

HIDDEN COMFORTERS.

Those idle hands upon her lap lay not, they rather hung
Like dead hands which from living grasp have carelessly been flung;
You saw that life still dwelt within by the deep heaving breast,
Save there, the woeful form displayed no motion—yet no rest.

The eyes were dry—their power was lost in tears to find relief;
While the tongue's very muteness spoke the eloquence of grief;
But if the quivering lips had breathed the prayer of that sad heart,
They would have asked for leave to mourn forgotten and apart.

For there are times when soothing words seem mocking human woe.
And half-resentful thoughts reply: "How can these glad hearts know?"
And thus with her, she saw her own, but saw no other's cross.
Nor guessed that she might find that gain which now she counts a loss.

Far less deemed she, when hunger came and harshly bade her rise,
That 'neath his dreared form there lay an angel in disguise;
Or that stern Want, who sharply cried: "Up, to your toil again!"
By heaven was sent to lift the load from her half-frenzied brain.

Yet these stern messengers have done what gentler ne'er had wrought.
For the poor mourner's daily toil demands its meed of thought;
Each simple task the hands complete, acts as a homely wile,
First teaching the dim eyes to weep, and then the lips to smile.

O ye who think that Labour owns no power to soothe and bless,
Learn, that a tenfold yeaven lurks mid grief in idleness;
Learn, that "Our Father" often sends mercy in sternest guise,
And homely forms hide angel-guests from our earth-blinded eyes.

RUTH BUCK.

MY GODMOTHER'S STORY.

IN TWO CHAPTERS.—CHAPTER I.

My godmother was always fussy when expecting a friend. Her old-fashioned hospitality would not delegate to servants finishing-touches and minute arrangements bearing upon the pleasure or convenience of guests whom she delighted to honour; but even I, who knew her ways, had never seen her so restlessly bent upon any one's comfort as that of Miss Moore she was expecting that fine July afternoon, when she told me the story I am going to tell. I don't know that I was a particularly worldly girl; but certainly the fact of Miss Moore being a music-teacher in a Bath school seemed to me a little out of keeping with such elaborate preparations; and when she arrived, her appearance impressed me as little as her position. Very slight and faded, quiet, and rather cold, her presence, I feared, would be nothing but a weight and a chill during the remainder of my visit, and when she retired for the two hours' rest before dinner which my godmother looked upon as essential after any railway journey, long or short, I could not forbear asking her, with some degree of petulance, what in the world there could be in or about Miss Moore to create the interest she had shown. It was then, and in reply to my questions, that she told me the following story.

When I lost my poor dear husband nearly one-and-twenty years ago, I chose for my widowed home a pretty little cottage in the neighbourhood of Eldersley. The country was beautiful, and the cottage secluded—two recommendations to me at that time. I did not want society, and was not likely to be troubled with it there, for the large proprietors around would hardly discover whether my small abode was tenanted or not. The only one of them who called upon me was Mr. Moore of Acton Hall, with his only daughter. He had known my husband in early days, and seemed anxious to pay all friendly attention to his widow. I had often heard my husband speak of Charles Moore as a warm-hearted and generous, but weak-minded fellow. I hardly knew that he ever said so in so many words, but the impression I received was that he had rather liked than respected him. Tall and graceful, there was yet something strikingly irresolute about every movement. The forehead was white as ivory, but it sloped backwards, and the full hazel eye met yours but for a moment, and then glanced restlessly away. But he was pleasant, kind, and much easier to get on with at first than his daughter, who was then a girl of about twenty. I took it for granted that she must be like her mother, who had died many years before, for she was singularly unlike her father—tall and slight in figure as he was, but with a very contrasting air of decision in all she said or did. Her father seemed wrapped up in her, and I liked the tenderness of her manner to him, though it was protecting rather than filial, like the manner of an elder sister. More than once she broke in upon an unfinished sentence of his, deciding some question which he was discussing, or giving a positive opinion where he was merely suggesting and qualifying. Before they left, they made me promise that I would soon spend a long day with them at Acton; and when their carriage rolled away, I found myself thinking more about them than I had for some time thought about anything but my own sorrows.

