

HIS OWN AT LAST.

CHAPTER XLVII.

This is how the ball ends for me. As soon as I am out of sight, I quicken my walk into a run, and, flying up the stairs, take refuge in my bedroom. Nor do I emerge thence again. The ball itself goes on for hours. The drawing-room is directly beneath me. It seems to me as if the sounds of the fiddling, of the pounding, scampering feet would never, never end.

The room is made up for the night; windows closed, shutters bolted, curtains draped. With hasty impatience I undo them all. I throw high the sash, and lean out. It is not a warm night; there is a little frosty crispness in the air, but I am burning. I am talking quickly and articulately to myself all the time, under my breath; it seems to me to relieve a little the inarticulate thoughts. I will not wink at any longer, indeed I will not; nobody could expect it of me. I will not be taken in by that transparent fallacy of old friends! Nobody but me is. They all see it; Algy, Musgrave, all of them. At the thought of the victory written in Musgrave's eyes just now—at the recollection of the devilish irony of his wish, as we parted in Brindley Wood—

"I hope that your fidelity may be rewarded as it deserves."

I start up, with a sort of cry, as if I had been smartly stung, and begin to walk quickly up and down the room. I will not storn at Roger—no, I will not even raise my voice, if I can remember, and, after all, there is a great deal to be said on his side; he has been very forbearing to me always, and I—I have been trying to him; most petulant and shrewish; treating him to perpetual, tiresome tears, and peevish, veiled reproaches. I will only ask him quite meekly and humbly to let me go home again, to send me back to the changed and emptied school-room; to Algy's bills and morosities; to the wearing pricks of father's little pin-point tyrannies.

The fiddles' shrill voices grow silent at last; the pounding and stamping ceases; the departing carriage-wheels grind and crunch on the gravel drive. I shall not have much longer to wait; he will be coming soon now. But there is yet another interval. In ungovernable impatience, I open my door and listen. It seems to me that there reaches me from the hall the sound of voices in loud and angry altercation; it is too far off for me to distinguish to whom they belong. Then there is silence again, and then at last—at last Roger comes. I hear his foot along the passage, and run to the door to intercept him, on his way to his dressing-room. He utters an exclamation of surprise on seeing me.

"Not in bed yet? Not undressed? They told me that you were tired and had gone to bed hours ago!"

"Did they?"

I can only say these two little words. I am panting so, as if I had run hard. We are both in the room now, and the door is shut. I suppose I look odd; wild and gray and haggard through the poor remains of my rouge.

"You are late," I say, presently, in a voice of low constraint, "are not you? everybody went some time ago."

"I know," he answers, with a slight accent of irritation; "it is Algy's fault! I do not know what has come to that boy; he hardly seems in his right mind to-night; he has been trying to pick a quarrel with Parker, because he lit Mrs. Huntley's candle for her."

"Yes," say I, breathing short and hard. Has not he himself introduced her name?

"And you know Parker is always ready for a row—loves it—and as he is screwed to-night as he well can be, it has been as much as we could do to make them keep their hands off each other!" After a moment, he adds: "Silly boy! he has been doing his best to fall out with me, but I would not let him compass that."

"Has he?"

Roger has begun to walk up and down, as I did a while ago; on his face a look of unquiet discontent.

"It was a mistake his coming here this time," he says, with a sort of anger, and yet compassion, in his tone. "If he had a grain of sense, he would have staid away!"

"It is a thousand pities that you cannot send us all home again!" I say, with a tight, pale smile—"send us packing back again, Algy, and Barbara, and me—replace me on the wall among the broken bottles, where you found me."

My voice shakes as I make this dreary joke.

"Why do you say that?" he cries passionately. "Why do you torment me? You know as well as I do that it is impossible—out of the question! You know that I am no more able to free you than—"

"You would, then, if you could?" cry I, breathing short and hard. "You own it!"

For a moment he hesitates; then:

"Yes," he says, firmly, "I would! I did not think, at one time, that I should ever have lived to say it, but I would."

"You are at least candid," I answer, with a sort of smothered sob, turning away.

