

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

BY MISS MULLOCK.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HER STORY.

"I should not like anything touched in my lifetime, but, should I die—not that this is likely; I believe I shall live to be an old woman—still should I die, you will know where these things are. Do with them exactly what you think best. And if money is wanted for—"

She stopped, and then, for the first time, I heard her pronounce his name, distinctly, like any other name, "for Francis Charteris, or any one belonging to him—sell them. You will promise?"

I promised.

Mrs. Granton, dear soul! asked no questions, but took the necklace, and gave me the money, which I brought to my sister. She received it without a word.

After this, all went on as heretofore; and though sometimes I have felt her eye upon me when I was opening your letters, as if she fancied there might be something to hear, still, since there never was anything, I thought it best to take no notice. But Max, I wished often, and wish now, that you would tell me if there is any special reason why for so many weeks, you have never mentioned Francis?

I was telling you about Penelope. She has fallen into her old busy ways—busier than ever, indeed. She looks well too, "quite herself again," as Mrs. Granton whispered to me, one morning when—wonderful event—I had persuaded my sister that we ought to drive over to lunch at the Cedars, and admire all the preparations for the reception of Mrs. Colin next month.

"I would not have liked to ask her," added the good old lady; "but since you did come, I am glad. The sight of young folk's happiness will not pain her; she has really got over her trouble, you think?"

"Yes, yes," I said hastily, for Penelope was coming up the green-house walk. Yet, when I observed her, it seemed not herself but a new self—such as is only born of sorrow which smiled out of her poor thin face, made her move softly, speak affectionately, and listen patiently to all the countless details about "my Colin" and my daughter Emily (bless the dear old lady, I hope she will find her a real daughter). And though most of the way home we were both more silent than usual, something in Penelope's countenance made me not sad or anxious, but only awed, marvelling at its exceeding peace. A peace such as I could have imagined in those who had brought all their earthly possessions and laid them at the apostles' feet; or holier still, and therefore happier—who had left all, taken up their cross, and followed Him. Him, who through His life and death, taught the perfection of all sacrifice, self-sacrifice.

I may write thus, Max, may I not? It is like talking to myself, talking to you.

It was on this very drive home that something happened, which I am going to relate as literally as I can, for I think you ought to know it. It will make you love my sister as I love her, which is saying a good deal.

Watching her, I almost—forgive, dear Max! but I almost forgot my letter to you, safely written over-night to be posted on my way home from the Cedars; till Penelope thought of a village post office we had just passed.

"Don't vex yourself, child," she said, "you shall cross the moor again; you will be quite in time; and I will drive round, and meet you just beyond the ponds."

And, in my hurry, I utterly forgot that cottage you know, which she has never yet been near, nor is aware who lives in it. Not until I had posted my letter, did I call to mind that she would be passing Mrs. Cartwright's very door.

However it was too late to alter plans, so I resolved not to fret about it. And, somehow, the spring feeling came over me; the smell of the furze-blossoms, and of green leaves budding; the vague sense as if some new blessing were coming with the coming year. And, though I had not Max with me, to admire my one stray violet that I found, and listen to my lark—the first, singing up in his white cloud, still I thought of you, and I loved you! With a love that, I think those only feel who have suffered together; a love that, though it may have known a few pains, has never, thank God, known a single doubt. And so you did not feel so very far away.

Then I walked on as fast as I could to meet the pony carriage, which I saw crawling along the road round the turn—past the very cottage. My heart beat so. But Penelope drove quietly on, looking straight before her. She would have driven by in a minute, when, right across the road, in front of the pony after a dog or something, I saw run a child.

How I got to the spot I hardly know; how the child escaped I know still less; it was almost a miracle. But there stood Penelope, with the little fellow in her arms. He was unhurt—not even frightened.

I took him from her; she was still too bewildered to observe him much; besides, a child alters so in six months. "He is all right, you see. Run away, little man."

"Stop! there is his mother to be thought of," said Penelope; "where does he live? whose child is he?"

Before I could answer the grandmother ran out, calling, "Franky! Franky!" It was all over. No concealment was possible.

I made my sister sit down by the roadside, and there, with her head on my shoulder, she sat till her deadly paleness passed away, and two tears slowly rose and rolled down her cheeks; but she said nothing.

Again I impressed upon her what a great comfort it was that the boy had escaped without one scratch; for there he stood, having once more got away from his granny, staring at us, finger in mouth, with intense curiosity and enjoyment.

"Off with you!" I cried more than once. But he kept his ground; and when I rose to put him away my sister held me.