When the appointed day for my visit came, Miss Moore drove over for me by herself. I was a little sorry, expecting to find conversation flag, and wishing for Mr. Moore and his placid generalities to fill up the time; but long before we got to the end of our drive, all sense of restraint was gone. Miss Moore seemed to enjoy the excitement of driving her pretty spirited ponies, and the bright sunshine and rapid motion revived my spirits too. I liked her frank protecting manner; I liked to watch the energy that pervaded her whole frame, the firm little hand that gathered in the reins, the steadfast eye, the ring of the clear voice. Though a coward in a carriage generally, I felt safe with her. As we neared the house, I saw that part of it was unfinished. "Yes," said she, "that's dear papa's present hobby—the new hall; necessitated by the last hobby—the new drawing-room. The old hall was once too large for the rest of the house, and he has since contrived to make the rest of the house too large for the hall. I'm sorry for it, for papa is not a rich man, and I often fear he is hampering himself seriously." Rather startled by this unexpected frankness, I made no reply, and we drove on in silence till we reached the temporary entrance, where we were met by Mr. Moore and a fashionable-looking young man, whom he introduced to me as Captain Cameron. I could not help remarking the change in Miss Moore's manner. Evidently Captain Cameron's visit was to her an event of no ordinary interest. When she had taken off her bonnet for luncheon, she hardly looked like the same person. It was not only the improvement in appearance, for the bonnet hid the small well-set head and rich hair, but the difference in voice and manner. All abruptness and self-possession were gone, and her colour came and went like a timid child's. His admiration was as evident as her embarrassment, but I felt the pleasure of my day was a good deal spoiled; for even when, after luncheon, the young officer rode away to Eldersley, where he was quartered, Miss Moore continued silent and absent, and left me to be entertained by her father, who took me to see the improvements he was making, and those he had made in former years.

It seemed that before his time Acton had been a rambling old house, without much pretence to architectural beauty; but he had raised the roof, thrown out a wing, and was now constructing a noble hall. It struck me as we walked through the grounds that he was making the house too stately in proportion to their extent, which was not considerable, nor had they much old timber to boast of. Evidently, a great many of the best trees had been recently cut down. The chief charm of the place was the noble river, which swept rapidly round the bank on which the house stood. The gardens and green-houses were not in first-rate order, and Mr. Moore rallied his daughter a good deal about the ill success of her administration, for it seemed she had been replacing a head-gardener by some young protégé of her own. "This naughty papa," she said, turning to me, "laughs at my economies, but I know that great greedy hall of his wants them all." Mr. Moore looked pained. "The hall was essential, Margaret. We had no billiard-room; the elevation was mean; the length of building disproportioned." Playfully she put her little hand on his mouth. "Yes, yes; but this is the very last of our building-schemes. I suppose it will be finished some day or other; then we'll shut up the house, go to Switzerland, and get rich." Her father sighed as he put his arm round her waist, and turned the subject.

From this day I may, I think, date my friendship for Miss Moore. I was won by her frankness and her energy; and she took to me, as girls often will to women much older than themselves, and all the more because she knew I was lonely, and at that time poor. Her pretty ponies very frequently were kept pawing the gravel at my cottage-gate, while she ran in to insist upon carrying me off for a drive, or failing, would remain for a chat. Very frequently, too, I spent whole days at Acton, where Mr. Moore had always a courteous welcome for me; indeed, both he and Margaret soon seemed to look upon me as a confidential friend, though, by the way, Mr. Moore could never be called confiding. He had a singular way of always keeping back what he thought—what he meant to do. But he was sufficiently at his ease with me to be silent or to talk according to his own inclination. As for his daughter, she had few reserves from any one she loved; so I soon discovered the skeleton in this seemingly pleasant home. Mr. Moore was living beyond his income, though to what extent she was unable to ascertain; but from his growing depression and reserve, she feared that he was becoming seriously involved. If she questioned, she roused an irritability of manner he had never shown to her before, and this would be succeeded by a dejection that she dreaded far more. But Margaret had another counterbalancing anxiety, though she never named it to me. Captain Cameron was a frequent visitor; what brought him so often? Was his undisguised admiration of her society to be taken as signs of real feeling, or was he merely trifling with her? His manner perplexed me, and it was plain to see, tortured Margaret. Sometimes he would ride over two or three times a week, and seem to worship the very ground she trod; then, again days would pass without a call from him, and when he came at last, he would seem cold and constrained. As for her, it was piteous to see her on those days of vain watching and waiting. But she would struggle bravely, and I was careful not to betray that I observed her changing colour, or the icy coldness of her poor little trembling hands. Her father never failed to welcome Captain Cameron warmly, and to brighten up during his visits, whatever his previous mood. It was evident that his consent would be most readily given. But would it be asked? I kept considering and wondering about this, thinking sometimes that it inevitably would, and then, again, doubting whether the young officer might not intend merely to secure a pleasant year or two, and then, when his regiment was ordered off, to trench himself behind those playful professions of extreme poverty which he was so fond of making.

