

## BETTER LATE THAN NEVER.

Life is a race where some succeed,  
While others are beginning;  
'Tis luck at times, at others speed,  
That gives an early winning.  
But if you chance to fall behind,  
Ne'er slacken your endeavor;  
Just keep this wholesome truth in mind—  
'Tis better late than never.

If you can keep ahead, 'tis well,  
But never trip your neighbour;  
'Tis noble when you can excel  
By honest, patient labor.  
But if you are outstripped at last,  
Press on as bold as ever;  
Remember though you are surpassed,  
'Tis better late than never!

Ne'er labor for an idle boast  
Of victory o'er another,  
But, while you strive your uttermost,  
Deal fairly with a brother.  
Whatever your station do your best,  
And hold your purpose ever;  
And if you fail to beat the rest,  
'Tis better late than never!

Choose well the path in which you run,  
Succeed by noble daring;  
Then, though the last, when once 'tis won,  
Your crown is worth the wearing.  
Then never fret if left behind,  
Nor slacken your endeavor;  
But ever keep this truth in mind—  
'Tis better late than never!

## JOAN:

A TALE,

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"Climb up as a Flower," "Red as a Rose is she," etc.

## PART I.

## CHAPTER IX.

She brings her eyes quickly back again to his face, but they are meek no longer; instead, flaming and flashing. "Do you think it can make things much easier or pleasanter for me to hear," she says, indignantly, "to hear him abused? When you say such things you make me regret that I have ever breathed the subject to you; how could he tell that it was the last moment? he was only seventy-two! people often live till eighty or ninety nowadays; he seemed no more likely to die than you do; does any one ever think that he himself will die? he knows that every one else will, but he does not believe that he will." After a moment, in a softer, gentler voice of deepest emotion: "My one prayer and trust is," she says: "that he does not know—that he cannot see! Oh! God could not let him see! it would be too cruel! it would break his heart! he that never thought anything could be good enough for me!"

Her voice wavers and breaks. The tears crowd up into her eyes. A rather prolonged silence. Joan's wet eyes go back to the sea, and absently watch the breakers, idly puzzled to see that a big wave with an imposing volume of brown water and noise of foamy froth sometimes does not reach as far as a lesser, humbler one that follows. It is she that at length resumes the conversation. Wolferstan, in fact, is feeling snubbed, and, though not exactly bearing malice, has no intention of laying himself open to a second rebuke.

"Apart from any question of will," she says, thoughtfully, "I wonder how I manage to be left so destitute! At the time, I was too miserable to think or reason about it, but since then it has often puzzled me; my father must surely have had a younger son's portion, and, as I was his only child, it would naturally come to me, would not it? I know nothing of the law, but it seems to me that it must be so."

She looks appealingly at him for confirmation or contradiction; but where are Wolferstan's manners? Is he sulky or only inattentive? He has turned quite away from her, and makes no answer, good or bad, to her appeal. She is too preoccupied much to heed his lapse from civility and goes on:

"Of course I can quite understand, now, why he never mentioned my mother's family to me. I suppose there never was any one who knew less about his parents than I do; I do not even know when and where they first met—when they were married—how long they lived together—"

She stops abruptly, becoming suddenly aware of her auditor's want of attention. His face is still quite turned away, and he has uttered no sound, good or bad.

"You are bored by these details?" she says a moment later, after a rather hurt silence; "and no wonder indeed! I beg your pardon, but—(with a rather desolate smile)—here I am so poor in friends, that, like the Ancient Mariner, I button-hole any stranger I chance to meet."

She rises to her feet as she speaks, and prepares to set off homeward. He must look round now—must utter. And he does. He also rises, and turns toward her the face that for the last five minutes he has been so carefully averting. It is redder than its wont. His countenance is troubled, and in his eyes is an expression she does not understand. But even now he makes no reference to the subject of her remarks. He only says in a constrained voice:

"If you think I am bored you are mistaken." Then, a moment after: "Are you going home already? Must you?"

"Unless I wish to lose my dinner," she answers, with a smile.

"Your luncheon, I suppose you mean?"

"I mean my dinner; we dine at two—at least we oscillate between that and four."

"Good Heavens!—and is that all? Have you nothing else—nothing more to look forward to the whole of the live-long day?"

