

THROUGH THE BREAKERS.

BY MARY ORCHIL HAY, "AUTHOR OF 'VICTOR AND VANQUISHED,'
'HIDDEN PERILS,' ETC."

We were sisters only by adoption; yet I know that the love between us, in those old days, was as great as it could have been if the mothers, of whom only sweet memories were left us, had been one; and as if my father had been Elsie's father too, instead of having pitifully adopted the orphan child, and brought her from a poor and loveless life to share our happy home. I suppose I always knew that he could never grow to love her just as he loved his own child; yet even if I had felt he did so, I should only have rejoiced. I am speaking now of the old times, and speaking, too, when I can see those old times lying in the full sunlight of the unsuspecting love we bore each other. We two adopted sisters were a strong contrast. Elsie was a bright light-hearted girl, with a sunny prettiness, and a happy smile forever rippling on her lips and sparkling in her eyes. We were the same age within a year, yet I always felt much the elder, for my nature was silent and concentrated, dreamy to a fault, and steadfast—so steadfast, that if I had had one aim to pursue, however hopeless, I should have pursued it silently to my death. Yet under my quietness, I knew, even then, that there slept a passionate intensity of feeling which gave me one power greater than Elsie possessed, the power of suffering. She won love and friendship; while I stood isolated, with only her love and my father's to encircle me. She won admiration and esteem from all, and I knew that this was well, because suffering to her was weakening as illness; under it she lay passive and helpless, while I met it as I would meet a sorrowful friend, and made my step firm, and my heart strong, to support it. But all this was in the old times, before she won (easily, as she won all else) the only love which could have gladdened me; and before that chill gray cloud dropped down between us.

He did not live with us at first, but my father, when his own health failed, persuaded his young partner (to whom the mills entirely belong after his death) to come and live with us in our great house, upon the hill, at the foot of which the mills lay. So Horace Capon came, and the whole active management of the mills fell into his hands; and although he was a young man, my father felt the utmost confidence in him. The master was safe in relying on Mr. Capon, the men would sometimes say to us, when we wandered, as we liked to do, over the busy noisy mills; he was one to be trusted. We used to smile at the expression, which seemed to them to mean so much, and when Horace would join us from the offices, what wonder was it if we saw a new power in his handsome face, and in his tone of genial yet irresistible authority? And could we warn each other of the feeling which was growing equally in both our hearts? Could we always remember that for one of us this feeling must end in bitter and humiliating pain? It was to me that the pain came at last; very gradually, because it took me such a long, long time to believe it after it was told; yet very suddenly, because I had forgotten as I said, that this love for Horace, which was growing equally in both our hearts, must end for one of us in bitter and humiliating pain. He had always treated us alike; coming home to us in the evenings, bringing a new element of strength and gaiety; interesting us no less than my father, and amusing and brightening my father no less than us. There was more laughter when he chatted with Elsie; but more earnestness when he talked with me. If he sang oftener with Elsie, he rode oftener with me; and if he fell beside Elsie oftener when we walked together, it was beside my chair that he would draw his own when he read aloud to us at night. And so the months sped on most happily for us, so equally loved and cared for that what wonder was it, as I said, that we forgot how this must end in a bitter humiliating pain for one?

I forget how it was that there first dawned on me the knowledge of one of my father's motives in having Horace Capon to live now in the house which he was eventually to occupy as master of the mills. I think he told me himself, one day, saying that Horace was even now as a son to him, the one man in all the world to whom he could most willingly give his daughter; and adding that he knew Elsie would always find a happy home with us. I listened quietly until the loving plan was all unfolded; then I went away and sat alone for hours, thinking of it, my cheeks burning even in my solitude, and my heart beating rapidly. What a future that was to dream of! From that hour, when my dreams lost their vagueness, and this one lay marked out in brightest hues before me, I was conscious of a new shyness in my manner to Horace; a timidity quite new to me, yet the most natural result of that dream which was buried now so deeply and so fixedly in my heart. I thought Elsie was too thoroughly wrapped up in her own bright thoughts to notice this, yet I knew that our love for each other then was true and unsuspecting. But the day came at last when, after one flash of nameless pain, that cloud fell slowly and heavily down between us.

