

## LOSS AND GAIN; OR, THE BENSONS.

BY EDITH AUBURN.

## CHAPTER I.

The end had come at last—as it always comes—and Mr. Clement, the wealthy retired merchant, the sympathizing friend, the willing helper, was carried to his last resting-place. Alice Benson, his niece, stood at a bay window that overlooked the street watching the long funeral procession. When the last person had disappeared in the distance, she shut the bars of the Venetian blinds, and, drawing the curtains close, gave way to the first fit of tears in which she had allowed herself to indulge. Helen, her younger sister, who had wept herself sick, was lying in a darkened chamber with ice at her head.

"Poor dear Uncle," said Alice aloud, "I am so glad I did not leave you. The temptation was strong, but I had strength given me to do my duty, and now I have nothing to reproach myself with."

No wonder that Alice and Helen Benson, with their brothers, grieved most sincerely for the death of their uncle, for he had been almost father and mother to them. Their father, a clergyman, had died fourteen years before, when Alice was only seven years old, and their mother followed him in a few months.

Mr. Clement was a widower for the second time; his beautiful residence situated on the St. Lawrence, a couple of miles from Montreal, was under the entire management of servants,—not the most efficient ones he feared. At the time of his brother-in-law's death, he was about to dispose of his property and take up his residence in England; but that event altered his plans. His sister and her children were to be cared for. He immediately brought them to Lindenwold, where he hoped his sister would sufficiently recover her health, which was prostrated by months of anxiety and

watching at her husband's bedside, so as to enable her to preside as mistress of her new home. But it was ordered otherwise. Death entered and took the third mistress of Lindenwold. Mr. Clement, in despair of anything but hirelings surviving under his roof, proposed again to part with his home and consign himself and his orphan charge to the tender mercies of a boarding-house. Fortunately he was led to reconsider this step, and to decide to bring up the little ones with home influences around them. Calling Alice, the little eight-year old girl, to his side, he said:

"Your little brothers and sister have no mamma now, so you must be a mamma to them. You must hear them say their prayers night and morning, and teach them to be good, the way mamma taught you; and you must be my little house-keeper, and help me to keep this pretty home for you."

With a very serious face, as though she fully realized what her uncle asked of her, the little girl promised.

Mr. Clement at once installed her head of the tea-table, and the childish hands prepared the tea for the maid to pass. He enjoyed the sweet little face opposite him, and the earnest efforts she made to please. But as she grew up to womanhood, he feared that he had deprived her of much of the happy thoughtlessness of childhood by treating her as a woman too soon. At eighteen Alice was engaged, with her uncle's approval, to a talented and rising young lawyer in the city. "But you must wait," the old gentleman said, "for a couple of years yet; I know youth is hasty, but love is the stronger for being tried. You may think me selfish."

"No, Uncle, you are not selfish," said Alice, interrupting him.

"Still you may think me so," he said,