

HOW IT ALL CAME ROUND.

(L. T. Meade, in "Sunday Magazine.")

CHAPTER LII.—(Continued.)

Two years ago I joined the business, I married my Charlotte's mother. I was a wealthy man even then. Though of no birth in particular, I was considered gentlemanly. I had acquired that outward polish which a university education gives; I was also good-looking. With my money, good looks, and education, I was considered a match for the proud and very poor daughter of an old Irish baronet. She had no money; she had nothing but her beautiful face, her high and honorable spirit, her blue blood. You will say 'Enough!' Ay, it was more than enough. She made me the best, the truest of wives. I never loved another woman. She was a little bit extravagant. She had never known wealth until she became my wife, and wealth, in the most innocent way in the world, was delightful to her. While Jasper saved, I was tempted to live largely. I took an expensive house—there was no earthly good thing I would not have given to her. She loved me; but as I said, she was proud. Pride in birth and position was perhaps her only fault. I was perfect in her eyes, but she took a dislike to Jasper. This I could have borne, but it pained me when I saw her turning away from my old father. I dearly loved and respected my father, and I wanted Constance to love him, but she never could be got to care for him. It was at that time, that that thing happened which was the beginning of all the after darkness and misery.

"My father, finding my proud young wife not exactly to his taste, came less and less to our house. Finally, he bought an old estate in Hertfordshire, and then one day the news reached us that he had engaged himself to a very young girl, and that he would marry at once. There was nothing wrong in this marriage, but Jasper and I chose to consider it a sin. We had never forgotten our mother, and we thought it a dishonor to her. We forgot our father's loneliness. In short, we were unreasonable, and behaved as unreasonable men will on such occasions. Hot and angry words passed between our father and ourselves. We neither liked our father's marriage nor his choice. Of course, we were scarcely likely to turn the old man from his purpose, but we refused to have anything to do with his young wife. Under such circumstances we had an open quarrel. Our father married, and we did not see him for years. I was unhappy at this, for I loved my father. Before his second marriage, he always spent from Saturday to Monday at our house, and though my own wife not caring for him greatly marred our pleasure, yet now that the visits had absolutely ceased I missed them—I missed the gray head and the shrewd, old, kindly face; and often, very often, I almost resolved to run down into Hertfordshire and make up my quarrel. I did not do so, however; and as the years went on, I grew afraid to mention my father's name to either my wife or brother. Jasper and I were at this time deeply absorbed in speculation; our business was growing and growing; each thing we embarked in turned out well; we were beginning quite to recover from the strain which our father's removal of so large a sum of money had caused. Jasper was a better man of business than I was. Jasper, though the junior partner, took the lead in all plans. He proposed that an Australian branch of our business should be opened. It was done, and succeeded well.

"About this time we heard that a little son had arrived at the Hermitage in Hertfordshire. He did not live long. We saw his birth announced in *The Times*. It may have been some months later, though, looking back on it, it seems but a few days, that the birth was followed by the death. A year or two passed away, and my wife and I were made happy by the arrival of our first child. The child was a daughter. We called her Charlotte, after my much-loved mother. Time went on, until one day a telegram was put into my hand summoning my brother and myself to our father's death-bed. The telegram was sent by the young wife. I rushed off at once; Jasper followed by the next train.

"The hale, old man had broken up very suddenly at last, and the doctor said he had but a few days to live. During those few days, Jasper and I scarcely left his bedside. We were reconciled fully and completely,

and he died at last murmuring my own mother's name and holding our hands.

It was during this visit that I saw the little wife for the first time. She was a commonplace little thing, but pretty and very young; it was impossible to dislike the gentle creature. She was overpowered with grief at her husband's death. It was impossible not to be kind to her, not to comfort her. There was one child, a girl of about the age of my own little Charlotte. This child had also been named Charlotte. She was a pale, dark-eyed child, with a certain strange look of my mother about her. She was not a particle like her own. My father loved this little creature, and several times during those last days of his he spoke of her to me.

"I have called her after your own mother," he said. "I love my second wife; but the Charlotte of my youth can never be forgotten. I have called the child Charlotte. You have called your daughter Charlotte. Good! let the two be friends."

"I promised readily enough, and I felt pity and interest for the little forlorn creature. I also, as I said, intended to be good to the mother, who seemed to me to be incapable of standing alone.

