

OUR NELL.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHILE Derwent reassured himself concerning her, Carry had been carried swiftly along through the night to an unknown bourne. Like a hunted hare, a wild longing possessed her to find a place to hide away in from Derwent, away from every one that knew her, somewhere where no one would know what she had done, where no one could point at her the finger of scorn. Her life before that fateful moment when Nell had found her with Derwent appeared as remote as if it had been lived in another age, and as indifferent to her as if it had belonged to some one else. Derwent's first reception of her resolve to return had been in itself a blow to her, but slight indeed compared with the shock of the revelation his words had borne of his position in the matter.

Poor Carry was stunned. She could feel no more. Piteous, indeed, had he had eyes for it, was the calm demeanour which had given Derwent so much satisfaction. Piteous, indeed, was her position, as thus alone she was carried on, far from loving hearts and strong hands, a lamb straying far from the fold, and all unconscious that in return lay the only hope of safety. To escape, to hide, was the one hope to which she clung.

She sat in a kind of stupor, rousing herself whenever the train stopped, in order to find out if the station appeared to belong to some large town. At length there came one whose aspect answered her requirements. Collecting her parcels mechanically, she alighted. Derwent had left her his railway rug, and had provided her with a little basket of provisions procured from the refreshment-room. He had also given her her ticket in his own purse, saying, hastily, "You will have to pay something on your journey, very likely."

It was fortunate he had done so, for Carry had no money of her own with her. She stood on the platform in a dazed condition, and watched the train which had brought her, steam out of the station on its way further north. The place was dreary, and quite deserted, except for one night porter, who was looking at her curiously. Rousing herself with an effort, she went up to him, and said—

"I am later than I ought to have been, and I am not expected. Do you think you could tell me where to get a lodging for the night?"

The man was puzzled. He had seen her get out of a first-class carriage, and he recognized the manners and speech of a lady; yet this was a strange position for a lady to be in.

"Why, miss, that 'll be a difficult job, I doubt, at this time o' night. I don't rightly see what can be done. If so be—" He hesitated, and regarded Carry dubiously; but, taking courage by the plain garb and the forlorn youthful face, he continued, "If so be as you 'd put up wi' my spare bed for to-night, miss, I dar say as my wife 'll make you comfortable."

"Indeed, I should be very thankful if you would allow me to do so," said Carry, with a grateful smile, whose pathos went straight to the heart of the honest fellow.

"Come along, then, miss; I'm off duty now. It ain't much of a step to where I live."

Though inly wondering, he had the delicacy to make no inquiries concerning luggage; but, throwing the rug over his arm, he marched out of the station at a brisk rate. Carry followed close behind him, as he led the way through a maze of small streets. The close smoky air, night though it was, seemed to choke her. Tall factories here and there rose gaunt into the darkness. To her shaken nerves, the position grew more and more terrifying. She had been foolish to trust herself to this strange man; might he not be taking her to some low den? She had begun to contemplate flight, when he stopped before the door of a little house, in the

midst of a long street of similar ones. Carry was reassured by the aspect of the interior, and when her conductor had summoned his wife from her bed, and given the visitor into her charge, she felt a great sense of relief and thankfulness.

Carry had fallen among clean, respectable, and kind-hearted people, of whom there are many more in the world than some of us are apt to imagine. The path she had now to tread was not so hard a one as might have been feared. She succeeded, through her hostess, whose sister served in a draper's shop in the town, in obtaining a situation in the show-room, for which her manners and appearance were in themselves a recommendation. She continued to lodge with the porter and his wife, thankful to feel that in their little house there was at any rate outward security and peace, and in time there came to be even an affectionate regard which made for her a sense of home-coming when her day's work was over. She met with nothing but kindness from her employers and her fellow-workers; none could resist her sweetness and humility, and all pitied her, and questioned much the reason for the quiet sadness of her manner, and for the lonely life she led. They noticed, too, how pale and thin she grew, and how weary she often seemed. The unaccustomed confinement and the close air of the big town had something to do with this, but there was another reason for it. Though her life outwardly was monotonous and peaceful, Carry was passing through a mental crisis, and the inward strife told upon the sensitive frame.

It had seemed to her at first, by the fear of shame, that if she could but hide from her friends, all that she craved would be granted, her whole need would be satisfied. If the thought of meeting them had been terrible after the discovery of her secret love-making, how far more terrible was it now that by her fatal cowardice she had placed an impassable barrier between herself and the careless joyousness of her girlhood! For the shame from which she shrank was that which could be put upon her by others, and not that redeeming shame which springs from within. And so, relieved from her immediate dread, she seemed to herself, for a time, to have accomplished all her desire, to have done all that was possible to her to regain her peace of mind and self-respect. Of her home she thought little—as little as she could help. Her love for the home people was swallowed up in fear. It had appeared impossible to her to face them after the discovery that Derwent was her lover, and now that they believed him to be her husband the idea was one from which she shrank in terror. Not un seldom does it happen that if we shirk the duty that lies before us, God sets us another tenfold harder.

