

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN.

CHAPTER XXI.—DOROTHY ENGAGED.

I cannot bear September; there is always something very sad about it," Dorothy said, wearily, as she sat with her betrothed beneath the boughs of the sycamore-tree.

She never had anything to talk to him about—or very seldom, at any rate—and when he talked to her of a hundred things she neither cared for nor understood, she quietly sailed off in a day-dream.

He used to think she would awake some day to the realities he saw so keenly, and so he waited patiently till the time should come.

"Yes, dear," he said, quietly, in answer to her remark, but without the slightest shade of curiosity in his voice, or even looking up from his book.

"It is the month in which the leaves begin to fall, you know, just as if they were trying to make a pall for the dead summer."

"Yes, dear," in the same tone.

"I hate being called 'dear!'" she broke out, passionately.

He looked up then.

"My dear child," he said, kindly, "what is the matter with you?" and he put down his book on the end of the seat, and, taking her hands in his, looked at her face, and at the two brown eyes into which the tears were slowly stealing.

"Don't call me 'child' either," she said.

It used to be Adrian Fuller's term of endearment, and now she could not bear that he should use it.

"Then I'll call you my little girl," he said, tenderly; "and so tell me what is the matter."

"Nothing," she answered; only the summer has gone, or nearly so, and I feel as if all the past summers belonged to me, and I lived in them, but the future ones will belong to others, and I may look on, but shall never feel they are mine any more."

"Where did you get your strange fancies from, Dorothy?"

"I don't know."

"You must read more, and learn to think more, on hard, healthy subjects, and get all those miserable ideas out of your head. You should learn to occupy yourself."

"That is what you always say," she answered. "But what can I do?"

"I'll find some work for you by-and-by. We will study together, dear. You shall write for me sometimes, too; you write such a nice hand, Dorothy."

"Yes," she said, not at all delighted with the prospect or propitiated by the praise. "Shall you always work?" she asked, after a minute or two.

"Yes, I hope so."

And then, seeing that the tears had vanished from her eyes, half absently he opened his book again, and she sat thinking.

She had been engaged a month, and she was so tired of it. It was like being in school, she thought, though school was a thing she had never known. She thought when she accepted George Blakesley, too, that after all Adrian Fuller would be sorry, and even his sympathy would be grateful to her; but no, he had only seemed a little surprised—that was all. And Netta had been delighted; it was a step towards the prosperity of the family, she considered; and her mother and father had been pleased also, and kissed her, and told her that now she must leave off her wild roving habits, and behave like a young lady; and her rebellious spirit rose at the speech. As for Tom, he had chaffed her in no sparing terms, and it had fretted and worried her; and Will and Sally seemed to think that as she was engaged she was no longer one of themselves, and so they left her to her own

devices; and the old happy life went for ever.

George Blakesley was always with her—always bringing her books to read, and talking to her of things she could not and would not understand or like, and she got impatient, and angry, and fretful. He was always kind, always affectionate and patient, and willing to explain things, but still she shrank from him. She was grateful to him; for, did he not love her? Yet she was not satisfied, and longed—oh, how wildly she longed!—to be free; but she felt chained and bound.

He shut his book presently. "It is getting dusky," he said. "Get your hat, dear, and let us go a little way."

She meekly obeyed him; and they sauntered out at the garden gate, and on through the dim lanes.

"Dorothy," he said, presently, "will you come to tea to-morrow at my house. You have never seen it yet, you know, and I want you to meet my aunts. We have been engaged a month, and they have not seen you yet."

She had always put it off.

"Oh no, no!" she answered, shrinkingly.

"Why not? You shall come to early tea, with your mother, in the afternoon. My aunts are nice old ladies, and they will be so fond of my little girl. We'll invite Netta too."

"Not to-morrow," she pleaded.

"Yes, dear; I have asked them already, so you must manage it. I saw them to-day, and they were so anxious to see you." Then there came a dead silence, and they walked on. "Don't you think we might be married this year?" he began.

"Oh no, no!"

"Why not, dear?"

"Oh please don't!" she broke out; "oh pray let me off! I don't want to be married, and I shall never do—indeed I shall not! I am not half clever enough; and I would give the world to be free again. Oh, George, do let me off! I am not old enough yet, and want to be by myself a little longer!"