"We have tea and muffins at eight—at least between that and ten."

"Good Heavens!" (throwing back his handsome head and looking up in shocked appeal to the turquoise sky.)

"I have hit the right chord now, have not I?" says Joan, with a smile of soft malice; "this is the one of my misfortunes that really touches you. You were bored before" (with gentle persistence), "though you will not own it; but now you are all interest and alert compassion. I have found the right way to your heart—to every man's heart!"

They are walking slowly homeward, side by side, over the thin and bitter grass of the sand-hills, and back into the pleasant meads by which Joan had come.

"You know you must not proportion your pity for me to what your own sufferings would be under a two-o'clock dinner," says Joan presently, with a humorous smile.

"They would be severe, I own," he answers, gravely. "I know no one, the pleasure of whose society would outweigh them: you, somehow, have a knack of making me speak the truth against my will, and I will own to you that I could not think I should enjoy dining at two o'clock, even with you."

She laughs a little; and again they walk on over half a field in silence.

"I hope," says Joan by-and-by, "that you will not go away with the impression that I am a great object of compassion. I feel as if I had been giving you the idea, and indeed it is not the true one. No one can expect to go through all his life quite smoothly; and perhaps those are best off who have their troubles while they are young—one is so strong when one is young; probably I shall have a prosperous middle age, or a serene old age, or a very easy death, to make up to me—depend upon it, it will be made up to me in some way."

"By a serene old age," cries Wolferstan, contemptuously. "God forbid! No!—take my word for it"—(looking down with a more unveiled admiration than he has yet allowed himself in the eyes, at the profile beside him—the little sensitive fine nose—the sweet white cheek, clear and clean as privet-flowers—the curled cherry lips)—"there is something better than that ahead of you."

"Is there?" says Joan, a little doubtfully. "I should not be sorry to think that there were—but if not I can do without it—I can do without it." After a pause—"It is impossible," she says, in a more cheerful tone, "to be quite unhappy as long as one is thoroughly healthy, as long as one is honestly trying to do one's best, and as long as one has a keen sense of the ridiculous. This world's beauty" (looking fondly at all the brave show of young greenery round her, "this world's beauty is a great boon, but I think that its little ridiculousnesses are a still greater! There are very few things or situations in which I do not find something to make me laugh."

They have come to the end of the fields, have crossed the stile that leads back into the road. To arrive at Portland Villa you must turn to the right, to reach Wolferstan's home to the left.

"We will say good-by here," says Joan, gently but resolutely, holding out her hand. "If you escorted me to the house Mrs. Moberley would invite you to luncheon, and you would find it difficult to evade her importunities."

She shakes her head. "It would not amuse you, or, perhaps," with a blush, "it would amuse you too much; and it would annoy me extremely. You will say good-by now, I am sure," again making a confident proffer of her hand. This time he takes it.

"You have left me no other word to say," he answers, rather ruefully.

She has lifted to him, in friendly farewell, the two lumps of her clear, serious eyes—eyes well versed in tears, laughter, and tenderness, but unpractised in finess; eyes ignorant of—or, if not, disdaining—the unused weapons in their armory. Wolferstan looks back into them, down, down into their modest depths, to see whether no little devil lurks even at the very bottom of them.

But no! With an awe, slightly dashed by irritation, he has to own to himself, as he had to own at their last meeting at Dering, that he might be her grandfather.

"If you really came down from London, and subjected yourself to all the privations you told me of, only to see me—I wonder, did you really?" in a parenthesis of girlish curiosity: "thank you very much for it. If not—if, as I believe, that is only a *façon de parler*, and you came down on some errand of your own, yet, still, thank you. I have thoroughly enjoyed seeing you."

He is very glad to hear it, but would have preferred that she should have been less able to tell him so.

"Do not say it in that solemn valedictory tone!" he answers, laughing lightly; "if you think that you are to be so easily quit of me, you are mistaken. I have something of the gnat about me, I warn you! You always go to the shore in the morning, do not you?"

She smiles and raises her eyebrows a little.

"Always? why, I have been here only two days."

"But you went there yesterday morning?"

"Yes."

"About eleven o'clock?"

"Yes."

