

## PARTED WAYS.

## I.

"I AM afraid it has all been a mistake, Harold," she said, slowly and sadly, without turning to look at him, gazing straight before her at the glowing October landscape that lay spread around them.

"What a mistake!" he exclaimed in a startled tone, turning to look at the speaker's half-averted face, paler than its wont; at the delicate profile, with the broad brow arched with soft dark-brown hair, that stood out relieved against a back-ground of iron-grey rock. But the large, soft, thoughtful eyes did not meet the keen dark ones that looked into them. They were seemingly absorbed in contemplation of the dreamy radiance of the lovely Indian summer day, that flooded with its mellow light the glancing gold and crimson of the palm-like sumachs about them, the sparkling tide of the river that wound at their feet, the rich mosaic of autumn foliage on the opposite shore, even the grey-green lichens that crusted the granite rock on which they sat, and the brown pine needles that filled in all its crevices, seeming like a soft mantle thrown over the tiny ferns and delicate vegetation that nestled so confidently therein.

She kept silence for a few moments, as if gathering her strength, while he repeated his question with a mingling of tenderness and impatience in his tone, and on the dark eager intellectual countenance in which a close observer might have traced a good deal of latent ambition, blended with a strong suggestion of suppressed passion and of a self-will that tended to obstinacy. "What is a mistake? Helen darling?" he repeated.

"Our engagement, dear," she said, at last, very gently, yet as if the words had been forced out, almost against her will.

"Helen, are you dreaming? What nonsense is this! It isn't like you to say such unkind things! What if we do see some things differently? Don't we know and love each other, and isn't that enough? Haven't we a thousand thoughts and feelings in common? What are a few points of difference in comparison with a love like ours—like mine, at least," he added, a little reproachfully, "and what I supposed yours to be!"

"Ah, Harold, don't doubt my love," she exclaimed. "It is its very strength that makes me feel as I do! What are a few thoughts and feelings in common, if there is hopeless separation at the very core of it all; of all that makes the real beauty and meaning of life? It is like the 'little rift within the lute!' Look at that tiny seam in this great rock. Don't you know how it will widen and widen, winter after winter, till at last the whole mass drops apart forever!"

"Mere poetical fancies, Helen! You are trifling with yourself and me! It isn't a question of lutes and rocks, but of hearts that love and will love on, I hope—"

"Forever?" she asked, for the first time turning and looking full in his face.

"What have we to do with 'forever' just now, Helen? Now is enough for me! Life is so sweet and beautiful, and we love each other! Isn't that enough? It is in the present we have to live, not in the future. And where there is love, it can stand a great deal of difference of opinion."

"A great deal—yes! But not that which goes to the very heart and root of things—that on which the very essence of life and love seem to me to depend."

"All sentiment, my dear children! Can't you let dreaming alone, and be your own sensible self? What can we really know about the future, or what you call the 'spiritual world?' No! I don't want to distress you. Keep your dreams and fancies about them if they make you happy." He had almost said, "if they amuse you." "But this unknown quantity need never come between us two. We have enough to fill our united life with, in what we do know! I can quote poetry, too, and from an unexceptionable source:—

Trust no future, how'er pleasant,  
Let the dead past bury its dead,  
Act, act in the living present!"

He stopped, and she finished the stanza:—

Heart within and God o'erhead.

His face hardened perceptibly. "Keep the last, if you think you need it, the first is enough for me!"

"But, dear, you don't understand, you can't understand the constant torture of living the best half of my life totally apart from you, utterly out of sympathy with you! It is the constant impulse to share with you what I love and value so dearly, the constant sense of the blank wall of separation between us, that makes this pain greater than I can bear! It seems like a nightmare, as if I were always struggling to get to you, across it, and were always thrown back again, do what I would."

"Then why not be philosophical, and school yourself to the inevitable? What is the use of crying for the moon, when you might be happy without it? Of course it would be delightful, if we could see all things just alike—'like two eyes on one face,' though even they don't see just alike; but mightn't it be a little dull? And what does it all matter, in the end? Surely you agree with me that the main thing is to be true to oneself, and that 'conduct is three-fourths of life.' He can't be wrong whose life is in the right!"

"Ah, Harold dear, but that is what troubles me most! It seems so clear to me that life can't be right apart from

its true foundation! And I do feel that your ideals and aims are changing, with your views of life! You haven't any longer the old aspirations, the old enthusiasms."

