

"SIR REGINALD." SOME REMINISCENCES OF AN ENGLISH HOME.

BY EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN, AUTHOR OF "BARBARA'S BROTHERS," IN THE SUNDAY AT HOME.

CHAPTER IV.—SAVED!

How well I remember that hurried journey to London with my mistress, the weight of the precious case I dared not let out of my hands for a single instant, the rattling of the great express through the frosty country, the clattering drive in the cab up to a certain fine establishment in the city, where my lady descended and was shown into a small room to wait! Presently she was summoned to another apartment, and the young man who fetched her shortly returned for the case, which I gave up to him with a few needless qualms, and then, perhaps half an hour later, my lady joined me we again with a leather case in her hand which she clutched as tightly as I had clutched the jewels. Her lovely eyes were shining and I thought that there was a glimmer of tears upon her long lashes. She was followed by a handsome, grey-headed man with a strong kindly face who put us into a cab, and pressed my lady's hand, and "God bless you for a brave and generous woman!" and then the rattling vehicle moved off through the crowded streets, and my lady leaned back half laughing and half crying, and then turned suddenly upon me and kissed my cheek.

"Neighbour! dear Neighbour! I have got it!—the money! See! it is all in this case. My uncle sent out to the Bank of England to get it, or at least to some bank. Twenty-five thousand pound notes! Just think of it! And when I told him all the story, and about the sale of the timber and everything he said he did not think it possible that more would be wanted than this, for reckless as men often get in their play, and it was plain that my husband has been what he calls the victim of a conspiracy, it scarcely seems possible he should have lost more than this. But we are to act at once, he said, without a day's delay, for every day may mean the loss of thousands now. And we are to take a lawyer with us to see into the business of the mortgage, if there has been one, and to make terms with that bad man. See, he has given me the address of a man who can quite be trusted to see the business through, as he calls it. We are to get some lunch first, he said, and then go to this address, and then find my husband as fast as we can and expose everything, and win him back to the old ways again. Oh, I think I have been to blame! I have let him feel sometimes that he is second to little Rex. I have made the same mistake that other wives have done—I know my uncle thought so—and have let him go away from home for his pleasures, instead of always having leisure to make him happy there when he came in from his day's work. Oh, how many mistakes I have made! How hard it is always to see the right way! But I will try now, I will begin afresh, and I will tell my Rex how grieved I am for making him such a poor wife. If he will only have a little patience, I will learn better in time."

And so she talked on, my sweet young mistress, woman-like, trying to take the blame upon herself, with no thought of bitterness in her heart for the husband whose reckless folly had gone nigh to rain their own lives and that of their helpless child, but only seeking excuses for him and taking upon her own little youthful errors and lapses all the responsibility of the sad fall. Sure if my master had heard, he would have understood that he had picked out a treasure amongst woman for his wife. Who would have thought a year ago that the pleasure-loving fairy-like young bride would have come out so wonderfully in the time of trial and perplexity?

It was difficult to get my lady to take any food, but she submitted when I reminded her that she must be strong for her husband's sake and her boy's. Time had already flown quickly by, and it was four o'clock before we were at the door of the lawyer's office, and could deliver up the note we had brought to be given him. Luckily he was at home, and either disengaged or willing to put other business aside for my lady's affairs, for he came to us almost immediately and professed himself entirely at our disposal. The next thing was to find the master. My lady believed him to be in London, and would have driven to his club at once, but I

knew better than that, and I could see that it was something of a shock to her to hear that he was actually the guest of the Colonel, residing under his roof, whilst his own home was not five miles away, and his wife believed him to be in London engaged in business.

How one sin leads to another, I mused, as the cab took us back to the station through the thickening darkness and fog. Three months ago my master would never have dreamed of keeping any blind upon his movements, and now would most likely excuse himself by saying that it was owing to some prejudice on the part of his wife, which made it better that she should not know how much time he spent at the house of a man against whom she felt so strong a dislike. But my lady betrayed none of her feelings to the stranger who sat beside us, but only asked if he could accompany us down to the country by the next train, and dispatched a telegram to the coachman bidding him meet us with the carriage.

All the way down, as I sat opposite to her in the carriage, for she made me travel in the in the same compartment as herself, I watched her pale, sweet face as she lay back against the cushions with closed eyes, not sleeping (as I could well see), but thinking deeply, and summoning strength for the task that lay before her. I did not exactly know what steps she purposed taking next, but I know enough of the world to be certain that it would be no light matter to her to enter the enemy's fortress and free her husband from the bondage cast upon him. Many a bolder woman than my lady might have shrunk from such a task; but there was no shrinking in her face; and when she reached the journey's end she was as calm as though she had nothing before her but a drive back to her home and her child. The only token of nervousness that she gave was the close clasp she kept of my fingers, and as we moved to the carriage she said in a low voice in my ear:

"You must stay by me, Neighbour, I must have you near me. Do not leave my side unless I bid you myself." After that nothing would have kept me from following her; but as it so happened no one appeared to note my presence during the scene that followed, and I was the witness of the whole. Coachman gave me a quick, enquiring glance when he received the order to drive straight to the Warrens, as Colonel Desborough's house was called; but there was no time to ask or answer questions, and I followed my lady into the carriage without a word. It was a dark winter's night, and the roads were slippery, and even roughed horses had to be carefully driven. It must have been ten o'clock before we saw the light of the Warrens before us, for we had to travel down by a slow train, and had lost much time.

