

MARGARET.

CONCLUDED.

CHAPTER IV.

Margaret woke next morning to see the sky pure and clear, and the sun shining; that sunshine penetrated to the core of her heart, as sunshine had never done before. Happiness had roused her early. Misery and indifference are heavy-lidded and slothful; happiness is wakeful, grudging hours given to unconsciousness. Many hours intervened before it would be time to set off for the farm; she remembered that James had been fond of lilies of the valley, and went to see if any had bloomed yet. Yes! she gathered a handful, and put them in a shady place on the dewy lawn. As the pure sunshine fell on her black dress, she thought it looked worn and dusty, and went to change it for one Clara had helped to make for her. That done, she sat in the garden and read *In Memoriam*, and thought of the person it belonged to, and to whom she belonged, as she felt, for all her life to come, till it was time to go.

Mrs. Hale was deep in the mysteries of the dairy, and asked Margaret to walk up by herself.

Margaret ascended the stairs lingeringly. 'Come in,' was said before she had knocked. As strange as sweet to Margaret was the look of love that sprang to meet her when she opened the door.

'I have lived in faith that this time would come,' said James; 'but when I heard the bells ring for Miss Woodford's wedding'

Silence once broken, they talked much; the history of thirteen years had to be told.

'But how came you by any other name than that of James Grant?' asked Margaret.

'The other name was my uncle's. He was James Grant Whitecar; I am James Whitecar Grant. His name is in many of my books; Mrs. Hale gave it me. You used to dislike James Grant, and so I did not care to set her right.'

'I was thinking so much about old times and—about you, James, only a few days before Mrs. Hale asked me if I could come sometimes and read to the 'strange gentleman.' I do not believe I did dislike you,' added Margaret, as she turned a little from him to order the lilies in a glass of water.

When Margaret prepared to go, warned by a hint from Mrs. Hale that it was time James had his dinner, and then a space of quiet, she saw that her lover looked at her wistfully. 'Shall I come as usual this evening?' she said, divining his wish.

'Come, then,' he said, pressing her hand against his cheek.

When Margaret came, she saw that James was not yet strong enough for happiness; the excitement of the morning had exhausted him. She read to him from the Bible a little; then they remained quiet, hand in hand, watching the fading light, till James was anxious that she should go before it got quite dark.

'You shall not go home alone many times more, please God to let my strength return as quickly as I fancy it will, now I am so happy,' he said.

A few days afterwards, when Margaret went her afternoon way to the farm, she found that a surprise had been arranged for her. Coming in sight of the porch, she saw a figure rise from a sunny seat outside it, and come down the flagged walk to the gate. A large lilac hung over one side of the gate, a laburnum drooped over the other. No inquisitive eyes could see how James and Margaret met. Leaning lightly on her shoulder, he returned to his seat; the low stool she liked was placed beside it, ready for her.

A westeria in full blossom covered the wall close to which they sat; the warm sunshine brought out its delicate fragrance to mingle with the perfumes of wall-flowers and sweet brier; a lovely landscape lay beyond the garden-fence, and the wind-spirit in the pines sang a low, plaintive melody. A deep sigh from Margaret, drew James's eyes from the golden meadows to her face.

'I am expecting to wake and find it all gone,' she said, in answer to the enquiry of his glance.

'What is it, Margaret?' James seldom used terms of endearment: there was no need; every tone and glance was endearing.

'My happiness,' answered Margaret shyly.

'You will not cease to love; and so, if you lose me, you will not lose your happiness. If you love me as I love you, you cannot really lose me. You have loved a sickly invalid, will you leave off loving when I grow strong? If you will give the strong man the love you gave to the sick one, and not change your love, because what you love is changed, you will love on through any change, even if the mortal man shall put on the incorruptible robe of immortality.'

Margaret turned white.

'Love!' he went on, laying his hand on her head, and speaking in a lower tone, 'may I warn you not to put me in the place of God! Love Him first and best, my Margaret, or you will not love happily.'

James's parting words at that time—'Very soon I shall walk as far as the old house'—gave a new direction to Margaret's thoughts. Much to Hannah's amazement, she turned her attention to household matters next morning, ordered clean lace-curtains to be hung over those of worn and faded crimson damask in all the windows, had the large drawing-room opened, a fire lighted there daily, all the treasured-up old-fashioned knick knacks displayed as they used to be, kept the vases filled with fresh flowers—everything prepared as if a guest were expected the next moment. Hannah's husband was told to get assistance in the garden, the turf was to be mown, the edgings clipped, the paths freed from grass and moss, the borders made trim, and the greenhouse flowers planted out in as short a time as possible.

