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A Tale of Tears.

By Francis Hodson Burnett.

Author of Little Lord Fauntleroy, Editha's Burglar, That Lass o' Lowries, Through One Administration, Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER IX.—Concluded.

She did not find either Prue or the rector at home, but as there was some probability that their absence would not be a long one, she decided to wait a short time. Marjory was there, at least, and might possibly serve her purpose even better than any one else, and in some sort she did.

But Marjory was not fond of Lady Strathspey at the best of times, and she was less partial to her than ever in these days. She was quick enough, in her Scotch shrewdness, to understand that the delicate immaculately-gloved hand, which rested on the table as her visitor talked to her, had not been wholly idle in the final turn of the game, and the knowledge did not detract from her naturally uncompromising manner. She had watched every new shade of pallor on the pretty, quiet face she had held against her faithful bosom in its babyhood; she had understood the dreamy listlessness which had settled upon it, and she had understood also what its beginning had been, and where its end would drift to. So she did not prove very sparing, as she thought over the matter, and replied to her visitor's well-bred sympathetic questions.

"I was sorry to see that your young mistress did not look very well yesterday, Marjory," her ladyship said, at length.

"She wasna weel, my leddy," answered Marjory, unbendingly. "I canna say she often is weel now, puir young thing!"

"I hope it is nothing serious," said Lady Strathspey. "I should be sorry to believe that. Miss Renfrew is a dear little thing and we cannot afford to lose her."

"Her father canna afford to lose her, my leddy," Marjory replied, with an uncompromising face; but if she dinna mend, I'm e'en of the mind he will. Her mither lies in the kirk-yard. She was na much aulder than Prue, an' she was happy wi' the man she luved. There's a taint o' consumption in the Renfrew bluid, your leddyship, and sorrow aye helps it to its work."

The immaculately-gloved hand was drawn from the table with a slight start.

"You surely do not mean it is so bad as that!" her ladyship exclaimed.

"I mean naething else," returned Marjory, sternly. "Prue Renfrew's heart is broken, your leddyship, and Angus, Laird Strathspey, has broken it. I'm but a puir body, but I speak my mind in that."

There was no use in diplomacy now. This straight-forward strong Scotchwoman, a hireling as she was, had gone to the point at once, and her ladyship was fain to follow. She had not intended doing so, it is true, but she was a sensible woman, her pride to the contrary, and since her difficulty had faced her, she met it in a matter-of-fact way.

She waved her gloved hand to Marjory with quiet decision.

"Sit down," she said, practically. "I am anxious to talk to you about that. I have feared this before."

"I can stan' as weel, my leddy," was the good woman's dry reply; so her visitor was obliged to pursue her conversation, looking up at the square figure and square face as her listener stood before her.

"I have feared this," she said again. "I have feared it from the first, and I tried to prevent it. How long has it been going on?"

"From the first week that Lord Strathspey came to Coombe-Ashley," grimly. "He wasted no time."

"And you think that this is the cause of your young lady's illness?"

"I did na say I thought it was."

"You are sure, then," said Lady Strathspey, a trifle impatiently. "I regret to hear it—extremely; but I hope you are mistaken in supposing the consequences to be so serious. It is very natural you should be anxious. I am anxious myself. My son has acted imprudently, of course; but men are not apt to be cautious. I only see one way out of the difficulty. He has thought of returning to London with Miss Framley—and I dare say that it is best that he should do so. I shall certainly encourage the idea, and after that we can only hope for the best. Miss Renfrew is very young, and I have no doubt she will get over it." (Observe, my readers, that her ladyship was not exempt from the popular belief that grief may be got over.)

Still, in spite of this belief, her face was not quite clear when her call had ended, and the footman closed her carriage-door upon her. The square, uncompromising form and dry voice had shaken her self-possession somewhat, though she did not deign to acknowledge it.

She sent for her son shortly after reaching the Coombe, and he came to her morning-room to find her standing by the low marble mantel-piece, resting a full, shapely arm on it, and looking both disturbed and annoyed.

