

THE GONE-BEFORE.

ALAS! we are prone to say:
"We have fallen on evil hours,"
When a rippled spirit floats away
Like the breath of the fading flowers.
Like a seed, on the wings of a dying day,
Is borne to the heavenly bowers!

Yet toil has a right to rest,
And the wearied a right to go,
And Love has a right to save the best
From the weight of the coming blow.
We gaze on the joys of the parted Blessed
Through the tears of a selfish woe.

'Tis blood, not tears, should fall
O'er the brave who breathe no more.
For empty the breach in the crumbling wall
Which they manned in the days of yore.
And who shall respond to the trumpet-call
To rescue the banner they bore?

Can the warrior now survey
How the distant combat wears?
Let him learn to wait—nor rashly say
That the valiant have left no heirs—
Till he watch the deeds of the changing day
From a crowning height like theirs;
Till the smoke of the fray
Shall have rolled away
On the breathe of their answered prayers.

R. R.

THE DOUBLE WIDOWHOOD.

IN FOUR CHAPTERS.—CHAPTER III.

The next two years of Mrs. Armour's life were singularly peaceful and cheerful. Her school was thriving, her children well and happy, while, for the first time since she was married, there was nothing on her mind—no secret anxiety weighing her down.

And now it was that the schoolmaster thought of maturing his plan for crushing opposition, and for triumphantly bringing the enemy over to his own side.

Civil wars have been brought to a close, rent kingdoms restored, deeply seated feuds have been healed by a process similar to that contemplated by Mr. Holiday. The rival Roses were blended in the persons of Elizabeth and Henry; Ferdinand and Isabella joined kingdoms when they joined hands; and the young and interesting members of the houses of Montague and Capulet meant to extinguish their ancient enmity in the same way, had not a tragic fate stepped in to prevent it: so that the man of authority had many precedents to encourage him, and went forward nothing doubting. Surprised, therefore, was the schoolmaster when the lady said "No."

Perhaps it was the man who was not attractive in Mrs. Armour's eyes, perhaps the state of matrimony, perhaps both; but it was as we have written, and the poor man returned to his dwelling looking more glum than ever. It would not be matter for astonishment if Mr. Holiday was a few degrees sharper and shorter than usual with his young friends for the next two or three days to come.

Ten years had revolved, and the anniversary of the day on which George Armour had crossed his threshold had come round. It was a Sunday—a midsummer Sunday morning, still and hushed. Except perhaps a labouring-man taking a turn round his garden, and for once bending his back, not of necessity, but to admire his flowers, so rich and fragrant, or a horse being taken to a pond to drink, all was quiet and tranquil. The soft air made a gentle motion among the corn in the blade, and blew the dust from the green glossy leaves of the roadside hedges; the insects were out in the sun; and the birds—what glad, gleg, little, light-headed creatures they are (so handsome, and one would think they knew it), with their throats full of song, and their pin-headed eyes glancing hither and thither like specks of living jet.

By and by, the country-people, as the villagers call them, come dropping in; young blooming women with showy ribbons, and flowers round their faces of a hue which cast even the carnation of their cheeks into the shade; sobered-down matrons, whose dressy days are over, with chubby tanned children keeping close behind them: these enter the church, and take their seats; while their fathers, husbands, and brothers stand about outside, talking, till they see the minister go in. One or two carriages, several gigs, and two or three carts—the last with cushions improvised by stuffing sacks with straw—drive into the village, and send their occupants to join the stream slowly flowing churchward. From corners of the village creep forth the aged poor—always more conspicuous in a country church than in a town one—the men with lart hassets and staff, and the coats which have gone in and out of the chest and the fashion for so many long years; and the little bent round-shouldered old women, with big black bonnets—affectingly decent—of a long-gone-by date, worsted shawls, and lumpy umbrellas. From below thick white borders, the little face of age peeps, seamed and withered. One wonders how it has fared with them on their long rough pilgrimage; whether they have softened and mellowed, or grown hardened and embittered, since the time when they found their feet fast in mortal shoes, where there is no putting off except in that dark and narrow passage they must enter so soon.