These things filled the old people with amazement, but were nothing to the change in Miss Woodford's look and manner.

CHAPTER V.

It was midsummer. The hay was down. James stood by the brook, and Margaret leaned on his arm.

'It is just thirteen years ago—all seems the same, only Margaret is changed!' he whispered, as if speaking to himself.

Margaret looked into his face somewhat sadly.

'The difference between seventeen and thirty is great. Of course I must be changed,' she answered.

With a summer flush on her cheek, and a summer rose glowing in her hair—with peace on her brow, love smiling on her lips and shining from her eyes—Margaret had no need to fear the summer light, much less the scrutiny of her lover's glance.

'I thank God that you are indeed changed!' he said. 'You love me now.'

'God only knows how I love you! Sometimes I almost wish you different—wish you could be imperious now and then, a little cruel and selfish; could cross me, thwart me, prove me, to see how I love you! She began quietly, but her voice had grown passionate as she proceeded; her breath came and went quickly, and her color changed.

'Margaret! Margaret! you make me tremble,' James cried. He was trembling. He sat down, and drew Margaret down beside him; then he said: 'I have not told you yet where I was all day yesterday. I rode to Ling, to talk to Dr. Silver.'

She turned a startled face towards him; he hastened to go on: 'Not that I feel ill—I feel full of life and hope; but I wanted the truth, and I have faith in him. He tells me that I may live many years (my darling, do not shake so!), even to a good old age; at the same time, he says, I am now in such a state that any violent exertion or sudden shock might end my life in a few hours, and that I am not to spend next winter in England under any circumstances. I need not try to say how dear life is to me, for your sake, Margaret; but I want to look the worst (which must be the best, if God wills it) in the face with you. Love, if death should take me soon, in these early days of our happiness, shall I have any cause to reproach myself for having linked your heart to mine?'

Margaret had hidden her face on his shoulder. She looked up when he had finished speaking.

'If we never meet after we part to-night, and if I live on and on, you have done me no wrong—you have done me infinite good. You would leave me better and happier than you found me; and I should thank God night and morning for having given you to me. It was you who told me that those who love cannot lose each other. I feel it now. You have done, and you can do, me nothing but good. My heart has never been drawn so much towards Heaven as since it began to love you. Oh, stay with

me a little James—God will not take you yet—not till you have made me more like yourself.'

'I trust that He will not take me for many years. When He does, you will submit yourself to Him, not only with patience, but with such passionate force of love as you have for me—not the passion of mere impulse, but steadfast, enduring passion, that will become life itself.'

A few days later, there was a wedding at the little gray church; the bride was neither young nor beautiful, the bridegroom was plain and weakly-looking. It was a truer and more beautiful marriage than ninety-nine out of a hundred—such a marriage as is for eternity.

In the afternoon, James and Margaret left Sunnyslope for West Cove. They were to return to the old house in the autumn, only for a few weeks, before leaving England for the winter.

CHAPTER VI.

James and Margaret sat on the natural breakwater which runs out into West Cove Bay; they sat at its extremity, and close to the water's-edge; a projecting ledge above them shut them out from the rest of the world; they faced the breeze and the setting sun.

'So we go home to Sunnyslope to-morrow,' said James. 'I am glad and sorry, or rather I am neither. I have been happy here; but I shall be happy anywhere.'

'I owe a great deal to West Cove. I shall always like it; let us come here often.' Margaret gazed in her husband's bronzed face, rejoicing in the comparative vigor it expressed.

'This broad, broken path of ruby light on the field of green is very lovely! But it looks stormy to-night,' James said.

'Summer is gone; no matter, we go after it, and take it with us,' replied Margaret. 'I think we ought to go to the house now, James; it is not warm.'

'Just a few moments more, till the sun is quite under.'

Margaret threw part of her own shawl round her husband, and they sat clinging close, as if the sinking of the sun were to be the signal for their parting.

'I could almost fancy that our rock trembles,' said Margaret presently; and that wave sweeping under us, made such a strange hollow sound! See the breadth of the billow of green crystal coming towards us; it looks as if it had force enough to sweep the rock away. The sun is gone now—let us go.' Margaret shuddered.

They rose—lingered one moment yet—each leaning against the other.

Above the sound of the water, they heard a child's merry laugh, followed by a shrill cry of warning; then something fell from above, close past them, into the water; a shriek of horror rang out. They looked up—a woman stood right above them, with a blank white face; they looked down and saw a gleam of golden hair; saw it for a second, then it was washed underneath the rock on which they stood.