Often I have noticed that in her harshest days, Penelope never disliked nor was disliked by children. She had a sort of instinct for them. They rarely vexed her, as we, or her servants, or her big scholars always unhappily contrived to do. And she could always manage them, from the squalling baby that she stopped to pat at a cottage door, to the raggedest young scamp in the village, whom she would pick up after a pitched battle, give a good scolding to, then hear all his tribulations, dry his dirty face, and send him away with broad grin upon it, such as was upon Franky's now.

He came nearer, and put his brown little paws upon Penelope's silk gown.

"The pony," she muttered; "Dora, go and see after the pony."

But when I was gone, and she thought herself unseen, I saw her coax the little lad to her side, to her arms, hold him there and kiss him; oh! Max, I can't write of it; I could not tell it to anybody but you.

After keeping away as long as was practicable, I returned, to find Franky gone, and my sister walking slowly up and down; her veil was down, but her voice and step had their usual "old-maidish" quietness—if I dared, without a sob at the heart, even think that word concerning our Penelope!

Leaving her to get into the carriage, I just ran into the cottage to tell Mrs. Cartwright what had happened, and assure her that the child had received no possible harm; when, whom should I see sitting over the fire but the last person I ever expected to see in that place.

Did you know it? Was it by your advice he came? What could be his motive in coming? or was it done merely for a whim—just like Francis Charteris.

Anywhere else I believe I could not have recognized him. Not from his shabbiness; even in rags Francis would be something of the gentleman; but from his utterly broken-down appearance, his look of hopeless indifference, settled discontent; the air of a man who has tried all things and found them vanity.

Seeing me, he instinctively set down the child, who clung to his knees, screaming loudly to "Daddy."

Francis blushed violently, and then laughed. "The brat owns me, you see; he has not forgotten me; likes me also a little, which cannot be said for most people. Heyday, no getting rid of him! Come along, then, young man; I must even make the best of you."

Franky, nothing loth, clambered up, hugged him smotheringly round the neck, and broke into his own triumphant "Ha! ha! ha!" His father turned and kissed him.

Then, somehow, I felt as if it were easier to speak to Francis Charteris. Only a word or two—inquiries about his health, how long he had left Liverpool, and whether he meant to return.

"Of course. Only a day's holiday.—A horse in a mill—that is what I am now. Nothing for it but to grind on to the end of the chapter—eh, Franky, my boy!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" screamed the child, with another delighted hug.

"He seems fond of you," I said.

"Oh yes; he always was." Francis sighed. I am sure nature was tugging hard at the selfish pleasure-loving heart. And pity—I know it was not wrong, Max!—was pulling sore at mine.

I said I had heard of his illness in the winter, and was glad to find him so much recovered; how long had he been about again?

"How long? Indeed, I forget, I am so apt to forget things now. Except"—he added bitterly—"the clerk's stool and the office window, with the spider-webs over it, and the thirty shillings a week. That's my income, Dora—I beg your pardon, Miss Dora—I forgot I was no longer a gentleman, but a clerk at thirty-shillings a week."

I said I did not see why that should make him less of a gentleman; and, broken down as he was—sitting crouching over the fire, with his sickly cheek pressed against that rosy one—I fancied I saw something of the man—the honest

true man—flash across the forlorn aspect of poor Francis Charteris.

I would have liked to stay and talk to him, and said so, but my sister was outside.

"Is she? Will she be coming in here?" and he shrank nervously into his corner.

"I have been so ill, you know." He need not be afraid, I told him; we should have driven off in two minutes. There was not the slightest chance of their meeting; in all human probability he would never meet her more.

"Never more!"

I had not thought to see him so much affected.

"You were right, Dora. I never did deserve Penelope, yet there is something I should like to have said to her. Stop, hold back the curtain; she cannot see us sitting here?"

"No."

So, as she slowly passed, Francis watched her. I felt more than glad—proud—that he should see the face which he had known blooming and young, and which would never be either one or the other again in this world, and that he should see how peaceful and good it was.

"She is altered strangely."

I asked, in momentary fear, did he think her looking out of health?

"Oh, no, it is not that; I hardly know what it is," then, as with a sudden impulse, "I must go and speak to Penelope."

And before I could hinder him he was at the carriage side.

No fear of a "scene." They met—oh Max, can any two people so meet who have been lovers for ten years?

It might have been that the emotion of the last few minutes left her in that state when no occurrence seemed unexpected or strange, but Penelope, when she saw him, only gave a slight start, and then looked at him straight in the face for a minute or so.

"I am sorry to see that you have been ill."