I had found Elsie sitting in the morning sunshine, watching Horace; so I stood above her, watching too, in silence. He turned at the gate for a moment, to raise his hat with a smile, then hurried on down the hill, and disappeared through one of the great doors of the mills. Elsie rose then, but I was dreaming still, just as I had stood, a little way back from the window, my eyes upon the spot where Horace disappeared.

"Margaret," said Elsie softly, pausing as she faced me, "your eyes look warm and glad now; and—because Horace could not see—you answered his smile with one as bright as his. Then why have you been cold to him, and distant?"

"Cold!" I echoed in a whisper, and I could not bring my eyes back to her face; "Elsie dear, you do not understand."

She had both her hands upon my shoulders now, and her eyes were reading mine eagerly—ah, with such pained and breathless eagerness!

"O, Margaret," she cried, catching her breath in a great tearless sob, "tell me I am wrong! Say that I cannot read that in your face! O, no, no, no; it is not that!"

I put one arm around her, wondering that she should be so moved to read the secret which I must have guarded so much better than she had guarded hers.

"Elsie dear," I said, laying my cheek upon her bright bent head, "there was nothing in my face which need have given you this sudden pain."

"O yes," she cried, "O Margaret, yes, I saw."

She was weeping sorely, there with her eyes hidden on my breast, and her trembling fingers clasping me even to pain.

"Elsie, what grieves you so?" I asked; "I cannot understand it."

"I—I must tell you, Margaret," she sobbed, keeping her face still hidden, "I must tell you; but—I never guessed

"Tell me," I whispered fondly, when she paused.

"Horace—Horace says—" she was uttering the words very rapidly below her breath, and with her head drooping so upon my breast that it was not easy to hear them—"Horace says—I mean he asked me—only yesterday—only yesterday, to be—his wife! O Margaret, I love him more than all the world; and yet I wish—I wish—"

I think I put her gently from me, and made a feint of smiling; and I think that—groping blindly in my great misery—I spent that day, just as I had spent other days which had been crowned with love and hope and pleasure. I think that I gave Horace my hand that night, and told him he would be very happy with Elsie; and I think that it was only Elsie who cried when we bade each other good-night. But I am not sure—I am sure of nothing save the anguished aching of my heart and head, and how, when that had been mine for many, many days, a great lonely coldness came and wrapped itself about my heart.

It was a happy and unruffled courtship, that of Horace's. My father gave his free consent to the marriage, and breathed no word of that disappointed plan of his; and my father's men, who all loved Elsie for her bright face and winning ways, made her young lover's heart rejoice with their praises of the wife whom he had chosen. And, day by day, it was my lot to watch this happy courtship, living entirely apart in my own inward life, and growing day by day more silent and more cold. But I felt that they would not notice this; it could not pain them, so closely were they bound now in each other. When Horace came home, of what value was my presence to Elsie—though until then she had liked to linger with me? When Elsie was near, what thought of Horace's would stray to me? Ah, what a bitter solitary time it was, and what hopeless and despairing thoughts possessed me! Why had he been given to her? His love was all the world to me; and she could have been made happy with other love, and would have turned brightly to accept another life. Sometimes I told myself that if he had loved me best, only for one day, I would have made it grow to such a strong and all-engrossing love, that it could never change; a love beside which this happy and untroubled affection that he bore to Elsie would be a shadow only—if only the love had once been there to take root.

Never could he guess at any of these dreams which haunted me, but I noticed that he often now looked at me with a new and curious intentness, which warned me that this hidden selfish pain was changing even my outward self. It must have been this change which prompted them to plan for Elsie and me to travel to the seaside, and stay there until the summer waned.