At last the congregation are all in. The rich have got settled in their cushions—God knows they don't always recline on roses either, much as they are sometimes envied; the gentlemen have disposed of their hats, and drawn their fingers through their hair; the ladies have spread their skirts roomily, opened their richly-bound Bibles, and have in hand their cut-crystal gold-stoppered smelling-bottles ready for a case of drowsiness; it being bad manners to sleep in church.

The poor have unwrapped their Bibles from white handkerchiefs, and laid their roses, sweet-william, southernwood, on the book-board, posies which (barring the southernwood) shed a perfume such as no bottle on the Queen's toilet-table could rival. There were plenty of middle-class people also, intelligent and sober-minded. Mrs. Armour was present too. It would have been something extraordinary if she or her children had been missed from their accustomed seat. The windows of the church were all down, and the psalm—sung heartily, if not scientifically—floated out to join the universal hymn of nature.

The text was read and the sermon begun, when an unusual incident occurred.

The beadle was seen stepping up a passage on one side of the church, in the manner which he supposed least likely to attract attention, but which set all the children below, and still more those in the opposite gallery, who had him fully

under their eyes, wondering whether it was a cat or a bird he wanted to catch for the purpose of instant ejection. But no; when he arrived at Mrs. Armour's seat, he nudged the person sitting at the foot of it, and whispered a few words; that individual nudged and whispered the next, and so on till the message reached Mrs. Armour, when, the seat being narrow, five people rose and stood in the aisle till she got out, much wondering what she could possibly be wanted for.

'It's a gentleman wantin' tae speak tae ye, Mrs. Armour,' said the beadle. 'See!' and he pointed to Mrs. Armour's house, 'there's a post-chaise at your door. I'm thinking he would come in it.'

And as he stopped speaking, Jeanie saw her old Edinburgh acquaintance, Mr. Boyd, make his appearance from round the corner of the church. He came up to her, looking rather sheepish.

'I daresay, Mrs. Armour,' he began, 'ye'll wonder what's brought me here on a Sabbath forenoon; but the fact is, an auld friend cam in upon us yestreen very unexpected; he's been long abroad, an' this is his ain country; sae naething wad ser' him but he munn be out the day. He's no in very gude health, an' that maks folk restless, ye ken.'

Mr. Boyd had run on thus far with a kind of nervous rapidity, and Mrs. Armour felt surprised that he had called her out of the church for such a reason: they might have waited till the service was over, she thought.

Mr. Boyd went on again: 'It's ten years sin' he's been at hame, Mrs. Armour,'—glancing at her black dress—'an' it's just ten years sin' I—dna ken how tae tell ye that your gude-man had left ye; an' now—he motioned his hand towards the chaise.

'Somebody that knew George,' said Mrs. Armour, 'if he has anything good to tell of him, he will be welcome indeed.'

They had got nearly close to the carriage-door, when a head was put out, and there, haggard, thin, and blanched, Jeanie again saw her husband's handsome face! She stood fixed to the ground.

He said: 'Jeanie, will ye take me in?'

All that she could gather strength to say was, 'Yes.'

The elderly ladies, her kinswomen, her promise to them, and her own wrongs, were all alike forgotten at that moment. Here was her husband probably destitute, apparently dying, and she did not see any other course open to her. Mr. Boyd was close beside her. He had expected that she would faint, or scream, or do something out of the ordinary way; so, greatly relieved, he patted her on the shoulder and said: 'That's a woman!'

This remark of his, or rather exclamation, embodied the entire philosophy and explanation of the thing: none of us men could have done it; but women, as Mr. Boyd said to himself, as he took a turn along the road after seeing them into the house—'women are curious beings; it's a question now but she makes more of him than if he had stayed at home all the time and done his duty.'

However, greatly pleased with the issue of his journey, he soon re-entered the chaise, and left them to themselves.