"Nancy!" he cries, following me, and taking hold of my cold and clammy hands, while what looks—what, at least, I should have once said looked—like a great yearning fills his kind and handsome eyes; "we are not very happy, are we? perhaps, child, we never shall be now—often I think so. Well, it cannot be helped, I suppose. We are not the first, and we shall not be the last!" (with a deep and bitter sigh). "But indeed, I think, dear, that we are unhappier than we need be."

I shrug my shoulders with a sort of careless despair.

"Do you think so? I fancy not. Some people have their happiness thinly spread over their whole lives, like bread-and-scrap!" I say, with a homely bitterness. "Some people have it in a lump! that is all the difference! I had mine in a lump—all crowded into nineteen years; that is, nineteen very good years!" I end, sobbing.

"What makes you talk like this now, to-night?" he asks, earnestly. "I have been deceiving myself with the hope that you were having one happy evening, as I watched you dancing—did you see me? I dare say not—of course you were not thinking of me. You looked like the old light-hearted Nancy that lately I have been thinking was gone forever!"

"Did I?" say I, dejectedly, slowly drawing my hands from his, and wiping my wet eyes with my pocket handkerchief.

"Anyone would have said that you were enjoying yourself," he pursues, eagerly; "were not you?"

"Yes," say I, ruefully, "I was very much." Then, with a sudden change of tone to that sneering key which so utterly, so unnaturally, misbecomes me—"And you?"

"I?" He laughs slightly. "I am a little past the age when one derives any very vivid satisfaction from a ball; and yet, with a softening of eye and voice, 'I liked looking at you, too!'"

"And it was pleasant in the billiard-room, was not it?" say I, with a stiff and coldly ironical smile; "so quiet and shady."

"In the billiard-room?"

"Do you mean to say," cry I, my factious smile vanishing, and flashing out into honest, open passion, "that you mean to deny that you were there?"

"Deny it!" he echoes, in a tone of the deepest and most displeased astonishment; "of course not. Why should I? What would be the object? And if there were one—have I ever told you a lie?" with a reproachful accent on the pronouns. "I was there half an hour, I should think."

"And why were you?" cry I, losing all command over myself. "What business had you? Were not there plenty of other rooms—rooms where there were lights and people?"

"Plenty," he replies, coldly, still with that look of heavy displeasure; "and for my part I had far rather have staid there. I went into the billiard-room because Mrs. Huntley asked me to take her. She said she was afraid of the draughts anywhere else."

"Was it the draughts that were making her cry so bitterly, pray?" say I, my eyes dry now, achingly dry—flashing a wretched hostility back into his. "I have heard of their making people's eyes run, indeed, but I never heard of their causing them to sob and moan."

He has begun again to tramp up and down, and utters an exclamation of weary impatience.

"How could I help her crying?" he asks, with a tired irritation in his tone. "Do you think I enjoyed it? I hate to see a woman weep, it makes me miserable! it always did; but I have not the slightest objection—why, in Heaven's name, should I?—to tell you the cause of her tears. She was talking to me about her child."

"Her child!" repeat I, in an accent of the sharpest, cutting scorn. "And you were taken in! I knew that she made capital out of that child, but I thought that it was only neophytes like Algy, for whose benefit it was trotted out! I thought that you were too much of a man of the world, that she knew you too well," I laugh, derisively.

"Would you like to know the true history of the little Huntley?" I go on after a moment. "Would you like to know that its grandmother, arriving unexpectedly, found it running wild about the lanes, a little neglected heathen, out at elbows, and with its frock up to its knees, and that she took it out of pure pity, Mrs. Zephine not making the slightest objection, but, on the contrary, being heartily glad to be rid of it—do you like to know that?"

"How do you know it?" (speaking quickly)—"how did you hear it?"

"I was told."

"But who told you?"

"That is not of the slightest consequence."

"I wish to know."

"Mr. Musgrave told me."

I can manage his name better than I used, but even now I redden. For once in his life, Roger, too, sneers as bitterly as I myself have been doing.

"Mr. Musgrave seems to have told you a good many things."

This is carrying the war into the enemy's quarters, and so I feel it. For the moment it shuts my mouth.

"Who is it that has put such notions into your head?" he asks, with gathering excitement, speaking with rapid passion. "Some one has. I am as sure as that I stand here that they did not come there themselves. There was no room for such suspicions in the pure soul of the girl I married."