To tell the truth, her ladyship had had a love affair herself a score of years ago or so—a very romantic love affair, with a hand[illegible]

[illegible]

"Gwendoline is alone," he said, half smiling. "You will excuse me for mentioning it."

But her ladyship did not smile.

"I want to speak seriously to you, she began. "I am rather anxious this morning—I have been to the Rectory."

He looked up, coloring a little.

"I—don't understand you," he said, a trifle confusedly.

"I ask pardon for contradicting you, Angus," said her ladyship, [illegible] "but I think you do. There is no need for attempting to ignore this matter, now. It has gone too far. You have done an absurd thing, and its consequences are more serious than you anticipated."

His color deepened almost to scarlet.

"Is that what your visit to the Rectory has taught you?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "I have been watching the affair for weeks, and this morning I went to the Rectory to inquire into it, as well as I could. No one was at home but the old servant,—rather a presuming old creature, by the way, faithful as she is,—and I discovered that my fears were not groundless. The girl's health is suffering. Of course, it is out of the question to suppose that you could have married her, Angus—and you were fully cognizant of it. Why did you not take my advice? She was a good little thing, and contented and happy enough before."

His thoughts went back to the innocent brown eyes, which had been upraised to his that first morning on the hill-side, and he flung himself from his seat, and came to the mantel with a gloomy expression.

"If it were not for Gwendoline, I would marry her now," he said, half savagely. "I have made a rascal of myself, I admit, but I was bored into it. Confound Coombe Ashley!"

"If it were not for Gwendoline you would do no such thing," said his mother, with a clear decisiveness. "There is one thing you can do, however. You can go away. I am sorry for the girl, and I blame you strongly. If a woman had committed herself in the manner you have done, the whole world would have been up in arms at her recklessness folly. I don't want any scandal to arise; and I think it would be better for all parties concerned, if you returned to London with Gwendoline. Girls outlive these sort of things; and I have no doubt this one will overcome herself in time."

It was an easy way out of a difficulty certainly, and not an unpleasant one. Even Coombe-Ashley had been rendered bearable with Gwendoline Framley's assistance; and surely London would be worth the trying at her side. She had overruled his fickle fancy for the rector's daughter; she had, now and then, almost overruled his remembrance of her, so he found it not so difficult a matter to persuade himself that his mother was right in saying that Prue would live her girlish trouble down. Besides, he was in earnest now, and was desirous of having his fate decided.

"I am ready to go as soon as Gwendoline is," he said. "If I have been a fool, I am sorry for it."

"So am I," returned Lady Strathspey concisely. "Gwendoline returns next week, and though decency will compel you to pay a farewell visit to the Rectory, I trust you will not be guilty of any greater indiscretion. I wish to heaven, Angus," with a sudden touch of woman's passion in her voice which startled him, "I wish to heaven your foolishness had been more honorable and less cruel."

He made no reply—he had nothing to say; so he only lingered for a few minutes, and then returned to the dining-room, and there, for the time the matter rested. But, wisely as her ladyship had disposed of it, it is quite likely that she had not overrated its seriousness; on the contrary, she had somewhat underrated it.

From the night when Prue had fainted at the kitchen-door a change had been slowly creeping over her. She thought at first that it would not be easy to go back to the quiet she had left in the past; but in the course of time, experience taught her that it was impossible. The simple contentment which had made her happiness was lost forever. The freshness was gone, the untried peace was gone. The days which had been scarcely long enough to contain her tender dreams, now the dreams had fallen into ashes, grew weary and intolerable. If she had known more of the world, if she had been less ignorant of sorrow, the blow she had received would not have been such a heavy one; but waking suddenly to the reality, she was strangely helpless, and a blight fell on her which she could not overcome. There was not an atom of weak sentiment about it, and her hidden trouble only showed itself in the new, soft pallor, and an added quietness in her life; but in spite of herself its shadow grew upon her every day.