"Boyish fancies!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "A man soon finds his level as he grows older. If one does his own little bit of work fairly well, that is his contribution to the general result, without taking the universe on one's back! What are we all but just bits of machinery in the great mill?"

Helen sighed with a sense of the hopelessness of argument. But she braced herself anew for what she had to say.

"But you can never do the good you might, with such a narrow ideal as that, dear! You could be so much more than a mere bit of machinery; you were meant to be!"

"Meant!" he echoed, with a bitter smile.

"Yes, I know," she said, wearily; "I forgot that word had no meaning for you!" But there, you see, we always come back to the blank wall! The things dearest to me are nothing to you! Indeed, you often seem to hate them! I can't love you as I do, and think of this life, beautiful as it is, being all there is; of love itself as at the mercy of the beating of these hearts of ours, which at any moment might be stopped by some sudden accident and all be ended forever! To me, the very sacredness of love lies in its immortality; while you—you—"

She could not go on. Her face quivered, and she turned away to hide the tears she could no longer keep back.

Harold caught her at once in his strong encircling arms, and pressed her closely to his heart, trying to kiss away the fast-flowing tears. This strange mood would soon be over now, he thought.

But she struggled hard for composure, and presently freed herself from his embrace, while he exclaimed tenderly: "My darling, don't torture yourself and me any more!—You've been brooding over things till you have unnerved yourself."

"If I have," she replied,— "it is because the thought will not let me rest, it haunts me so,—the consciousness of that horrible idea of yours, that there is nothing in the universe but blind force, and our frail human love. It is the very strength of my love for you that troubles me. I want so much to be at one with you—that we should see things with the same eyes, that I often feel as if I were losing hold of the only thing that is fixed and stable—as if a black chasm of nothingness were opening at my feet. Ah, you don't know how many wakeful nights, and how many bitter tears it has cost me! Your death, dear, I could bear, with the 'sore and certain hope' of reunion, but the blackness of desolation, the death in life that seems to loom up before me when my faith seems drifting from my hold, is more than I could bear! Don't you see, I am afraid—afraid lest, under the constant influence of your questioning, incredulous spirit, I might lose the light altogether, and, for me, that would be the most terrible loss of all!"

There could be no question of the intensity of her feeling. It impressed Harold in spite of himself, and indeed it touched some chords in his own breast which still vibrated painfully. Presently he said, gloomily: "I suppose Harvey has been meddling! Do you think I can't see through that? And I suppose, if he manages to separate us, he will hope to console you himself, by and by!—Fanatical bigots, all of them!" he muttered.

"Harold, dearest," she said, with a look of unutterable pain, "Do you think I should allow him or any one to talk to me on such a subject? or that anyone else could influence me, when you cannot? This is solely and entirely my own deliberate judgment."

"Yet I thought you believed in the sacredness of love and betrothal!"

"But what if you do not? And, with your philosophy, how can anything be 'sacred?' Love is simply 'a product,' you say. Why should it be more sacred than any other product? I did believe that love's claims were supreme, that where two people loved each other, nothing, not even this, should come between them. And if I were stronger, myself, I might decide differently; I might feel able to go on, unchanged myself, always hoping, what you have told me I need not hope for! But as it is—oh Harold, darling—I feel I dare not!"

"And do you really mean that for this shadowy reason, we must part, after all our close intimacy, our dear friendship, our dear love, our plighted troth?"

"Harold," she replied, "I am not thinking of myself alone. I shall never cease to love you—never forget you! But I honestly believe it is best for you, too. Don't you think I have seen how your present distasteful work and narrow sphere fret and gall you? Can I help knowing that but for me and our engagement, you would not think of staying here—that you would gladly avail yourself of the opening your uncle has offered you, to enter the profession that has always been your own choice? And if I let you make the sacrifice, for I know it is one, how will it be by and by? Might you not come to feel you had made a mistake? No, dear, I have not come to this conclusion hastily. It has been a long, hard struggle, but I do see it now."