That one sentence must have struck him, as it did me, with the full conviction of how they met—as Penelope and Francis no more—merely Miss Johnston and Mr. Charteris.

"I have been ill," he said, at last, "almost at death's door. I should have died, but for Dr. Urquhart and—one other person, whose name I discovered by accident. I beg to thank her for her charity."

He blushed scarlet in pronouncing the word. My sister tried to speak, but he stopped her.

"Needless to deny."

"I never deny what is true," said Penelope, gravely. "I only did what I considered right, and what I would have done for any person whom I had known so many years. Nor would I have done it at all, but that your uncle refused."

"I had rather owe it to you—twenty times over!" he cried. "Nay; you shall not be annoyed with gratitude; I came but to own my debt—to say, if I live, I will repay it; if I die—"

She looked keenly at him. "You will not die."

"Why not? What have I to live for—a ruined, disappointed, disgraced man? No; no; my chance is over for this world, and I do not care how soon I get out of it."

"I would rather hear of your living worthily in it."

"Too late—too late."

"Indeed, it is not too late."

Penelope's voice was very earnest, and had a slight falter that startled even me. No wonder it misled Francis—he who never had a particularly low opinion of himself, and who for so many years had been fully aware of a fact which, I once heard Max say, ought always to make a man humble rather than vain—how deeply a fond woman had loved him.

"How do you mean?" he asked, eagerly.

"That you have no cause for all this despair. You are a young man still; your health may improve; you are free from debt, and have enough to live upon. Whatever disagrees your position has, it is a beginning; you may rise. A long and prosperous career may lie before you yet; I hope so."

"Do you?"

Max, trembled for he looked at her as he used to look when they were young. And it seems so hard that to believe that love ever can die out. I thought, what if this exceeding calmness of my sister should be only the cloak which pride puts on to hide intolerable pain? But I was mistaken. And now I marvel, not that he, but that I, who know my sister as a sister ought, could for an instant have seen in those soft, sad eyes anything beyond what her words expressed—the more plainly, as they were such extremely kind and gentle words.

Francis came closer, and said something in a low voice, of which I caught only the last sentence:

"Penelope, will you trust me again?"

I would have slipped away, but my sister detained me; tightly her fingers closed on mine, but she answered Francis composedly.

"I do not quite comprehend you."

"Will you forgive and forget? Will you marry me?"

"Francis!" I exclaimed, indignantly, but Penelope put her hand on my mouth.

"That is right. Don't listen to Dora; she always hated me. Listen to me, Penelope, you shall make me anything you choose; you would be the saving of me—that is, if you could put up with such a broken, sickly, ill-tempered wretch."

"Poor Francis!" and she just touched him with her hand.

He caught it and kept it. Then Penelope seemed to wake up as out of a dream.

"You must not," she said, hurriedly; "you must not hold my hand."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not love you any more."

It was so, he could not doubt it. The vainest man alive must, I think, have discerned at once that my sister spoke out of neither caprice or revenge, but in simple sadness of truth. Francis must have felt almost by instinct that, whether broken or not, the heart so long his, was his no longer—the love was gone.

Whether the mere knowledge of this made his own revive, or whether, finding himself in the old familiar places—this walk was a favorite walk of theirs—the whole feeling returned in a measure I cannot tell; I do not like to judge. But I am certain that, for the time Francis suffered acutely.

"Do you hate me, then?" said he at length.

"No; on the contrary, I feel very kindly toward you. There is nothing in the world I would not do for you."

"Except marry me."

"Even so."

"Well, well; perhaps you are right. I, a poor clerk, with neither health, nor income, nor prospects—"

He stopped, and no wonder, before the rebuke of my sister's eyes.

"Francis, you know you are not speaking as you think. You know I have given you my true reason, and my only one. If we were engaged still, in outward form, I should say exactly the same, for a broken promise is less wicked than a deceitful vow. One should not marry—one ought not—when one has ceased to love."

Francis made her no reply. The sense of all he had lost, now that had lost it, seemed to come upon him heavily, overwhelmingly. His first words were the saddest and humblest I ever heard from Francis Charteris.

"I deserve it all. No wonder you will never forgive me."

Penelope smiled—a very mournful smile.

"At your old habit of jumping at conclusions! Indeed, I have forgiven you long ago. Perhaps, had I been less faulty myself, I might have had more influence over you. But all was as it was to be, I suppose; and it is over now. Do not let us revive it."

She sighed and sat silent for a few moments, looking absently across the moorland; then, with a sort of wistful tenderness—the tenderness which, one clearly saw, forever prevents and excludes love—on Francis.