Her poor pensioners upon the hill-sides and in the village began to wonder in the something they had lost in the fresh voice and sweet smile; and some of the more observing began to whisper among themselves their kindly sorrow for her. The little basket was not so easy to carry, she found at last; and the rough, sturdy, bare-legged "bairns" fell into the habit of carrying it for her, trotting along at her side silently, and yet in all the intensity of their wild shyness, casting wistful glances at her quiet, white, young face.

But no one knew the truth so well as Marjory. In her first sudden weakness Prue had rested in the strong arms, and let her faithful old friend guess at her story without any effort at concealment.

"I knew so little," she faltered out in the end; "and I thought he loved me. I scarcely know why—he never said so; but once he—he kissed me. It wasn't his fault, Marjory," with weary quietness. "How could he love me? It was mine because I was weak and foolish[illegible]

[illegible]

deceived from the beginning. She watched the girl from morning until night. She saw as no one else did, the slender little figure growing more slender, and the slight young hands slighter, even though the change was an almost imperceptible one. The tragedy, quiet as it was, had been a tragedy to her honest heart from its first scene, and the dread which had fallen upon her master had grown upon hourly, with a sorrowful fresh recollection of how she had watched her nursling's fair young mother fade away from them like a broken flower.

And in the meantime, at the Coombe, as far as mere plans may be regarded, Lady Strathspey's plan prospered. Certainly her son threw no obstacles in their way. He was getting tired of Coombe-Ashley, and besides, was not so comfortable there as he had been, for now and then a whisper of the wrong he had wrought came to him. Of course, outsiders did not understand that he had been to blame, but they discussed the matter, notwithstanding. It was "the taint o' consumption in the Renfrew bluid," Prue's friends said sadly; and in their mourning over it in their poor homes, it became the common talk that "the puir, bonny young thing was following her mither."

It was not easy to realize, and Strathspey did not realize it, but it troubled him vaguely, nevertheless. He could never missed seeing the slight figure in the [illegible] pew, and [illegible] the change which [illegible] the face beneath the plain little [illegible] had startled him once or twice. He had still a belief in his mother's doctrine that she would "get over it." Still he was not sorry when the time drew near for his departure; it would be better, of course, and more agreeable.

He rather dreaded the farewell call, however. He was like many other men, in his fear of awkward situations—and decidedly this was a somewhat awkward one. If it had been avoidable, it certainly would have been avoided; but since it was not, it was necessary to face it with as good a grace as possible.

He was not sorry to find the rector absent when he made his visit—possibly the absence was somewhat of a relief to him.

There were many men with whom he would not have been reluctant to have exchanged places as he waited in the old-fashioned, many-cornered parlor for Prue's coming. So thoroughly impressible was he, and so utterly controlled by circumstances, that I think, if it had not been for Gwendoline Framley, he might have been overruled even then—but it would only have been by the force of circumstances after all.

CHAPTER X.

But Prue came at last, and his first glance at her almost shocked him, the change which had slowly crept upon her was really so great a one. He had not known its full extent before, and he was startled by the slenderness of the hand she offered him, and by the pure, colorless look of her face.

Was it possible that she would not "get over it" after all? Careless as she was, he could not control a swift pang of remorseful fear at the thought. She knew why he had come. She had heard the rumor of his intended departure; and she understood that this was to be the end of her dream. Her pulse was fluttering wildly, and the blood at her heart beat with a heavy throb; but she was not an ignorant girl now; her experience had forced her into womanhood, and she had learned at length to see what the graceful, idle game had meant. He had done her the bitterest wrong a man can do a woman, and he was trying to ignore it. But it was not so easily ignored. Remembering the past, it was somewhat difficult to appear at ease, though he made an effort at it.

He had come to bid her a hurried good-bye, he told her, after a first commonplace had been spoken. Circumstances had rendered it necessary that he should leave Coombe-Ashley, and of course he could not go without making his adieux to herself and Mr. Renfrew. He was anxious to get it over, and tried to speak easily; but he could not help being conscious that his attempt was a failure, and he could not resist the sense of discomfort which overpowered him. How would she take it?