I made no answer.

"If it were not for the misery of it," he goes on, that dark flush that colored his bronzed face the other night again spreading over it. "I could laugh at the gross absurdity of the idea! To begin such fooleries at my age! Nancy! Nancy!" his tone changing to one of reproachful, heart-rending appeal, "has it never struck you that it is a little hard, considering all things, but you should suspect me?"

Still I am silent.

"Tell me what you wish me to do!" he cries, with passionate emphasis. "Tell me what you wish me to leave undone! You are a little hard upon me, dear; indeed you are—some day I think that you will see it—but it was not your own thought! I know that as well as if you had told me. It was suggested to you—by whom you best know, and whether his words or mine are worthy of most credit!"

He is looking at me with a fixed, pathetic, mournfulness. There is in his eyes a sort of hopelessness and yet patience.

"We are miserable, are not we?" he goes on, in a low voice—"most miserable! and it seems to me that every day we grow more so, that every day there is a greater dissonance between us! For my part, I have given up the hope that we can ever be happier! I have wondered that I should have entertained it. But, at least, we might have peace!"

There is such a depth of depression, such a burden of fatigue in his voice, that the tears rise in my throat and choke the coming speech.

"At least you are undeceived about me, are not you?" he says, looking at me with an eager and yet almost confident expectation. At least you believe me?"

But I answer nothing. It is the tears that keep me dumb; but I think that he thinks me still unconvinced, for he turns away with a groan.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

We are home again now; we have been away only three days after all; but they seem to me like three years—three disastrous years—so greatly during them has the gulf between Roger and me widened and deepened. Looking back on what it was before that, it seems to me now to have been but a shadow and trifling ditch, compared to the abyss that it is now.

During the drive home we none of us speak. Roger and I are gloomily silent, Barbara sympathetically so. Barbara has the happiest knack of being in tune with every mood; she never jostles with untimely mirth against any sadness. I think she sees that my wounds are yet too fresh and raw to bear the gentlest handling, so she only pours upon them the balm of her tender silence. There is none of the recognized and allowed selfishness of a betrothed pair about Barbara. Sometimes I almost forget that she is engaged, so little does she ever bring herself into the foreground; and yet, if it were not for us, I think that to-day she could well find in her heart to be mirthful.

After all is said and done, I still love Barbara. However much the rest of my life has turned to Dead Sea apples, I still love Barbara; and, what is more, I shall always love her now. Is not she to live within a stone-throw from me? I do not think that I am of a very gushing nature generally, but as I think these thoughts I take hold of her slight hand and give it a long squeeze. Somehow the action consoles me.

Two more days pass. It is morning again, and I am sitting in my boudoir, doing nothing (I never seem to myself to do anything now), and listlessly thinking how yellow the great horse-chestnut in the garden is turning, and how kindly and becomingly Death handles all leaves and flowers, so different from the bitter spite with which he makes havoc of us, when Roger enters. It surprises me, as it is the first time he has done it since our return.

We are on the foremost terms now; perhaps so best; and, if we have to address each other, do it in the shortest little icy phrases. When we are obliged to meet, as at dinner, etc., we both talk resolutely to Barbara. He does not look icy now; disturbed rather and anxious. He has an open note in his hand.

"Nancy," he says, coming quickly up to me, "did you know that Algy was at Laurel Cottage?"

"Not I!" I answer, tartly. "He does not make any struggle. She never was one to strive or cry; never loud, clamorous, and self-asserting, like the boys and me; she was always most meek, and with a great meekness she now goes forth for with a full and collected consciousness she looks in the face of Him from whom the nations shuddering turn away their eyes, and puts her light hand gently into his, saying, 'Friend, I am ready!'"

And the days roll by; but few, but few of them, for, as I tell you, she goes most quickly, and it comes to pass that our Barbara's death-day dawns. Most people go in the morning. God grant, that it is a good omen, that for them, indeed, the sun is rising!

And it comes to pass that, about the time of the sun rising, Barbara goes.

Our Barbara is asleep!—to wake—when?—where?—we know not, only we altogether hope, that, when next she opens her blue eyes, it will be in the sunshine of God's august smile—God, through life and in death, her friend.