"Immediately after my father's death and before the funeral, I was summoned hastily to town. My wife was dangerously ill. A little dead baby had come into the world, and for a time her life was despaired of; eventually she got better; but for the next few days I loved and thought only for her. I turned over all business cares to Jasper. I was unable even to attend our father's funeral. I never day or night left Constance's bedside. I loved this woman most devotedly, most passionately. During all those days her life hung in the balance, my time seemed one long prayer to God.

"Spare her, spare her precious life at any cost, at any cost." Those were the words for ever on my lips. The prayer was heard; I had my wife again. For a short time she was restored to me. I have often thought since, was even that precious life worth the price I paid for it!

Here Mr. Harman paused. Some moisture had gathered on his brow; he took out his handkerchief to wipe it away. A glass of water stood by his side; he drank a little.

"I am approaching the sin," he said, addressing the clergyman. "The successfully buried sin is about to rise from its grave; pardon me if I shrink from the awful sight."

"God will strengthen you, my dear sir," answered Home. "By your confession, you are struggling back into the right path. What do I say? Rather you are being led back by God himself. Take courage. Lean upon the Almighty arm. Your sin will shrink in dimensions as you view it; for between you and it will come forgiveness."

Mr. Harman smiled faintly. After another short pause he continued.

"On the day on which my dear wife was pronounced out of danger, Jasper sent for me. My brother and I had ever been friends, though in no one particular were we alike. During the awful struggle through which I had just passed, I forgot both him and my father. Now I remembered him, and my father's death, and our own business cares. A thousand memories came back to me. When he sent for me, I left my wife's bedside and went down to him. I was feeling weak and low, for I had not been in bed for many nights, and a kind of reaction had set in. I was in the kind of state when a man's nerves can be shaken, and his whole moral equilibrium upset. I do not offer this as an excuse for what follows. There is no excuse for the dark sin; but I do believe, enough about myself to say that what I then yielded to, I should have been proof against at a stronger physical moment. I entered my private sitting room to find Jasper pacing up and down like a wild creature. His eyes were blood-hot, his hair tossed. He was a calm and cheerful person generally. At this instant, he looked like one half bereft of reason. 'God, heavens! what is wrong?' I said. I was startled out of myself by his state of perturbation.

"We are ruined; that is what is wrong," answered Jasper.

"He then entered into particulars with which I need not trouble you. A great house, one of the greatest and largest houses in the City, had come to absolute grief; it was bankrupt. In its fall many other houses, ours amongst them, must sink.

"I saw it all quite plainly. I sat down quiet and stoned; while Jasper raved and swore and paced up and down the room, I sat still. Yes, we were beggars, nothing could save the house which our father had made with such pride and care.

"After a time I left Jasper and returned to my wife's room. On the way, I entered the nursery and paid my pretty little Charlotte a visit. She climbed on my knee and kissed me, and all the time I kept saying to myself, 'The child is a beggar, I can give her no comforts; we are absolutely in want.' It was the beginning of the winter then, and the weather was bitterly cold. The doctor met me on the threshold of my wife's room; he said to me, 'As soon as ever she is better, you must either take or send her out of England. She may recover abroad; but to winter in this climate, in her present state, would certainly kill her. How could I take my wife away? I sat down again in the darkened room and thought over the past. Hitherto the wealth, which was so easily won, seemed, of comparatively small importance. It was easy with a full purse to wish, then to obtain. I had often wondered at Constance's love for all the pretty things with which I delighted to surround her, her almost childish pleasure in the riches which had come to her. She always said to me at such times:

"But I have known such poverty; I hate poverty, and I love, I love the pretty things of life."

"This very night, as I sat by her bedside, she opened her lovely eyes and looked at me and said:

"John, I have had such a dream, so vivid, so, so terrible. I thought we were poor again—poorer than I ever was even with my father; so poor, John, that I was hungry, and you could give me nothing to eat. I begged you to give me food. There was a loaf in a shop-window, such a nice crisp loaf; and I was starving. When you said you had no money, I begged of you to steal that loaf. You would not, you would not, and at last I lay down to die. Oh! John, say it was a dream."

"Of course it was only a dream, my darling!" I answered, and I kissed her and soothed her, though all the time my heart felt like lead.

"That evening Jasper sent for me again. His manner now was changed. The wildness and despair had left it. He was his old, cool, collected self. He was in the sort of mood when he always had an ascendancy over me—the sort of mood when he showed that wonderful business faculty for which I could not but admire him.

"Sit down, John," he said, "I have a great deal to say to you. There is a plan in my mind, if you will agree to act with me in it, we may yet be saved."

