Take it, child,” said her uncle, “he bought it from me, I was not going to let Brandon off from any of his penances over his folly, but should have let him suffer a bit in having to give up all the comforts of Hazlewood. I knew it would be no trouble to you to rough it for a time” he said tenderly patting her cheek, “and when he had learned his lesson, should have brought you back, but Fitzroy pleaded so to do this himself and to do it at once, I was compelled to yield, though against my judgment.”

Brandon rushed from the room; he felt he did not deserve the kindness all showed to him, and for the first time came a sincere desire to be one with them; but it took years of discipline to bring the joy, and root out all the seeds of doubt he had so persistently sown, and with all the love of her heart going out to him, Violet realised her union lacked the completeness marriage alone has when *two walk together agreed*.