If they had let me go alone—there or anywhere—I thought I might have gained health and strength and better thoughts; but Elsie would not leave me. The days had been hard enough to bear at home, but they were harder here. If I had been left to sit alone in silence on the cliffs, I could have loved perhaps, instead of chafing at, the lonely solemn sympathy of the sea; but Elsie seemed always near me, talking of home and Horace, until I nearly—ah, so very, very nearly!—grew to hate her very presence, dreading every word that her bright voice should utter, and wearying utterly of her smiling face. Left alone with her, and hearing her constantly speak of Horace in that tone of confident childlike happiness, it could not be but that I soon must hate her in my heart.

II.

My father and Horace were to be with us in the afternoon, and in the morning Elsie and I went out to bathe together. There was no sunshine on the sea, but the water was fresh and full of motion, just as we liked it; so we laughed when we were told that there was danger of a sudden squall that day; that very few ladies had ventured out, and even they were returning now.

"Not that there's any danger, miss," the man said, as he hooked his horse's harness to the caravan which I had chosen; "only don't you think you'd better take one of the women with you?"

"We are not afraid; are we, Margaret?" smiled Elsie; "and we help each other quite enough."

Then she gave orders for her own machine to be wheeled close to mine in the sea, and ran up the steps with a smile and nod to me.

How well I remember the look of the sea that day, as I stepped into it, and Elsie came up to me with her dancing step and laughing eyes! So gray and sombre the water was, so wide and restless; so wide, so secret, and so safe. I shook away Elsie's clinging hands.

"Why do you hold me?" I cried. "Go away; do not come so close to me again."

"No, no; give me your hands, Margaret," she said, rising merrily, and shaking back her hair, after the noisy wave had passed over us, and left us free to speak again. "Do you forget that they feared a sudden gust? We shall be all right if we are hand in hand."

"We are quite safe so, and it is pleasanter," I said, and threw myself beneath the water, trying hard to drown the happy sound of Elsie's laughter.

How wide and secret the sea was! and what a little thing she looked there, battling merrily with its waters, so strong against her little shielding hands! And what a horrible longing possessed me, yet what an over-mastering fear! Fear of what? Fear of the waters which I loved? Fear of Elsie's tiny power? Ah, no; what fear I had was fear of myself.

We were standing quite still, telling each other how calm the sea had grown all in a minute, and still with that distance between us, which I kept so carefully, when the squall came. A sudden violent rush of wind swept across the waters towards the shore; the waves reared themselves above us, then swooped down and dashed us helplessly upon the sand.

"Margaret! Margaret!"—I could hear Elsie's call as the great wave rushed on—"Your hands!—hold me, hold me!"

I fought my way to her, and took her hands, then I looked wildly round. The bathing-machines seemed to be miles away from us now, and one was thrown upon its side by that strong rush of wind and water. If we could reach it, we might support ourselves, perhaps, until help came. The shore looked like another world, to my hot anguished eyes, so far away, so far away. What was this singing in my ears? Was it the water still? I was strong and fearless now; no wave, however

fierce and strong, would swallow me. The water was but shallow after all—unless we fell.

"O Margaret, take me in your arms—my breath is going! You are so strong and calm; don't leave me, Margaret!"

Calm! There was such a tempest in my heart, that this tempest on the waters was as nothing to it.

"Margaret, where have the waves carried us? O we are lost, we are lost!—help me, Margaret!"

I put my arms about her—this girl who had won from me all that made life precious—and I held her closely, very closely. She looked up from my arms, her eyes eagerly seeking comfort from mine, her lips parted for the question to come, panting forth:—

"Shall we be lost?"

Then, as if she had read a hopeless answer in my face, a piercing cry went up among the clouds:—

"O Horace! Horace!"

More closely still I held her now, but held her where the waters must pass over her in their rush. My lips were tight and firm; my eyes upon that second mighty wave that came so fiercely to engulf us.

"I am holding you, Elsie! Close your eyes, for it is coming!"