Meanwhile, the new hall got finished, and Mr. Moore, probably, as we said to each other, from having no longer the excitement of watching its progress, grew more and more absent and gloomy. Margaret used to talk now very constantly about him and his affairs. Several small things occurred about this time to increase her alarm. The family lawyer, a formal, impenetrable sort of man, for whom she had one of her vehement antipathies, was constantly driving over to Acton, and spending hours with Mr. Moore, invariably leaving him more dejected than he found him. On one of these dark days, it so happened that the poor girl, whose allowance, it seemed, had not been regularly paid her for a year or two, was induced, by a pressing letter from her milliner, to enter her father's study, and ask for money to pay the enclosed bill. It was but a small one, but it threw Mr. Moore into a state of distressing excitement. "Girl, do you want to ruin me?" he had said. "Curses on women and their vanity! why must you run up such bills as this just now?" And then, as she stood there petrified, for it seemed to her as though her father's mind were shaken, he looked at the trifling sum-total, seemed shocked at his own violence, tried to laugh it off, kissed her, told her the milliner should be paid the next day, and sent her back to me in tears. But that very evening Captain Cameron came over; and when Margaret returned from a stroll with him by the river's side, her eyes were bright and her step firm, as though the scene of the morning had never been. Some word or look of his had blown that cloud quite away! But it will be easily imagined that when, on the following morning, Mr. Moore announced to us he was going to town for a week, I for one could not help feeling a sensation of relief. He, too, seemed more cheerful than usual, and kindly insisted that I should remain and keep his Maggie company. This was in the month of July, as I remember well, for the very day before Moore's expected return, I was summoned to the death-bed of my husband's father, and did not get home till September.

The first morning after my arrival, I heard the rapid trot of the pretty ponies, and Margaret, running in, flung her arms round me in her warm-hearted way. "You must come back with me, dear Mrs. Malcolm; you must indeed. Papa wishes it; he must not be crossed." And then, suddenly bursting into an agony of tears: "I do not know what is the matter with papa; I fear—I fear—I fear—lowering her voice to a whisper I guessed rather than heard, "I think sometimes that papa is going mad."

Of course I could not refuse to accompany her to Acton, and when I got there, we found Mr. Moore so hospitable and seemingly cheerful, that Margaret's fears appeared to me quite unreasonable, though I was shocked at the look of illness on her father's face, and could not refrain from telling her that it was for his bodily health I should be inclined to tremble.

"Yes," she said, "he does look very ill. I think it is this new habit of his, this early bathing in the river."

"Bathing! so late in the year?" For it was the second week in September, and the weather had a touch of frost about it. Margaret went on:

"Very soon after papa's return from town, he began to talk of bathing, as having been recommended to him by a London doctor. I wanted to go to the sea, but that he would not hear of. For the last month, he has bathed in the river every morning. He is a first-rate swimmer, and thought it would do him good to battle with the current, which, you know, is very rapid just below the house. But I do not think it agrees with him. When he returns, his manner is strange and restless, and in the evenings, when wishing me good night, he kisses me in such a wild way, and looks into my face so wistfully. Last night, as he held me long in his arms, I felt large tears drop on my hair, and heard him say: 'She at least shall be happy. Come what may she shall be happy.' I wanted to speak, and tell him I knew there was some great trouble hanging over us, but that if he would only trust me, both might be happier, and that we would bear it bravely together. But I was so frightened, I could not say one word. Hush! he is coming; let us look cheerful."

"Mrs. Malcolm, I challenge you to a stroll before dinner," said Mr. Moore. "And my Maggie, too; I can't spare her this afternoon."

We put on our bonnets, and went at once. His manner to his daughter was unspeakably tender, but it impressed me painfully; I scarcely knew why. It was strange and solemn, and sometimes, I thought, incoherent. I began to understand her fears. Coming home, the sunset fell yellow and golden upon the deep, swift river, and recalled to my mind his practice of early bathing.