"And you went to-day?"

"Yes."

"And you will go to-morrow?" in a tone more affirmatory than interrogative.

"By all the laws of analogy!" she answers, breaking into a gay laugh, and so merrily takes leave.

## CHAPTER X.

It is not often in April, and in the first half of April too, that one sees five consecutive days of honeyed warmth, and strong summer shining; but it is so this year. The mighty young light next morning pouring into Joan's eyes, and waking her at an unearthly hour, when even the birds speak sleepily, shows her that not yet is there any lessening of the kingly beauty of the weather. Her first taste of the morning wind at her wide-dung window tells her that there is no touch of shrewish east in it. She looks out yawningly toward her friend the sea, and, so looking, ceases to yawn and smiles instead, at some recollection apparently.

Later on, after breakfast, she is again wistfully eyeing the ocean; leaning against the gate-posts, surrounded by the dogs, who are asking as plainly as short, excited barks and pathetically-goggling eyes can ask, whether she is going out to walk, and, if so, why she has not put her hat on. She is asking herself the same question. Shall she go to the sea-shore, after all? Were Wolferstan still in London she undoubtedly would. Why, then, should she let his goings and comings influence or constrain hers? How winning the fresh fields would look! How interesting it would be to see how much the young wheat-blades have sprung since this time yesterday! and how many more marsh marigolds have lit their brave gold fire by the little swampy pool in the meadow! And the sea! There is less wind to-day. To-day there would be no white horses tossing their snow-crests; no noisy breakers riotously tumbling; only an unbounded stretch of burnished silver, panting as in some great love-ecstasy.

She half closes her eyes, and with inward vision, longingly sees the unnumbered curves, losing themselves in one another; the dreamy ripple creeping to her feet; the green mermaid's hair aloft on the tide; the warm sands; and across them Wolferstan, stepping to meet her, with his low laugh, and his welcoming eyes. At the thought of his, her own reopen rather quickly.

"And you will go there to-morrow?" She puts on her hat and sets off for a long walk—not to the sea, however—she turns her back stoically upon it; to-morrow she will return thither.

She rambles aimlessly away with no other guiding impulse than the desire to avoid Helmsley, and the determination to keep away from the ocean. She follows the dogs noses more than any other leader. Where the rabbit-scent is strongest thither they take her. After a while she finds herself in a little still wood, alone. Only the sound of rustled leaves and a small squeaking bark of utter excitement now and then tell her that her companions are still within hail, and are in zealous pursuit of the ground-game of somebody unknown.

It would be a useless waste of voice to call them, for they certainly would not obey. So with a sigh of content she sits down on the warm, dry, leafy bed, and leans her still aching head against the smooth stem of a young beech-tree. She has taken off her hat and bared her forehead to the light handling of the baby winds. With a sense of deep, thorough peace and enjoyment, she looks about her—at the sticky horse-chestnut buds beginning to break into crumpled leaf; at the wood-anemones, pure as snow-drops but not half so cold, lifting their fine white heads and delicate green collars; at the primroses blossoming out in pale life from among the dead oak-leaves, brown and curled.

Apparently, however, solitary peace is not to be her portion for long. Not more than five or ten minutes has she been resting in dreamy tranquillity, when a step, heavier than the dogs' light scampering patter, troubles the quiet of the wood—some game-keeper, probably, justly irate at the invasion of his covers and the disturbance of his pheasant's eggs. Well, if she is to be scolded, she may as well be scolded sitting as standing. So she neither rises nor changes her position. With cheek leaned against the beech-bark, she awaits the on-comer's advent. Nearer, nearer, the quick foot-falls come; he means to pass close beside her—he does not mean to pass by her at all—she has stopped. With a half-frightened start she looks up. After all, she might as well have gone to the sea.

"No man can be more wise than destiny." It is Wolferstan!

## CHAPTER XI.

"How about the laws of analogy?" he asks, taking off his hat, and looking rather angry; "what has become of them since yesterday?"

She looks up, smiling subtly.

"They are temporarily suspended."

The sweet carnation color that surprise and half fright have sent flying up into her cheeks is kept prisoner there by pleasure. After a moment: "Did you really expect to meet me there?" she asks.

Her smile is catching. A reflection of it brightens the young man's aggrieved features.