The door was thrown open to us at our summons, but I well remember the look of astonishment upon the man's face as my lady in her rich furs stepped across the threshold of that house, her lovely face very pale, but her eyes all alight with her lofty and devoted purpose.

"My husband, Sir Reginald Warwick, is with the Colonel," she said, in tones of quiet authority. "I wish to speak at once to him—to them. Be good enough to take me to them at once, without an instant's delay. They are in the billiard room, I dearsay."

My lady could be soft and gentle in the main, but she had an imperious way with her when she chose to exert it that generally bore down all opposition. In this case the man appeared to see that she meant to be obeyed, and with only one glance of bewilderment and amaze he led the way down a long bare corridor, flung open the door at the end, and announced in the conventional wooden way:

"Lady Dorothy Warwick."

The double doors thus thrown wide open displayed to my gaze (I was just behind her ladyship, and the lawyer gentleman followed a few paces behind me, keeping out of the way, it seemed, till he was wanted), a large and dilapidated room which had once, I daresay, been a very fine sort of place. There was a great billiard-table in the middle of it, and two men were playing at it, whilst two or three more lounged about the room, laying bets, as I fancied, and watching the players. One of these players had his back to me, but by his tall and graceful figure I knew him to be my master, whilst the light of the lamps overhead fell full on the face of the other, who was bending over the table to take his stroke, and I saw the sinister features and gleaming eyes of my lady's enemy, the Colonel.

I saw that face before the manservant had time to get out his words, and as the unexpected name fell from his lips I saw the flash of evil triumph which gleamed out of his eyes; and he turned

a quick glance upon one of the men standing near, as much as to say, "There, I have won my wager. What did I tell you? So at least I interpreted that look, and I do not think I was far wrong. As I realized that this wicked man had been bandying about the name of my sweet lady, and making her the subject of his vile wagers, and the but of his hateful talk with those reprobates with whom he concerted, I felt such a hot anger rising within me as I hope never to feel again towards any fellow creature. How my delicate and timid young mistress could face those men staring at her with undisguised curiosity I did not know. No doubt her own purity of heart, her deep love and lofty purpose were her best shield and protection. I hardly think she knew there were others present beside her husband and the Colonel. Her whole soul was wrapped up in the one, every faculty absorbed in the one determination to save him, be the cost what it might.

He had turned hastily round at the sound of the servant's voice, and now throwing up his hands in a gesture of shrinking and almost of terror, he exclaimed in hoarse accents:

"Dorothy! How come you here?" But the Colonel left her no time to reply. He made two paces forward, and addressed her with an insolence that sent the blood tingling through my veins down to my very finger tips. I think he had been drinking sufficiently to excite himself somewhat, for he was not a man who frequently betrayed himself by unwise speech.

"So, my lady, you have put your pride in your pocket at last and have honoured my poor abode with a visit! I knew you would come at last—come with that vaunted pride of yours in the dust—come to grovel at my feet for mercy! So you have heard what that precious husband of yours is doing—gambling away his own possessions and your son's inheritance; and you think to come with your tears and your beauty and your willing ways and lure him back to your side, and melt my stony heart with your entreaties! But you will find yourself mistaken for once in your artful calculation. I will have no mercy, I will have gold—gold—gold! Ask your husband what has become of that handsome fortune left him by his father. Ask him where the money is to be scraped together by impoverishing his land and impairing the value of his estate. Gone—every stiver of it—gone into the pockets of my friends. And to me he owes—let him tell you how much. I have my revenge now! I have a knife in his side, and I will drive it home ere long! You think that fine home of yours is yours for ever. But you are vastly mistaken. Three and twenty thousand pounds fall due to me to-morrow. If the money is not forthcoming I foreclose instantly, and Warwick Hall with the home park becomes mine!—my own property. And you, my lady, may crave admission from your tenants to one of your husband's farms; and see what those who have cringed to you before will say when you come to their doors the ruined suppliant. You will soon find then the true value of your beauty and charm with which you think to enslave the world. If you think to soften my heart by your prayers and tears you have reckoned without your host. I have seen enough of your artful ways. I will abuse you to the dust—but I will not pity you nor listen to your cries."

As this wicked man hissed out these savage words my master turned away with a deep groan and buried his face in his hands; but my lady stood as upright as a dart, facing the tyrant without a single thought of fear. I shall remember to my dying day how she looked, her sweet face shaded by one of those big black velvet hats she generally wore, her graceful figure robed in a long cloak lined with sables (one of my master's early gifts to her), slightly thrown back and loose at the throat, showing something of the dainty travelling dress beneath, he eyes shining like stars, a beautiful fearlessness and purity in her face which made the other men present mutter shame upon the Colonel, and withdraw silently to the shadowy background of that large place, so that my lady never knew they had been there at all. She looked the Colonel full in the face and said:

"I have not come to plead with you. I have not come to bandy words with you. I have come to save my husband from your power. I have come to repay the money that he owes you, and to free my boy's inheritance from the grasp you have upon it."