"To-morrow morning will be decidedly frosty, Mr. Moore," said I; "surely you will not be so imprudent as to bathe before the sun gets a little power. At six o'clock, it can hardly be light!"

"Six o'clock! Whv, Biddy, told me to-day that papa left his room a little after five, when it was quite dark, before any one but himself was up," interrupted Margaret.

"Confound Biddy!" burst out Mr. Moore; "prying old fool! What does she do up at this hour? I will not have her set the house on fire, going about with her candle; pretending to brush, forsooth. It's your fault, Margaret; you've spoiled that old Irishwoman, till she has become insufferable. Tell her, once for all, that I will not have her get up before the others. I will not have it—I will not."

"But, Mr. Moore," I persisted, anxious to divert him from the subject, Biddy being an especial favourite of mine, and not a little alarmed at such disproportionate vehemence about so mere a trifle—"but ought you to bathe? Is it good for you?"

"Perhaps not," said he; "perhaps I am carrying it a little too far. I had a touch of cramp this very morning. A mere touch, my Maggie; you need not look scared. The girl loves her poor father; would mourn for him, after all, I do believe." And he looked at her with a strange yearning expression of love and woe, which seemed to frighten her, though she tried to laugh it off, saying she could not love a naughty papa who did not take care of his health, but bathed at unheard-of hours, and soaked good faithful Biddy. He tried to laugh, too, but it was a sorrowful laugh.

The remainder of our walk was silent. Clouds gathered, yellow leaves fluttered thickly over our heads, and each knew that the other was sad. Margaret played the whole evening through, as, indeed, she often did. Her father held a book up before his face; but he did not turn the pages, and once, when I happened to change my seat, I caught that same loving, despairing look fixed upon his daughter, as she sat there at the instrument, her little hands sometimes flying over the keys, but oftener lingering over some sweet, sad strain with a passionate pathos I never heard equalled. I remarked that she kept playing Scotch airs, Captain Cameron's favourite ones, as if she cared for no others. Once her father asked her for one of Beethoven's adagios, of which he was very fond. She said she would look for it immediately; but she went on as if spell-bound, improvising wild, wailing variations, and then returning to dwell again on the simple melodies so dearly associated, till bedtime came.

"My Maggie," said Mr. Moore, "my own child, you do not care for your poor father, and will not play one tune for him!"

"O papa, how thoughtless I have been. Let me play it now."

"No, darling, it is too late. No; it is best as it is—best as it is. Give all the young heart to happiness, my own Maggie! God in heaven bless you, my child!" And he strained her to his heart with a convulsive energy which seemed to shock her, and confirmed my worst suspicions.

That night, as I sat up rather late in my own room, there came a low tap at my door, and Biddy, the Irish house-maid entered, to my surprise, with an air of profoundest mystery.

"I ask your pardon, ma'am; and is the young mistress goin' to be wid ye agin this night?"

"No, Biddy. Miss Moore seemed tired, and wished me good-night at the door of her own room."

"Sure, thin, ma'am, I'll be after spakin' a word wid yourself this same blessed night; for may I never sin, but there's sorrow and heartbreak to the fore, and a pity it is for the sweet, young mistress, the cratur, and she so young and illigant, glory be to God!"

"What is the matter, Biddy?" said I, not without a vague dread, the faithful Irishwoman was so weird-looking with her brown "ribbed sen-sand" face, and her keen, wistful eyes set close together like those of a monkey.

"Faix, thin, ma'am, and it's myself does not know, barrin' that the master—and he as civil a gentleman as ever was—is gone clean out of his wits altogether!" And Biddy raised her hands above her head, swaying herself to and fro in her agitation.

"Why do you think so? What has happened? What do you mean?" I enquired.

"Sure, ma'am, and it's easy to see it by lookin' on his face, let alone his ways. They've been talking long enough in the hall, but I never let on that I tuk any notice to any soul alive but yourself. Sure and he's taken all the plate out of James's keepin', till the poor boy has not a spoon to spare, and daren't ask for another for his life; and jist this evening, when I was fixin' his dressing-room, and movin' some lump of a big parcel that he brought with him from London, if he didn't come in and rate at me till I was like to drop with the fear; he that used to be the decentest gentleman, says he'd have none of my pryin' ways; and what had I to do to be lookin' into that