"If I had any self-respect I should answer 'No'; but as I have not, I will confess to you that 'yes, I did!'"

"And you went there yourself?"

"Of course."

"And waited some time?"

"About two hours, I should think," replies the young man, gravely; "I built three large sand-castles, and saw two of them washed away; and I collected more cockle-shells than I ever saw together in my whole life before."

"Et puis?"

"Puis—I gave it up as a bad job—particularly as I was becoming an object of ridicule to three little boys and a nursery-maid; then I took my stand at that stile that commands the Helmsley road and your house; I thought, from the little I knew of you, that not even to avoid me could you stay mewed up in-doors all such a day as this; then I saw the Misses Moberley and their mamma set forth, arrayed like Solomon in all his glory. Then I ventured a little nearer, and watched you collect your dogs and set off. I stalked you stealthily; I knew that if I ventured to overtake you, you would turn back, re-enter the house, and give me my *cognac* with as cold-blooded and inexorable a gentleness as you did yesterday."

"You are very persistent!" she says, looking at him with a slow, serious smile; "such perseverance, directed to worthier objects, might make you do great things."

"When one has come one hundred and twenty miles to see one pair of—I mean to attain one object," answers the young man, emphasizing his words by the steady fire of his look, "one is hardly content to go away without having succeeded, at least in some measure, in it."

The flush on Joan's face has hitherto amounted only to a fair, cool pink; now it strengthens to a hot, red glow of indignation; quite as beautiful to look at, but not nearly so comfortable to the wearer.

"May I beg of you not to make me any pretty speeches?" she says, hurriedly; "I cannot tell you how they humiliate me! I never was fond of them in my good days—never; but now—now I dislike them far more than ever I did!" (giving one blue flash out of her eyes at him, and then hastily looking away). "If I were an unsophisticated country girl of seventeen, I could understand your thinking that they would please me; but I am surprised at your imagining that a woman who has been three—nearly four years in the world—your own world, should be so credulous!"

"I stand reproved," answers Wolferstan, quietly: "I am aware that in society it is nearly as rude to tell persons that you like them as that you dislike them. I withdraw the obnoxious statement."

Together they have strolled slowly home through the dew-crisped meadows. Together they have watched the sun's nightly swoon—what so quickly rises again into life, cannot be called death—and praised his parting benediction to the courtier clouds.

Together they now stand in the dusty road at the gate of Portland Villa. Joan smiles soberly.

"They are not come back yet," says Wolferstan, surveying with his eyes the front of the house—silent windows, and closed door; "if they were" (smiling), "I feel sure that I should see some indication of them, as I did yesterday morning."

"I did not expect them," answers Joan; "they will not be back till two or three o'clock."

"And you will be alone all evening?"

"Yes."

"And" (in a rather lowered voice), "and I shall be alone all evening!"

"Yes."

If he had contemplated proposing any plan that should entail their not being alone all evening, something, either in her face or in her "Yes," makes him change his mind.

A moment of silence. The wind is making a soft sighing bustle in the hedge, and the distant Helmsley churches chime eight.

"You will not send me a linenow and then, I suppose?" suggests Wolferstan diffidently, leaning on the gate.

"Certainly not."

"Not even if you are in any trouble?"

"I cannot imagine any trouble in which you would be able to help me," she answers, gravely; "if I were sick, I could not ask you to nurse me; if I were starving, I could not ask you bread."

"Then why call me friend?" cries the young man, hotly; "what is the use of an empty name in which there is no meaning?"

She smiles a little teasingly.

"As you say, what use—let us drop it!"

"If," continues the young man, eagerly—"if by-and-by—not very soon—I run down again—will there be any chance—is it likely that—the laws of analogy will have resumed their sway?"

"Do you mean," she answers, smiling, yet gravely, while her look meets his, full-eyed and collected—"do you mean shall I be likely to meet you on the shore?—most assuredly not!—I know nothing more unlikely; if we meet accidentally—really accidentally—not accidentally on purpose"—(laughingly)—"I shall be delighted; I like to see you: it gives me pleasure; as I have told you till you must be tired of hearing it, you are the last connecting link between me and my good old life!"

He makes an impatient gesture with his foot,