I am twenty years old now, barely twenty; and seventy is the appointed boundary of man's date, often exceeded by ten, by fifteen years. During all these fifty—perhaps sixty—years, I shall have to do without Barbara. I have not yet arrived at the pain of this thought: that will come quick enough, I suppose, by and by!—it is the astonishment of it that is making my mind reel and stagger!

Already there has grown a sacredness about the name of Barbara—the name that used to echo through the house oftener than any other, as one and another called for her. Now, it is less lightly named than the names of its less loved ones.

I am talking of her to Roger now; Roger is very good to me—very! I do not seem to care much about him, nor about anybody for the matter of that, but he is very good.

"You liked her," I say, in a perfectly collected, tearless voice, "did not you? You were very kind and forbearing to them all, always—I am very grateful to you for it—but you liked her of your own accord—you would have liked her, even if she had not been one of us, would not you?"

I seem greedy to hear that she was dear to everybody.

"I was very fond of her," he answers in a choked voice.

"I think," say I, "that I should like to go home for a bit, if you do not mind. Everybody was fond of her there. Nobody knew anything about her, nobody cared for her here."

So I go home. As I turn in at the park-gates, in the gray, wet gloom of the November evening, I think of my first home-coming after my wedding-tour.

Again I see the divine and joyous serenity of the summer evening—the hot, red sunset making all the windows one great flame, and they all, Barbara, Algy, Bobby, Tou Tou, laughing welcome to me from the open gate. To-night I feel as if they were all dead.

I go into the garden, and begin to pace up and down the gravel walks, under the naked lime-trees that have forgotten their July perfume, and are tossing their bare, cold arms in the evening wind.

Only one of my old playfellows is left me. Jacky still stands on the gravel as if the whole place belonged to him; still stands with his head on one side, roguishly eyeing the sunset.

Whether he resents the blackness of my appearance as being a mean imitation of his own, I do not know, but he will not come near me; he hops stiffly away, and stands eyeing me from the grass, with an unworthy affectation of not knowing who I am. I am still wasting useless blandishments on him, when my attention is distracted by the sound of footsteps on the walk.

I look up. Who is this man that is coming, stepping toward me in the gloaming? I am not long left in doubt. With a slight and sudden emotion of surprised distaste, I see that it is Musgrave. I rise quickly to my feet.

"It is you, is it?" I say, with cold ungraciousness.

"Yes, it is I!"

He is dressed in deep mourning. His cheeks are hollow and pale; he looks dejected, and yet fierce. We walk alongside of each other in silence for a few yards.

"I have come to bid you all good-bye," he says, in a low, quick voice, with his eyes bent on the ground.

"I am going away," he goes on, raising his voice to a louder tone of reckless unrest, "where?—God knows!—I do not, and do not care either!—going away for good!—I am, going to let the Abbey."

"To let it!"

"You are glad," he cries, in a tone of passionate and sombre resentment, while his great eyes, lifted, flash a miserable resentment into mine; "I know you would be."

"Am I glad?" I say, "y." "I do not know! I do not think I am! I do not think I care, one way or another!"

"Nancy!" he says presently, in a tone no longer of counterfeit mirth, but of deep and serious earnestness. "I do not know why I told you just now that I had come to bid them all good-bye—it was not true—you know it was not. What are they to me, or I to them? I came—"

"For what did you come, then?" cry I, interrupting him, panting, while my eyes, wide and aghast, grow to his face.

"Do not look at me like that!" he cries, wildly, putting up his hands before his eyes. "It reminds me—great God! it reminds me—"

He breaks off; then goes on a little more calmly:

"You need not be afraid! Brute and blackguard as I am, I am not quite brute and blackguard enough for that!—that would be past even me! I have come to ask you once again to forgive me for that—that old offence (with a shamed, red flush on the pallor of his cheeks); 'I asked you once before, you may remember, and you answered'—(recalling my words with a resentful accuracy)—"that you 'would not, and, by God's help, you never would!'"

"Did I?" say I, "I dare say!—I do not recollect!"

"And so I have come to ask you once again," he goes on, with a heavy emphasis—"it will do me no great harm if you say 'No' again!—it will do me small good if you say 'Yes.' And yet, before I go away forever—yes!—with a bitter smile—"cheer up!—forever!—I must have one more try!"