"Thinking of my Constance lying so ill upstairs, my heart leaped up at these words.

"What is your plan?" I said. "I can stay with you for some time. I can listen as long as you like."

"You hate poverty?" said Jasper.

"Yes," I said, thinking of Constance, "I hate it."

"If you will consent to my scheme; if you will consent before you leave this room, we need not sink with Cooper, Cooper, and Bennett."

"I will listen to you," I said.

"You have always been so absorbed lately in your wife," continued Jasper, "that you have, I really believe, forgotten our father's death; his funeral was last Thursday. Of course you could not attend it. After the funeral I read the will."

"Yes," I said, "I had really forgotten my father's will. He left us money?" I said.

"I am glad; it will keep us from absolute want." Constance need not be hungry after all."

"My brother looked at me.

"A little money has been left to us," he said, "but so little that it must go with the rest. In the general crash those few thousands must also go. John, you remember when our father took that very large sum out of the business, he promised that we should be his heirs. It was a loan for his lifetime."

"He had not married then," I said.

"No," answered Jasper, "he had not married. Now that he has married he has forgotten all but his second wife. He has left her, with the exception of a few thousand, the whole of that fine property. In short, he has left her a sum of money which

is to realize an income of twelve hundred a year."

"Yes," I said wearily.

"Jasper looked at me very hard. I returned his gaze.

"That money, if left to us, would save the firm. Quite absolutely save the firm in this present crisis," he said slowly and emphatically.

"Yes," I said again. I was so innocent, so far from what I since became, at that moment, that I did not in the least understand my brother. 'The money is not ours,' I said, seeing that his gray eyes were still fixed on me with a greedy, intense light.

"If my father were alive now," said Jasper, rising to his feet and coming to my side, "if my father were alive now he would break his heart, to see the business which he made with such pride and skill come to absolute grief. If my father were still alive; if that crash had come but a fortnight ago, he would say, 'Save the firm at any cost.'"

"But he is dead," I said, "we cannot save the firm. What do you mean, Jasper? I confess I cannot see to what you are driving."

"John," said my brother, "you are stupid. If our father could speak to us now, he would say, 'Take the money, all the money I have left, and save the firm of Harman Brothers.'"

"You mean," I said, "you mean that we are to steal that money, the money left to the widow and the fatherless?"

"I understood the meaning now. I staggered to my feet. I could have felled my brother to the ground. He was my brother, my only brother; but at that moment, so true were my heart's instincts to the good and right, that I loathed him. Before, however, I could say a word, or utter a reproach, a message came to me from my wife. I was wanted in my wife's room instantly, she was excited! she was very so. I flew away without a word.

"Come back again, I will wait for you here," my brother called after me.

"I entered Constance's room. I think she was a little delirious. She was still talking about money, about being hungry and having no money to buy bread. Perhaps a presentiment of the evil news had come to her. I had to soothe, to assure her that all she desired should be hers. I even took my purse out and put it into her burning hand. At last she believed me; she fell asleep with her hand in mine. I dared not stir from her; and all the time, as I sat far into the night, I thought over Jasper's words. They were terrible words, but I could not get them out of my head, they were burned like fire into my brain. At last Constance awoke; she was better, and I could leave her. It was now almost morning. I went to my study, for I could not sleep. To my surprise, Jasper was still there. It was six hours since I had left him, but he had not stirred.

"John," he said, seeing that I shrank from him, "you must hear me out. Call my plan by as ugly a name as you like, no other plan, no other plan will save the firm. John, will you hear me speak?"

"Yes, I will hear you," I said. I sank down on the sofa. My head was reeling. Right and wrong seemed confused. I said to myself, My brain is so confused with grief and perplexity that it is no matter what Jasper says just now, for I shall not understand him. But I found to my surprise, almost to my horror, that I understood with startling clearness every word. This was Jasper's plan. There were three trustees to the will; I was one, my brother Jasper another, a third was a man by the name of Alexander Wilson. He was brother to my father's second wife. This Alexander Wilson I had never seen. Jasper had seen him once. He described him to me as a tall and powerful man with red hair. 'He is the other trustee,' said my brother, 'and he is dead.'

"Dead!" I said, starting.

"Yes, he is without doubt; here is an account of his death."

Jasper then opened an Australian paper and showed me the name, also the full account of a man who answered in all particulars to the Alexander Wilson named as the third trustee. Jasper then proceeded to unfold yet further his scheme.

"That trustee being dead, we were absolute masters of the situation, we could appropriate that money. The widow knew noth-