'Now, our readers—at least the feminine portion of them—are sure that we have nothing more to say than that George Armour returned home a wiser and a better man; that native air and good nursing restored him to health; and that he did all that in him lay to atone to his wife and children for past misconduct. We shall see.

But how had these ten years been spent?

CHAPTER IV.

During eight years, he had been tossing from one State of the American Union to another, sometimes working industriously, and hoarding his wages penuriously, then herding with the vile, and losing both his senses and his money in intoxication and riot; having to stand the wild and wicked jests of the crew he was among, upon the latter loss, which they knew gave him sore distress. This troubled him, but his conscience did not. Regret for anything he had done, or was doing, he did not know, except when sin brought suffering on him in his own person. On the contrary, he valued himself upon the fact that he was not so bad as some others.

Then came the news which roused all the more intelligent and adventurous blackguardism of the world.

There was gold in California, gold to be had for the lifting. At the first blush of this intelligence, George Armour, in company with bands of the reckless and the wicked, set out for the land of gold. Gold! gold! already he felt his hands clutching it, his fingers closing on it. The floating scum of every city of Europe set in for the golden centre. The multitudes dwelt in tents. Tents are suggestive of an age of innocence and wandering shepherd-life, or of a well-drilled and disciplined military array—but these tents sheltered crime of every dye under heaven. George Armour was not behind. He gathered gold, he drank; he gambled, and went gold-seeking again. This life of alternate exposure and riot began to tell on his constitution, originally strong, and which, in a different course of conduct, and with ordinary care, might have served him to the utmost limits of man's life.

It was rough nursing any one got at the diggings; and even the necessities of life, in no long time, rose to an enormous price. So, shaken as he was, George Armour resolved to try his luck once again; and if he succeeded, to keep his own counsel and his gold, and make for home. He was lucky, even beyond his expectations; and he no sooner landed in England than he embarked his capital in freighting a ship with the stores most needed at the gold-fields. By this venture, he became rich.

He hung about England for a time, but not getting better—but, if anything, rather worse—he came to Edinburgh, and consulted medical men there. They told him that, by strict temperance and regularity, he might have a chance for his life; but that otherwise, it was all over with him. If it is come to that, thought he, I may as well go home. This thought led him to seek Mr. Boyd, and inquire of him as to his wife's whereabouts; and hence his arriving, as we have seen, at her door on that Sunday forenoon.

If he had any feeling of shame at all, when he entered his wife's home, it was very faint indeed. He still believed in himself as being a much better man than many he had known; and when he asked Jeanie if she would take him in, it was more by way of saying something of an introductory kind, than that he thought it was a necessary question. He had no doubt that she would only be too glad to see him again; and

he gave her a sketch of his history, not containing any of the more glaring facts, which we have only hinted at, but filled in with sundry cock-and-bull stories, calculated to leave the impression that he was rather an exemplary character than otherwise—which indeed was his own conviction.

She believed his account; but in a few days found that, whatever of hardship he had undergone, he had returned the same selfish and exacting man; and that if, as he said, he had made money, he was determined to part with as little of it as possible.

The school had to be given up; he could not bear it. Miss Bogle and Miss Elder instantly stopped their annuity. Miss Bogle insisted on it, although Miss Elder, left to herself, would gladly have continued it; so Jeanie was reduced to the allowance which her husband doled out to her as if it had been his life's blood; living in a place like that ought, he said, to cost next to nothing.

Even in his weak state, he felt the life he was condemned to lead irksome to a degree. His children, although told that he was their father, did not feel natural affection for him—they rather instinctively disliked him: he saw this, and imagining them to be spies upon him, generally sent them from the room, and they were glad to go.

Neither was he looked upon by the public with an over-friendly eye; he found people generally shy of his approaches. There was one exception, however; a man of the name of McColl, whom he had known intimately in early life, and whom he now found established in the locality as a lawyer in a small way. He did not bear a high character in the district; was mean of soul, and grasping. But George, even if he had been inclined, could not afford to be particular; and when he got a pony, McColl accompanied him in his rides, and exerted himself in many ways to beguile the time which hung so heavy on his hands. The entire change from his former habits to temperance and regularity, brought about a lull in his disease, although it was short-lived.