I am silent.

"You may as well forgive me!" he says, taking my cold and passive hand, and speaking with an intense, though composed mournfulness. "After all, I have not done you much harm, have I?—that is no credit to me, I know. I would have done, if I could, but I could not! You may as well forgive me, may not you? God forgives!—at least!—(with a sigh of heavy and apathetic despair)—"so they say!—would you be less clement than He?"

"Yes," say I, speaking slowly, and still with my sunk and tear-dimmed eyes calmly resting on the dull despair of his, "yes—if you wish it—it is so long ago—and she liked you!—yes!—I forgive you!"

CHAPTER XLIX.

And so, as the days go by, the short and silent days, it comes to pass that a sort of peace falls upon my soul; born of a slow yet deep assurance, that with Barbara it is well.

And so the days go by, and as they do, as the first smart of my despair softens itself into a slow and reverent acquiescence in the Maker's will, my thoughts stray carefully and heedfully back over my past life; they overlap the gulf of Barbara's death, and linger long and wonderingly among the previous months.

What in Heaven's name ailed me? What did I lack? My jealousy of Roger, such a living, stinging, biting thing then; how dead it is now!

I have already marred and blighted a year favor me with his plan; tiresome boy. He is more bother than he is worth."

"Hush!" he says, hastily, yet gently. "Do not say anything against him; you will be sorry if you do. He is ill."

"Ill!" repeat I, in a tone of consternation, for among us it is a new word, and its novelty is awful. "What is the matter with him?"

Then without waiting for an answer, I snatch the note from his hand. I do not know to this day whether he meant me to read it or not, but I think he did, and I glance hastily through it. I am well into it before I realize that it is from my rival.

"MY DEAR ROGER—My hand is trembling so much that I can hardly hold the pen, but, as usual, in my trouble, I turn to you. Algy Gray is here. You, who always understand, will know how much against my will his coming was; but he would come. And, you know, poor fellow, how headstrong he is! I am grieved to tell you that he was taken ill this morning; I sadly fear that it is this wretched low fever that is so much about. It makes me miserable to leave him! If I consulted my own wishes, I need not tell you that I should stay and nurse him; but, alas! I know by experience the sharpness of the world's tongue, and in my situation I dare not brave it; not would it be fair upon Mr. Huntley that I should. Ah! what a different world it would be if one might follow one's own impulses! I shall be gone before this reaches you."

I throw the letter down on the floor with a gesture of raging disgust.

"Gone!" I say, with flashing eyes and lifted voice; "is it possible that, after having deceived him there, she is leaving him now to die, alone?"

"So it seems," he answers, looking back at me with an indignation hardly inferior to my own. "I could not have believed it of her."

"He will die!" I say, a moment after, forgetting Mrs. Huntley, and breaking into a storm of tears. "I know he will! I always said we were too prosperous. Nothing has ever happened to us. None of us have ever gone! I know he will die; and I said yesterday that I liked him the least of all the boys. On, I wish I had not said it. Barbara! Barbara! I wish I had not said it."

For Barbara has entered, and is standing silently listening. The roses in her cheeks have paled, indeed, and her blue eyes look large and frightened; but, unlike me, she makes no crying fuss. We will go to him at once—all three of us—and will nurse him so well that he will soon be himself again; and whatever happens (with a kindling of the eye, and godly lightning of all her gentle face), is not God here—God our friend? It is very foolish, very childish of me, but I cannot get it out of my head that I said I liked him the least. It haunts me still when I stand by his bedside, when I see his poor cheeks redder than mine were when they wore their rouge, when I notice the hot drought of his parched lips. It haunts me still with disproportioned remorse through all the weeks of his illness.

For Algy has always loved life, and had a strong hold on it; neither will he let go his hold on it now, without a tough struggle; and so the war is long and bitter, and we that fight on Algy's side are weak and worn out.

And so the days go on, and I loose reckoning of time. I could hardly tell you whether it were day or night.

My legs ache mostly a good deal, and I feel dull and drowsy from want of sleep. But the brunt of the nursing falls upon Barbara.

It is always Barbara, Barbara, for whom he is calling. God knows I do my best, and so does Roger. No most loving mother could be gentler, or spare himself less, than he does; but somehow we do not content him.