"I know how it is, Francis, but you seem to me Francis no longer—quite another person. I cannot tell how the love has gone, but it is gone—as completely as if it had never existed. Sometimes I was afraid if I saw you it might come back again; but I have seen you, and it is not there. I never can return again any more."

"And so, from henceforth, I am no more to you than any stranger in the street?"

"I did not say that—it would not be true. Nothing you do will ever be indifferent to me. If you do wrong—oh, Francis, it hurts me so! It will hurt me to the day of my death. I care little for your being very prosperous or very happy—possibly no one is happy; but I want you to be good. We were young together, and I was very proud of you; let me be proud of you again as we grow old."

"And yet you will not marry me?"

"No, for I do not love you; and never could again, no more than I could love another woman's husband. Francis, speaking almost in a whisper, "you know as well as I do that there is one person, and only one, whom you ought to marry."

He shrank back; and, for the second time—the first being when I found him with his boy in his arms—Francis turned scarlet with honest shame.

"Is it you—is it Penelope Johnston who can say this?"

"It is Penelope Johnston."

"And you say it to me?"

"To you."

"You think it would be right?"

"I do."

There were long pauses between each of these questions, but my sister's answers were unhesitating. The grave decision of them seemed to smite home—home to the very heart of Francis Charteris. When his confusion and surprise abated, he stood with eyes cast down, deeply pondering.

"Poor little soul!" he muttered. "So fond of me, too—fond and faithful. She would be faithful to me to the end of my days."

"I believe she would," answered Penelope.

Here arose a piteous cry of "Daddy, daddy," and little Franky, bursting

from the cottage, came and threw himself in a perfect paroxysm of joy upon his father. Then I understood clearly how a good and religious woman like our Penelope could not possibly have continued loving, or thought of marrying, Francis Charteris, any more than if, as she said, he had been another woman's husband.

"Dora, pray don't take the child away. Let him remain with his father."

And from her tone, Francis himself must have felt—if further confirmation were needed—that now and henceforth, Penelope Johnston could never view him in any other light than as Franky's father.

He submitted—it always was a relief to Francis to have things decided for him. Besides, he seemed really fond of the boy. To see how patiently he let Franky clamber up him, and finally mount on his shoulder, riding astride, and making a bridle of his hair, gave one a kindly feeling—nay, a sort of respect for this poor sick man whom his child comforted, and who, however erring he had been, was now, nor was ashamed to be a father.

"You don't hate me, Franky?" he said, with a sudden kiss upon the fondling face. "You owe me no grudge, though you might, poor little scamp! You are not a bit ashamed of me; and, by God!" (it was more a vow than an oath) "I'll never be ashamed of you."

"I trust in God you never will," said Penelope, solemnly.

And then, with that peculiar softness of voice, which I now notice whenever she speaks of or to children, she said a few words, the substance of which I remember Lisabel and myself quizzing her for years ago, irritating her with the old joke about old bachelors' wives and old maid's children—namely, that those who are childless, and know they will die so, often see more clearly and feel more deeply than parents themselves the heavy responsibilities of parenthood.

Not that she said this exactly, but you could read it in her eyes, as in a few simple words she praised Franky's beauty, hinted what a solemn thing it was to own such a son, and, if properly brought up, what a comfort he might grow.

Francis listened with a reverence that was beyond all love, and a humility touching to see. I, too, silently observing them both, could not help hearken even with a sort of awe to every word that fell from the lips of my sister Penelope. All the while hearing, in a vague fashion, the last evening song of my lark, as he went up merrily into his cloud—just as I have watched him, or rather his progenitors, numberless times, when along this very road, I used to lag behind Francis and Penelope, wondering what on earth they were talking about, and how queer it was that they never noticed anything or anybody except one another.

Heigho! how times change!

But no sighing. I could not sigh. I did not. My heart was full, Max, but not with pain. For I am learning to understand what you often said, what I suppose we shall see clearly in the next life if not in this—that the only permanent pain on earth is sin. And, looking in my sister's dear face, I felt how blessed above all mere happiness, is the peace of those who have suffered and overcome suffering, who have been sinned against and have forgiven.

After this, when Franky, tired out, dropped suddenly asleep, as children do, his father and Penelope talked a good while, she inquiring, in her sensible, practical way, about his circumstances and prospects, he answering, candidly and apparently truthfully, without any hesitation, anger, or pride; every now and then looking down, at the least movement of the pretty sleepy face; while a soft expression, quite new in Francis Charteris, brightened his own.