She met it very quietly. The sharp sting of the blow had passed away, and only the dull, dead bruise remained, and there was something like a touch of simple dignity in her girlish manner. The shadow of dawning womanhood in her still sad eyes would not have been a pleasant thing for the least impressible of men to have upon his conscience. In some way it touched this man's shallow soul, in its contrast with the old untried freshness which had charmed him so, and it needed a greater effort than ever to utter graceful commonplaces with the slender figure standing quietly before him, and the quiet young face a little averted from his gaze.

His visit had been a very pleasant one, he said to her again, but he was a little tired of rustication, and was unlike herself, in the respect of being necessary to Coombe-Ashley's happiness.

He did not remain very long, and said but little more—he had little more to say. He could not overcome the awkwardness of his position, and he found it becoming more awkward every moment.

He left Coombe-Ashley in her care, he added, finally, trying to speak lightly; he was sure it was in good hands, and he thanked her for the assistance she had rendered him. But it was a wretched mockery of ease, so wretched a one that he bade her good-bye with an intense feeling of relief, and she—well, she saw him leave the room with a consciousness that she could not have borne the ordeal longer.

She stood at [illegible]

[illegible]

most unconsciously, and sat there looking out at the sunshine in a moveless silence, and when her father returned, he found her sitting there still, though the sun had gone down, and evening was setting in. Marjory had opened the door for him, and in her quaint bitterness had told him of the visit.

"He has been, master—this braw Strathspey," she had said. "He came to bid her gude-by, and she has been sitting her' lane ever sin'."

He went to her with a heavy heart, and when he came to her side, she looked up, and their eyes met in a swift, saddened understanding.

There was a little silence, in which he laid his hand upon her hair, as he always did, with that pitying, caressing touch, and then he spoke to her.

"He has gone, Prue?" he questioned in a low voice.

"Yes," she answered.

"And it is all over?"

"Yes."

He touched the brown hair even more tenderly than before, she was so dear to him in her girlish trouble.

"We will try to forget it together, my bairn," he said. "We were very happy in the old life—you and I; and we will try to be happy again."

Prue looked out into the darkening garden with a slow heart-throb. Were they really going back? Could she ever go back to the old peace? The answer did not come to her clearly, though a shadow of it passed through her mind with a remembrance that it was a shadow not entirely new.

She did not speak of it then, but it was upon her, nevertheless, it had been upon her before; and as the days passed on, its shadow grew deeper, and she began to recognize it more clearly.

When Strathspey was gone, their lives slipped back into the old groove. The rector returned to his labors with a feeling of relief, Prue to her quiet work; and Lady Strathspey began to congratulate herself that her charitable plan had been a success. This little Miss Renfrew would forget her fancy, as other girls had done.

But perhaps she did not quite understand the matter rightly. The girls who had "got over it" had not been made of the same material as Prue Renfrew, and their lives had held more of excitement to distract their attention from their grief. Prue stood alone. She had wondered, and dreamed, and faltered, and now the end had come, and there was nothing else left to her. This brief, sweet love-story, which to other women would have seemed so trifling, had revealed to her ignorance a world of delicious happiness. There was nothing more to dream of, nothing to believe in, nothing to trust. Often at night, she wakened, wondering strangely what the coming day would bring, or if each day would pass on as the last had done, until her life was ended. Once or twice she had found herself flinging up her hands in the darkness, and panting in a wild, sudden tremor of pain and terror at the dull apathy which was creeping over her. Marjory looked up now oftener than ever to see her darling dreamily silent, with the faint lines on her forehead, and the shadow in her eyes. She wakened from such reveries, generally, with a start, and then the quiet listlessness came upon her again. But once she did not awaken, and when Marjory touched her, she slipped into her arms, still and white, just as she had slipped into her arms the night when her tragedy had first dawned upon her fully, and when she returned to consciousness again, the secret she had hidden in her girlish breast so long, revealed itself for the first time.

"Marjory," she whispered, clinging to the broad shoulder. "Marjory, I think I am going to die."

She had never spoken so before; she had never let them dream that she felt her quiet sorrow could lead to such an end; but Marjory had known it, and now the good old creature broke down utterly.