And so it is always "Barbara! Barbara!" And Barbara is always there—always ready.

The lovely flush that outdid the garden-flowers has left her cheeks indeed, and her eyelids are drooped and heavy; but her eyes shine with as steady a sweetness as ever; for God has lit in them a lamp that no weariness can put out.

Whether it be through her nursing, or by the strength of his own constitution, and the tenacious vitality of youth, or, perhaps, the help of all three, Algy pulls through.

Life, worsted daily in a thousand cruel fights, has gained one little victory. To-day, for the first time, we all three at once leave him—leave him coolly and quietly asleep, and dine together in Mrs. Huntley's little dusk-shaded dining-room.

We are quite a party. Mother is here, come to rejoice over her restored first-born son; the Brat is here. I am in such spirits; I do not know what has come to me. It seems to me as if I were newly born into a fresh and altogether good and jovial world.

Barbara is not nearly so boisterously merry as I, but then she never is. She is more overdone with fatigue than I, I think; for she speaks little—though what she does say is full of content and gladness—and there are dark streaks of weariness and watching under the serene violets of her eyes. She is certainly very tired; as we go to bed at night she seems hardly able to get up the stairs, but leans heavily on the banisters—she who usually runs so lightly up and down.

Yes, very tired, but what of that? It would be unnatural, most unnatural if she were not; she will be all right to-morrow, after a good night's rest—yes, all right. I say this to her, still gayly laughing as I give her my last kiss, and she smiles and echoes, "All right!"

CHAPTER XLIX.

All right! Yes, for Barbara it is all right. Friend, I no more doubt that than I doubt that I am sitting here now, with the hot tears on my cheeks, telling you about it; but oh! not—not for us.

On the morning after my mad and premature elation, it is but too plain that the fever has laid hold of her too, and in its paroxysm, withering clasp, our unstained lily fades. We take her down to Tempest at her wish, and there she dies—yes, dies.

Alas! we have no long and tedious nursing of her. She has never given any trouble in her life, and she gives none now. Almost before we realize the reality and severity of her sickness, she is gone. Neither do she and three-quarters of his life. I recollect how much older than me he is, how much time I have already wasted; a pang of remorse, sharp as a knife, runs through my heart; a great and mighty yearning to go back to him at once, to begin over again—once, this very minute, to begin over again—overflows and floods my whole being. Late in the day as it is—doubly unseemly and ungracious as the confession will seem now—I will tell him of that lie with which I first sullied the cleanness of my union.

So I go. I am nearing Tempest; as I reach the church-yard gate, I stop the carriage and get out.

As I near the grave, I see that I am not its only visitor. Some one, a man, is already there, leaning pensively on the railings that surround it. It is Roger. As he hears my approaching steps, the swish of my draperies, he turns; and, by the serene and lifted gravity of his eyes, I see that he has been away in heaven with Barbara. He does not speak as I come near; only he opens his arms joyfully, and yet a little diffidently, too, as I fly to them.

"Roger!" I cry, passionately, with a greedy yearning for human love here—at this very spot, where so much of the love of my life lies in death's austere silence at my feet—"love me a little—ever so little! I know I am not very lovable, but you once liked me, did not you—not nearly so much as I thought, I know, but still a little!"

"A little!"

"I am going to begin all over again!" I go on, eagerly, speaking very quickly, with my arms clasped about his neck, "indeed I am! I shall be so different that you shall not know me for the same person, and if—if"—(beginning to falter and stumble)—"if you will go on liking her best, and thinking her prettier and pleasanter to talk to—well, you cannot help it, it will not be your fault—and I—I—will try not to mind!"

He has taken my hands from about his neck, and is holding them warmly, steadfastly clasped in his own.

"Child! child!" he cries, "shall I never undeceive you; are you still harping on that old, worn-out string?"

"Is it worn out?" I ask, anxiously, starting up with my wet eyes through the deep twilight into his. "Yes, yes!" (going on quickly and impulsively), "if you say so, I will believe it—(without another word I will believe it, but)—(with a sudden fall from my high tone, and lapse into curiosity)—"you know you must have liked her a good deal once—you know you were engaged to her."

"Engaged to her?"

"Well