There was even a degree of cheerfulness and hope in his manner, as he said, in reply to some suggestion of my sister's, "Then you think, as Dr. Urquhart did, that my life is worth preserving—that I may turn out not such a bad man after all?"

"How could a man be anything but a good man, who really felt what it is to be the father of a child?"

Francis replied nothing, but he held his little son closer to his breast. Who knows but that the pretty boy may be heaven's messenger to save the father's soul?

You see Max, I still like, in my old moralizing habit, to "justify the ways of God to men," to try and perceive the use of pain, the reason of punishment; and to feel, not only by faith, but experience, that, dark as are the ways of Infinite Mercy, they are all safe ways. "All things work together for good to them that love Him."

And so, watching these two, talking so quietly and friendly together, I thought how glad my Max would be: I remembered all my Max would be: Penelope knows it now; I told her that night. And, sad and anxious as I am about you and many things, there came over my heart one of those sudden, shining rests of peace, when we feel that whether or not all is happy, all is well.

Francis walked along by the pony-carriage for a quarter of a mile or more. "I must turn now. This little man ought to have been in bed an hour or more; he always used to be. His mother—" Francis stopped—"I beg your pardon." Then, hugging the boy in a sudden passion of remorse, he said, "Penelope! if you want your revenge, take this. You cannot tell what a man feels, who, when the heyday of youth is gone, longs for a home, a virtuous home, yet knows that he never can offer or receive unblemished honor with his wife—never give his lawful name to his first-born."

This was the sole allusion made openly to what both tacitly understood was to be, and which you, as well as we, will agree is the best thing that can be, under the circumstances.

And here I have to say to you, both from my sister and myself, that if Francis desires to make Lydia Cartwright his wife, and she is willing, tell them both that if she will come direct from the jail to Rockmount, we will receive her kindly, provide everything suitable for her (since Francis must be very poor, and they will have to begin housekeeping on the humblest scale), and take care that she is married in comfort and credit.

Also, say that former things shall never be remembered against her, but that she shall be treated henceforward with the respect due to Francis's wife; in some things, poor loving soul, a better wife than he deserves.

So he left us. Whether in this world he and Penelope will ever meet again, who knows! He seemed to have a foreboding that he never will, for, in parting he asked, hesitatingly, if she would shake hands?

She did so, looking earnestly at him—her first love, who, had he been true to her, might have been her love forever. Then I saw her eye wander down to the little head which nestled on his shoulder.

"Will you kiss my boy, Penelope?" My sister leaned over, and touched Franky's forehead with her lips.

"God bless him! God bless you all!"

These were her last words, and however long both may live, I have a conviction that they will be her last words to Francis Charteris.

He went back to the cottage; and through the rosy spring twilight with a strangely solemn feeling, as if we were entering upon a new spring in another world, Penelope and I drove home.

And now, Max, I have told you all about these. About myself—

No, I'll not try to deceive you; God knows how true my heart is, and how sharp and sore is this pain.

Dear Max, write to me; if there is any trouble I can bear it; any wrong—supposing Max could do me wrong—I'll forgive. I fear nothing, and nothing has power to grieve me.

Your faithful

THEODORA.

P. S.—A wonderful, wonderful thing—it only happened last night. It hardly feels real yet.

Max, last night, after I had done reading, papa mentioned your name of his own accord.

He said Penelope, in asking his leave, as we thought it right to do, before we sent that message to Lydia, had told him the whole story about your goodness to Francis. He then inquired abruptly how long it was since I had seen Dr. Urquhart?

I told him never since that day in the library, now a year ago.

"And when do you expect to see him?"

"I do not know." And all the bitterness of parting—the terrors lest life's infinite chances should make this parting perpetual—the murmurs that will rise, why hundreds and thousands who care little for one another should be always together, while we—we—Oh, Max! it all broke out with a sob, "papa, papa, how can I know?"

My father looked at me as if he would read me through.

"You are a good girl, and an honorable one. He is honorable, too. He would never persuade a child to disobey her father."

"No, never!"

"Tell him"—and papa turned his head away, but he did say it, I could not mistake, "tell Dr. Urquhart if he likes to come over to Rockmount, for one day only, I shall not see him, but you may."

Max, come. Only for one day of holiday rest. It would do you good. There are green leaves in the garden, and sunshine and larks in the moorland, and—there is me. Come!

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Group, that dire disease, has lost its terrors to those who keep Yellow Oil at hand. Yellow Oil also cures Sore Throat, Quinsy, Congestion and Inflammation of the Lungs. Now is the season to guard against sudden diseases. Ask your druggist for Hagyard's Yellow Oil.

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