James began to take off his coat. Margaret made an effort to detain him, while she said to the woman above, in a tone of agonised appeal: 'Is no one there? Is no help near?'

'No one. For Heaven's sake! For pity's sake!'—

James plunged into the water.

'Run up the breakwater—make them put a boat round!' Margaret said to the woman.

She was obeyed. The woman's frantic haste and wild face attracted people to the spot from which she had started. Presently a group of idlers stood above Margaret. She did not know that she was not still alone—she did not hear their questions—she leaned over the water, her whole soul in her eyes.

Twice she saw her husband—the child in his arms—gaining a footing on a sunken rock, clearly visible under the transparent water, only to be swept off by the force of a wave.

She turned her face back at last to see if no help came. 'Hold me!' she said to those who had scrambled down to where she crouched. A man took her firmly round the waist, clasping the rock himself. She threw herself half over the edge. Presently James held the child high enough for her to reach it; she seized it, tossed it into the arms of the person nearest her, and turned to the water again. James had disappeared. A moment after she almost touched him; he smiled up at her, then was again swept out of sight. At last she got a firm hold of his arm; other arms reached over

—he was drawn up, and laid on the rock at her feet, to all appearance dead. The mother of the rescued child lingered by, hugging it in her arms.

Margaret looked up from James's face into that of the woman.

'Let the child be very precious to you, its life has cost me my husband.' She spoke with a calm that seemed stern, that chilled and awed the poor creature to whom she spoke.

James was carried home tenderly, even Margaret owned. The bystanders assured her it was only a faint, from which he would soon recover. He did revive, almost as soon as he was in bed, and the house clear of all strangers but the doctor. His first question, his eyes having satisfied themselves by gazing on Margaret, was: 'Is the child hurt?'

'I do not know. I thought only of you. I will send and ask,' she answered.

'Do love.'

He closed his eyes, and was silent a short time. Presently he said:

'Your hand saved me Margaret. I clutched your dear hand, and saw your white face, and felt safe. I remember nothing after, till I woke here to a delicious sense of fatigue, of warmth, and of your presence. Do not be anxious, love. I am very comfortable. I have no pain. I shall be well after a night's sleep.'

The physician confirmed the patient's statement, and by and by prepared to take his leave, merely advising that James should not rise till he had paid an early morning visit.

Margaret followed Dr. Merton from the room. She led him into another, and shut the door.

'Has all that is possible been done to avert evil consequences?' she asked, when she had briefly stated the previous state of James's health.

'All, my dear madam; and I see no reason for apprehension.'

'If you thought my husband in danger, could you do nothing more?'

'Nothing. Pray, be easy; you are over-excited and require rest. I shall look in the first thing in the morning, and hope to find you more composed, and your husband refreshed and tranquil.'

'Perhaps it would be better to put off our journey one day—I may be very stiff to-morrow. I dare say I am bruised,' said James, when Margaret returned to his bedside. 'Won't you write a line to old Hannah, to prevent her being uneasy.'

'You think of everything,' his wife answered, and sat down to write close by him.

A message came from the mother of the rescued child, of inquiry for its deliverer, and to say that the child was sleeping quietly, and seemed quite uninjured.

'I am very glad he is doing well,' observed Margaret.

'It was a little girl, love,' James, said smiling.

James talked a good deal that evening. Margaret feared that he was over excited by the stimulants that had been freely given. She administered a dose of sedative medicine that had been sent, and then retired behind the bed-curtain, refusing to talk to him any more.

He slept at last. Margaret sat and watched, not taking her eyes from his face. He woke once to beg her to lie down. She stooped, kissed him softly, and laid her head on the pillow by him till he was again asleep.

The night passed, and he slept on. Margaret dozed for half an hour. When she woke, the light of dawn made the candle-light look sickly. Was it that made the sleeper's face look so much whiter, colder?

She let her hand just touch his brow. As she bent over him he groaned slightly. She sprang up to extinguish the flaring, flickering light, and let it in the dawn. She poured out brandy ready to give him, as she had been ordered to do if he seemed faint on waking. When she approached him again, his eyes were open. He held one hand towards her, the other he pressed upon his breast, and seemed to struggle for breath.

Margaret set down the glass she held, passed an arm round him, and raised his head upon her shoulder. 'Are you suffering?' she asked.

Unutterable love shone up from his eyes into hers.

'I am dying! Remember. Be happy—kiss me.' The words were pronounced with pain.

It was a long, long kiss. The wife never