"For the gude Lord's sake, Miss Prue," she cried, "dinna say that, bairn! For the gude Lord's sake, think o' your father!"

But she had thought of her father often enough, with a sad wonder as to who would take her place, if such an ending really came. The shadow had become more than a shadow, and she had begun to feel that this end was coming, however slowly, and had looked forward to it with a listless recognizance of its reality, but she had never mentioned it before.

The two months that followed were a terrible two months to Marjory, and as the new consciousness grew more strongly upon him, they were a terrible two months to her master, too. His pretty, brown-eyed Prue—this "one ewe lamb!"

It could not be. He battled against her fears with all his stern strength; he tried to ignore it, and then one glance at the slender little hands, with their sadly lighter touch; one look at the fair pure face, and his courage would fail him. Before the summer had ended the quiet, slight figure was often absent from the square pew, and he was learning to understand that the girlish romance was proving itself a tragedy in truth. Even her pensioners had begun to miss her, and in the end Marjory came to her master one morning and poured forth her long silent grief.

She had just left Prue lying, as she often did of late, upon a lounge in the parlor, and her last glimpse of the pale face, with its half-closed eyes, had been too much for her.

"She is dying, master," she cried, with sad brevity. "I canna let your een be lang shut. She was but a bairn after a', and her heart is o'n broken, and neither you nor I can save her."

He rose from his place a stricken man. He did not speak. He went to the room where the girl lay and there the full force of the [illegible]

[illegible]

CHAPTER XI.

[illegible]

cannot believe it!"

"It is true," she said, with great weariness, scarcely as though she had heard him. "It was true from the first. You did not quite understand it, you know, but it was true."

It was useless to tell him that now, for he could read the truth for himself. The face which lay upon the cushion was the face of her dying mother—he knew the look too well; but she had not faded and died with a blight on her young life.

Now, my reader, I dare say I shall surprise you, perhaps, if you are practical persons, which is very likely, and excite your practical contempt, when I tell you that this girl, with her quiet little sentimental, every-day tragedy, did die, in truth,—died quietly, but sadly enough, perhaps, in the eyes of unpractical people, of what we sometimes hear called a broken heart. A common-place cause for such an uncommon-place death, you think; but the love of this Scottish rector's young daughter had been her life—and her love was dead; and perhaps such deaths are not so uncommon as we fancy. Perhaps the unromantic hearts, whose unromantic beatings are sometimes stilled—the homely hearts of homely men and women—are oftener stilled by some quiet tragedy, than we, who know so much of great and practical reason, would ever dream of.

But however that is, I must end my tragedy as it ended on the stage of the quite life.

Prue Renfrew died—died because her young life was blighted; and being only a girl, since it seemed to her girlish weakness that life's burden was too hard to bear, she laid it down. This is one view of the case; but there is another—that He who is pitiful to all, laid His great hand upon the girlish heart, and lightened the burden with a touch.

Only a few weeks more and one morning Lady Strathspey's carriage stopped at the Rectory garden-gate, and her ladyship stepped out, with a deeper anxiousness on her pale, handsome face than had ever softened its haughtiness before.

Marjory opened the door for her, as usual; but there was something softened even in Marjory's stern, tear-stained face, as she led the way [illegible] little white bed-room, up stairs, now darkened by closed blinds, and faintly sweet with the odour of flowers.

The rector stood at the bedside, looking down at the fair young face upon the pillow, and after her first startled glance at this young face, her ladyship turned to him.

"I did not dream of this!" she said. "I never dreamed of this! She is dying!"

He touched the strengthless little hand upon the coverlet, and bowed his head with the broken majesty of a stricken man.

"My 'one ewe lamb,' my lady," he said; "and she is dying."

The woman could not speak. If she had not murdered this girl, she had at least helped her to her death in spite of her tardy caution, and in the first passion of her womanly pity, I think it possible that she saw her idol as she had never seen him before.

She went home and wrote him a passionate, earnest letter, full of a remorse which struck him to the soul when it reached him. In her recognition of what his trifling had done, she could not be bitter [illegible]

[illegible]