"My dear child!" he said, when a pause came, and reverting in his surprise to the old phrase, "you musn't go on like this. You quite distress me. It is all strange to you yet, dear."

"Oh no—it is not that," she said, sadly; "but I shall never be reconciled to it. Won't you let me off?" she pleaded.

He looked at her with a long, long grave look.

"No, dear," he answered. "I could not bear to do that now. You will get reconciled in time. I cannot let you off."

CHAPTER XXII.—DOROTHY A HYPOCRITE.

It came about that Tom escorted Dorothy to her lover's tea-party the next day. Mrs. Woodward was not well, and, to Dorothy's relief, Netta excused herself, on the plea of expecting visitors at home. A change had come over Tom lately. What it was Dorothy did not know; but he seemed more taken up with himself, and a little preoccupied, and almost selfish. He used to be so very unselfish at one time—ready to buy her anything he could afford out of his pocket-money, and to help her in a bit of fun, or sympathise with her in any of the trifling troubles that came to her, in the old happy days.

"I suppose as we get older we get more selfish, all of us," she thought, as they trudged along, "and more taken up with our own individual troubles and pleasures. I am. I used to think of all sorts of things once, and now all my time is taken up in thinking how much I would give if my life were different."

"What an awful 'gig' you look, Dorothy!" said her hopeful brother, arousing

her with a start from her reverie, and recalling her to the terrible ordeal before her—i.e., the first visit to her future home (as she supposed it would be), and the meeting of the maiden aunts.

"Do I?" she exclaimed, ruefully; "and I have got on all my best things. Netta made me put them on, and they are so uncomfortable."

"Made you do it on purpose, you may depend. This is Blakesley's house, Doll. Awfully prim-looking crib, isn't it? and you have no idea what it's like inside—all spider-legs and crockery, chairs you can't sit upon, and clocks that won't go—a get-up which he calls Old Style. He'll make you get up like a Dresden china image when you are married, to complete the picture."

It was a prim-looking house—a square, squat little place, standing under the shelter of a much larger house which was next to it, and enclosed on three sides with a neatly-kept garden. There was a rustic porch—"so make-believe countrified," she thought, as they entered. A middle-aged servant opened the door, and showed them into a peculiar-shaped drawing-room, which was reached by ascending a steep little staircase, lighted by a diamond-paned window. It was a quaint room—only a man of culture and refinement could have collected and arranged the things in it—and yet it had a hard uncomfortable look everywhere, save in one corner by the fire, where there was a large old-fashioned easy chair, into which Dorothy longed to creep and hide herself.

"The old cats haven't arrived, that's evident," said Tom, with his usual want of politeness.

There was no one in the drawing-room when they entered.

"Oh Tom, don't!" she began; but George Blakesley entered, and Dorothy stood shyly before him, awkward with the weight of her best clothes and the shining glory of the bracelet Netta had given her long ago, and some additional ornaments which the beauty had insisted upon lending her (to do her justice, Netta had tried to make her sister look nice, and had succeeded), and shrinking from the ordeal of meeting strangers as the acknowledged fiancée of the master of that house.

"How pretty we look!" he said.

The words would have given such new pleasure to her once, no matter from whose lips they fell, but now she hardly cared. The faint sound of a door-bell was heard, then a rustle of silk, and Dorothy retreated into an uncomfortable arm-chair in a corner (there were lots of arm-chairs), just half a second before the door opened, and three ladies entered. From her corner and the arm-chair, from which she suddenly realized that it was impossible to rise, Dorothy first looked at her future relations. Tom was perhaps the only self-possessed person in the room for a moment.

"Aunt Milly" George Blakesley said, when he had saluted the elderly spinners, "this is Dorothy, and this is your Aunt Milly, dear."

She was the eldest of the three—a kind old lady, with a bright sunshiny smile, and a voice as crisp and clear and sweet as the chirp of a bird.

"I am very glad to see you, my dear," she said; but Dorothy hung her head, and had nothing to say in reply to her.

"I feel such a dreadful hypocrite!" she thought.

"This is Aunt Josephine."

And the second lady (she could not be called old yet) came forward; but she only bowed. A handsome woman still was Josephine; she had been a beauty in her day, and she carried the conscious remembrance of it about with her. She was not