Jeanie bore with his bad temper, watched his slightest wish, and devoted herself to him by day and night, with small thanks on his part, for he never said, and probably never thought, that she did enough. He clung to life, but at last his malady assumed such an aspect that he could not disguise from himself that life was ebbing from him; he had been accustomed to shut his eyes to consequences so long, however, and look at things in such a distorted light, that it was not likely his senses should begin to serve him correctly now, when the vacuity of mind and torpor induced by disease seconded his efforts in cultivating that total apathy which he called resignation to fate. Sometimes he upbraided his wife for not looking more cheerful; but for McColl, he did not know what he would do; as for George and Betsey, she had brought them up to forget they had a father: if she wished to go out, she need not punish them by sending them to look after him, he could get McColl when he wanted company. McColl knew what a man wanted; he did not come in with a face as long as the steeple; and so on.

But to do him, or perhaps rather his disease, justice, an outbreak of this kind was only occasional; for the most part, he was quiet and passive.

The greater his debility became, McColl's attentions grew the more constant, till at last he was a daily visitor, and even, when it became necessary, insisted on relieving Mrs. Armour by taking turns of sitting up at night with him. Jeanie did not much like McColl, but she had no choice, and so far as fatigue was concerned, the relief was most welcome. Although, how this man should tie himself, hour by hour, to the sick-bed of a weak, querulous man, evidently dying, who had not even the claim of relationship on him, was more than she could account for; certainly, she thought, he must be a kind-hearted man in reality, although she could not like him, and would have preferred another sort of companion for her husband's last days.

It was not long, however, before the riddle was read to her very plainly and rather unexpectedly.

One day, George seemed to be more excited than usual, and told his wife that he expected McColl in the evening, and that she might go to bed as early as she liked, for he would not want anything, and she would be the better for a sound sleep.

It is amazing how faint a breath will blow into life the embers of dying affection. These latter words of George Armour's fell upon the weary, crushed spirit of his wife like dew upon the withered grass. Her love for her husband was just about expiring of sheer starvation, and she grasped at these words as if her ingenuity could make a meal of them. Poor creature, so little was she accustomed to any consideration from this quarter, that these few words, which anybody might have said from mere humanity, actually brightened her eye, and made her step lighter. It was a brief flutter of hope—that night she sounded the depths of her husband's heartlessness.

True to his appointment, McColl came, and Jeanie observed in him that slight, and, on the part of the individual, unconscious difference of manner which distinguishes the person having business in view, from the same person with thoughts wholly free. Jeanie was not what is called a sharp, clever woman, far less a jealous, suspicious one, yet she could not help thinking there was something more than usual to take place between these two men.

Her husband, for the sake of thorough ventilation, occupied the largest room in the house—not very large after all—she herself slept in what was little more than a hole in the wall opening from this apartment, and was in the habit of leaving her door half open, that she might hear readily, and be instantly on the alert if wanted.

As had been proposed, she had gone early to bed; but owing to her thoughts wandering over many things, it was long before she slept; however, sleep at last she did. She was a light sleeper at any time, and now it was not long before she suddenly awoke, owing to the glare of a candle being shed over her face; it was just at the moment, however, that it was being withdrawn, and she saw McColl in the act of moving away with it in his hand. He crossed the room to George's bedside, and she heard him say: 'She's as sound as a top.' Her curiosity was excited, and raising herself gently on her elbow, she listened, the door being turned round on its hinges, she could see through the interstice. George was sitting up in bed with an inexplicable expression on his thin wasted face. Jeanie gazed at him with a feeling of profound and unutterable pity. Many times, as she had sat watching him, her heart had sprung to her lips, and her feelings nearly burst forth; but knowing the stinging repulse she was likely to meet, she kept them to herself. But the afternoon's gleam of