"Well, Helen," he rejoined, in a colder tone, "I should, of course, never hold you to an engagement you wish to break. If this is really your decision, the sooner we part, the better! I had another letter from my uncle last evening, again urging me to come to him, and begging for an immediate reply. I did not tell you of it, as I knew it would give you pain. But if you are serious in this madness, as I regard it, I had better reply that I will

avail myself of his offer as soon as I can get a substitute for my work here, which I know I can do at once." His voice sounded hard and metallic. His face had quite lost the tender pleading look it had worn. Helen knew that he was very angry, and felt keenly wounded by his tone. She made no reply, and as he unconsciously rose, she rose, too, and he instinctively offered his hand to help her down the path that led to the shore, where their boat lay waiting. As they descended, she looked up, and their eyes met. The wistful pleading look in her sad eyes was too much for him. Instantly his mood changed. Once more he clasped her in his arms, strained her passionately to his breast, and held her as if he could not let her go. Her beauty and her love were so sweet to him, the old habit of loving was so strong. "My darling! my darling! I cannot give you up!" he murmured, as he kissed again and again the soft cheek, wet with tears. But she did not answer, and silently took her seat in the stern of the skiff. There was no sign of yielding in the pale thoughtful face, or in the curves of the slightly compressed lips. Nor did Harold—the burst of passionate emotion over—care to renew the contest. The homeward row was very silent. Now and then a lovely bit of colour, glowing out in the sunset light, called forth a few admiring comments, but, for the most part, the hearts of both were too heavy for the effort of conversation, while Helen was often fain to turn away her head to hide the tears that would rise to her eyes under the foreboding feeling that this was, in all probability, their last row. As Harold helped her to land at the foot of her father's grounds, he held her tightly for a moment, with a few earnest words:—

"I am not going to take what you have said for final, Helen, darling! I can't think it could really be your deliberate decision. I should never hold you or any woman to an irksome pledge; but I know you love me, and I know how good and true you are! and I think, if you send me away, it will be as hard for you as for me. For both our sakes, reconsider it, dear. I will come in to-morrow evening, and I hope you will tell me that it has all been a bad dream. Good bye, my own darling!"

He let her go, sprang into the boat, and with a few rapid strokes had disappeared round a bend of the stream. Helen stood still till he was out of sight, then, sinking down on the grass, she buried her face in her hands and gave way to the burst of weeping she had with such difficulty restrained. "Oh, if things could only be different!" she murmured. "If I only could keep him and my faith, too! But, as things are, how could we ever be happy together? Better the pain of parting now, than to be tortured by the perpetual sense of separation of soul!"

While Harold's thoughts, as he rowed on with gloomy brow and set lips, ran thus: "What a hold these illusions must have, after all, on a soul like hers! I believe she loves me intensely—perhaps more intensely than I love her—and yet she can give me up sooner than these shadows! Poor girl! I don't want to rob her of them if they give her any satisfaction! But why can't she be reasonable, and not insist on tearing our hearts asunder? It seems as if women never can be reasonable!"

Then for a moment the thought occurred to him how it would be if he should profess for the time being to be at least partially convinced of what she clung to so tenaciously. But it was only for a moment. Honour and manliness rose to repel any such subterfuge. Harold Vaughan was too much a man to attempt to deceive the true woman he so truly loved.

## II.

Life is so complex that we never find it stand still to serve as a background for our own griefs, however absorbing they may be to ourselves. When Helen—her overburdened heart somewhat relieved by the burst of tears—had regained her usual composure and returned to the house, she found the little household in commotion. Dr. Musgrave's well-worn "buggy" was standing at the gate, while the brown spaniel Rover was leaping up on the patient horse, eager for the start. The doctor himself—his overcoat and gloves on—was standing by the table, swallowing a cup of tea which the thoughtful old servant had hastily prepared for her master.

"Glad you've come in, my dear," he said. "I am just off to the Sinclairs'. They have had a bad accident there with the threshing-machine. Poor Jem! I am afraid it's all over with him."

"Oh, father, how dreadful!" she exclaimed, the slight flush on her cheek disappearing and leaving it paler than before. Presently she continued, eagerly: "Oh, father dear, let me go too. Jem's wife, you know, poor Maggie! Perhaps I could do something for her, at least. Do let me go at all events."

"Indeed, my dear child, I'll be only too glad if you will. Only you must eat something, or at least take some tea. You'll need all your strength."

Helen forced herself to drink a cup of tea, and in a few minutes they were driving rapidly out of the little town and along the quiet country road that led to the Sinclair homestead—a place associated in Helen's memory with many pleasant visits. The rich rose and purple tones of the afterglow were rapidly fading into the more sombre ones of moonlight with its clear cold lights and intense shadows. As they approached their destination, it seemed to Helen—whose own personal pain seemed for the time numbed by her intense sympathy with this crushing sorrow—as if the calm beauty and repose of the scene, the