Bent and frail, she stood in my embrace, with her eyes closed, while the huge wave, which I could calmly stand and watch, came rolling on behind her. Then I held her down, firmly and steadily, beneath the water, battling the while for my own life and breath. When at last the sea grew calm again, and we were tossed no longer at its wild strong will, I had still my hands upon her shoulders, and under the waters I could see a white dead face. And my strength had not failed me even yet, for I was holding her so, when they found us, and lifted us together; whispering eagerly that one was living, but that the other had been for a long time dead.

III.

I did not see Horace for a long time, so that when at last they let me see him, the first bitterness of his grief was past. He asked me many things about that day, and I told him all—save the terrible truth that I had killed her. I told him how Elsie had clung to me in her fear, when that awful wind swept so suddenly across the sea; but how she had grown so weak at last and despairing, that she fell with the second wave, and never rose again. He sat beside me when I told him this, and then it seemed to grow natural to him to sit beside me; and at last I—watching his face—saw its sorrow fade, and the old look of content return to it. At first it was in silence that he sat beside me, and this silence I could understand and share; but gradually he would win me on to talk to him, and his eyes would brighten as he listened. So we grew dear friends again, dearer than we had ever been; and I forgot that white drowned face which lay now side by side with my own mother, under the old cedar in our churchyard on the hill.

One night we had strolled there together to lay some autumn blossoms on the grave; and so long he lingered there in perfect silence, that all my fears and my despair came back to me in overwhelming force. Had he forgotten me? Before his grave eyes was the bright childish face of her who had won his first love. He was wishing she had been saved and I lost. Why had he brought me here, where I could see the white drowned face, just as I saw it look when I held it still below the waters, after the angry death had passed? Should I be obliged to see it thus before me all my life?

Silently, as we had stood there, we turned from the grave side by side; then suddenly Horace clasped me in his arms and kissed me. So tenderly, and yet so passionately, he kissed me, under the quiet stars, that at that moment I knew I had won what I had so long craved for vainly. He had learned to give me a stronger and more fervent love than he had ever given to Elsie.

IV.

Horace and I had been married nearly a year, and this was Christmas-eve. My husband had been away for two or three days, but I knew he would return for Christmas-day, and so I sat waiting for him. Always I longed for his return when he had left me, but hardly ever so intensely as I longed for it this night. The wind was blowing fitfully; now rising in sudden gusts which brought back to me that horrible morning in the sea; and now lying lulled and calm, as it had been upon that autumn night when Horace and I stood beside Elsie's grave in that strange silence which he broke at last to tell me with what strength and tenderness he loved me.

So strangely nervous and so timid I had grown, that when I heard my husband's step at last, I ran to meet him just as if he came as a deliverer.

"Frightened, my darling?" he questioned tenderly, as he led me back into the lighted room. "Tempestuous, is it not? but so beautiful out of doors. The moon is full, and the sky exquisite. Have you been out at all to-day?"

"No, Horace."

"Then, when dinner is over, I will take you out. It will do you good, if you will put on plenty of furs; and it will do me good too, to have you walking at my side again. You are not afraid of this wind, my darling?"

"No."

"And I love it. Ah, how good it is to be at home with you again, my wife!"

"Do you miss me when we are apart, then, Horace?" I asked it eagerly, yet I knew well that the time had come of which I used to dream—he lavished on me now far more intensity of affection than he had ever given to his first love.

"Miss you!" he echoed, folding me within his arms and laying his lips most tenderly on mine. "There is no minute in any hour of my absence in which I do not miss you, darling; and if I tried to say how much, I should but fail."

"Because you love me so, Horace?"

"Because I love you so, my cherished wife."

"You never loved any one before, as you love me?"

"I never have—I never can—love any one as I love you, my own beloved."

I knew it so well; but still I loved to hear him say it. The moon was riding gloriously through the frosty sky, when we started out together. Horace had himself fastened the soft furs about my neck, kissing me as he did so, and my heart beat joyously and proudly as I leaned on his strong arm, and felt that I was very precious to him.

So earnestly and happily were we talking, so perfect was the beauty of the night, that I had not noticed where we were going, until we stopped before a gate I knew, and Horace bent to open it.