"A likely story, indeed!" began the angry Colonel, his dark face suddenly clouding and contracting with rage; but at that moment the lawyer we had brought with us quietly stepped forward.

"Sir," he said sternly, "you have no

call to take that tone to Lady Dorothy Warwick. I am here to settle the question of Sir Reginald's liabilities, and I will do so at once if you will be good enough to take me into your private room. Madam, will you entrust the rest of this matter to me? I will undertake to settle it to your satisfaction. This house is no place for you after the words just addressed to you by its master, nor for your husband either. I shall deal with Colonel Desborough better when you are gone; and I will do myself the honour to wait upon you at Warwick Hall to-morrow morning and certify to you that the thing has been done."

"I thank you from my heart," she said simply, "It shall be as you say." And then she went up to her husband laid her hand on his arm. "Reginald," she said softly, "I am waiting to take you home."

He lifted his bowed head then, and looked wistfully in her face. He saw nothing there but the tenderest love and confidence. A sudden strangled sob burst from the strong man, and in the deepest silence my lady led him away, the Colonel himself not raising his voice with a single objection or even a single sneer. I do not think my lady knew it, but at that moment she was achieving such a triumph as she had never done in the days of her triumphant girlish beauty.

I followed them in silence, and Sir Reginald himself signed to me to follow my lady into the carriage, though I scarce liked to do it at such a moment. But there, I had known and loved him from a baby; and he must have known that I was in the inner circle of the mystery. He got in the last, and then he took his wife in his arms, and in the darkness as we drove off I heard his passionate kisses and words of repentant love, broken and gasping, such as went to my very heart.

I tried not to hear what passed as the carriage rolled along; but it was impossible not to catch a phrase or two now and then. I knew that after my master's first outburst my lady took up the word, soothing and comforting him in her own sweet way, and striving to show him how the blame was rather hers in the first place than his; raying his forgiveness for her early folly and foolish concealment, and begging that there might be no secrets between them any more.

No blame to him for the reckless squandering of wealth that must cripple them for years to come. No hard words, no fearful reproaches; and yet I well knew that my master was more deeply cut to the heart by his tender exhibition of trust and love than by the most passionate outbreak of reproachful sorrow that could have been poured upon his head. I could not help thinking, as we drove alone in the darkness, of that old picture of the gambler, watched over and warned by his good angel; and truly I thought that the same thing had happened to my master that night; and I felt as certain as frail humanity can do that the fearful spell of evil had been broken for ever from off his neck. He had had such a lesson and such a salvation as comes not twice in a man's lifetime. I knew his nature well—my high-spirited young master. He was reckless, generous, careless almost to a fault; he had fallen into lax ways, and his wily foe had been more than a match for him. Too honest himself to dream of conspiracy in others, he had fallen into the pitfall spread for him, but how terribly he must have suffered when he saw the net closing round him; his changed face plainly told; and now that his deliverance had been effected almost as by a miracle, and his enemy exposed in all his malice and wickedness, I was sure the shock would be lasting and its effects enduring. A wife's prayers were going up ceaselessly for him; and I prayed God that this might be the means of bringing him to pray once again for himself.

The carriage stopped at last, and we all alighted. The servants eyed us with veiled curiosity, but not a word was spoken. My lady was pale, but calm and smiling; the master looked strangely aged and haggard, but the uneasy restlessness had passed out of his eyes. I thought that he would learn to be young again before long. On the threshold of his home he bent his head and kissed his wife, headless of the presence of the servants; and she gave one sweet upward look, and said:

"Come and see the boy!"

I do not know whether I ought to have followed them, but my lady had not given me my word of dismissal yet, and I could not choose but go.

A faint light was burning in the night-nursery, and nurse was asleep beside the fire, not yet gone to bed, for my lady had not yet paid her last visit to her child, as she always did before going to rest herself.

The light foot-fall across the floor did not waken her, and only my eyes saw the look with which my lady lifted little Rex from his cot and laid him in her husband's arms.

"We must grow up good for his sake, Reginald," she whispered, a bright tear sparkling on her long lashes. "We have much to teach now. We have to make him grow up a stainless knight with a stainless name, like your father."

Again that deep tearless sob broke from him, and holding his son to his breast with one arm he caught his wife to him with the other.

"God help me! God forgive me!" I heard him say in broken accents, and then the mother gently took the sleeping child again.

"Let us say our prayers beside him to-night," she said with the loveliest look in her liquid eyes; and the last thing I saw before I softly withdrew (for I felt that the scene was too sacred for any human eye to look upon), was father and mother kneeling down beside the bed of their sleeping boy; and though my own eyes were wet as I crept down the stairs alone, they were tears of the purest joy and thankfulness, for I felt assured that my lady's labour of love was accomplished; and that my dear master was truly saved.

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