There was, however, going on within her a strife in another direction which was of necessity absorbing. Though never for a moment faltering in the resolution which had brought her away from Derwent, her love for him was not extinguished. At first, indeed, she lived in a dream of past happiness; though she knew that the happiness was past, and for ever; and though she knew in her heart of hearts that Derwent had been unworthy of her love, she spent her days in living through again the weeks during which she had known him; memories of the time when he had first begun to show her special regard, haunted her with their sweetness; and the hot blood rushing to her cheeks, she dwelt on the enraptured happiness of the days when she had grown to feel sure he loved her, when words, simple enough to other ears, had borne to hers a tender significance, and a tacit understanding had grown up between them, which made private meetings and little caresses appear a natural, an inevitable consequence. And then came memories of anguish, from which she shrank shuddering, of the night when Derwent had told her he was doing wrong, and must

leave her, and she had sobbed her heart out in the dark. And then had come the parting, and the fearful end of it all.

But absence and the lapse of time had begun to do their work, to bring things to their true relations in her mind. At first faintly enough, there asserted itself a sense of wrong-doing, which made of that love time, against her will, an unworthy object of her memories and her regrets. She would fain have stifled it, for she feared to be awakened from her dream; but it would not be stifled. Before long she could fight against it no longer. It grew keener and keener, until with rude force it dragged out from his hiding-place the lurking consciousness of the vanity, the mean deception, the treason against her friends, and the forgetfulness of God which she had been guilty of, which had brought her where she was.

To Nell such a strife would have been impossible. Her direct nature, strong through its simplicity and single-mindedness, would have revolted from a double existence such as this. She might have been absorbed in an unworthy love; but the moment her eyes were opened, she would have indulged in it no longer, it would have been cast from her with a relentless will. Carry had little of self-reliant will, little of independent force in her nature; but she had the true religious instinct, and in this lay her only hope of strength. Had she not allowed her religious principle to be swamped by the tide of her growing feeling for Derwent, she would not have done as she did. But that principle had never been tried; genuine as it was, it was weak, and needed the storms of life to root it firmly. When it was for the first time called on to keep her safe in the right path, it had failed her, and had indeed appeared at last utterly extinguished. Now, however, her religious feeling again asserted itself; and then began a cruel stamping out, which, once begun, must be carried to the end. Who shall describe the bitter conflicts through which so sensitive and clinging a nature had to fight, the many relapses, the many upward struggles, to regain the ground she had lost! For a time she lay in great darkness, and saw no light, little dreaming that in her despair and self-abhorrence, she was yet nearer to the good and the true joy than she had ever been in the days of her serene obedience.

By-and-by the darkness lightened; no sudden illumination came to her, but daily, as she walked with lowly steps along the path of right, the gleam in the sky above, at first so faint, grew fuller and more full, till at last the whole earth shone bright and fair with the glory of God's presence.

One morning she awoke with an intense yearning for home. Early memories reached out beckoning hands to her, and the faces of her loved ones appeared as if living before her eyes. So vivid and so real were they, that she covered her face with her hands and burst into a torrent of tears.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me," she cried aloud. "Oh, father, mother, Nell! I am coming back, I am coming back!"

As she was dressing, she regarded herself attentively in the glass.

"Yes," she thought, "I am very much altered. They will hardly know me."

And then her face grew solemn, and she said, still gazing at the reflection before her—

"Oh, foolish wicked girl that you have been! You ran away from rebuke, the rebuke that was your due. Go back again, and take up the cross that is waiting for you. If they scorn you, do you not deserve it?"

CHAPTER XX.

One winter's evening Nell came home from the village, whether she had gone after tea to do an errand. It was six o'clock, and the night was cold and dark. As she opened the door of the kitchen the ruddy firelight flickering on the wall and ceiling made it seem a

warm inviting refuge from the chill world outside. Nell shut the door behind her, and advanced towards the fire. She had taken but a few steps forward when a figure emerged from the dark corner, and stood in the firelight. Nell's heart gave a sudden leap, and then stood still.

"Nell!" said a low voice.

"Carry!"

In another moment the girls were in each other's arms, heart to heart, nearer to each other than they had ever been in their lives before.

"Oh, Nell, Nell, Nell!" sobbed Carry. "I have come home. I have come home!"

For a long time Nell held her close. At last, with an effort, she asked—

"Where is Mr. Derwent?"

"I don't know. I left him directly, as soon as we got to London. Oh, Nell! thank God that I did. He wanted me to; he thought I was going home."

An articulate passionate exclamation burst from Nell's lips, and Carry felt her bosom heave, and she could scarcely breathe, so tightly was she strained against it.

"Oh, Nell!" whispered Carry, "this is like heaven. When I came up to the house I didn't know what to do: I nearly died. Then, when I saw the kitchen was empty, I thought I would sit down here and wait till some one came in and found me; and oh, I hoped it would be you. I don't know why, because I kept thinking you would not love me. But when I saw you, I forgot to think of that. Oh! it was just my own old Nell."

Nell kissed the pale face passionately.

"Carry, I must go and tell them," she said, after a while.

"No; I will go," said Carry in a decided voice.

"You, Carry! Aren't you afraid?"

"No, Nell."

"Why, that doesn't seem a bit like you talking! How is it?"

"I don't know." Then, after a pause, "I suppose, Nell, it's because I have done so very wrong, and God has forgiven me."

"Carry, how can you be sure that God has forgiven you?"

"Oh! don't you know? I can't tell it, but it is all so different—so different." Nell's tears were falling fast.

"Oh! Carry, Carry," she said, "teach me; you are better than me!"

"How can you say that, dear, dear Nell?"

And, with her arms round her neck, Carry kissed her sister's lips again and again. Then she said—

"Nell, musn't we go?"

They rose, and stood in the firelight. Nell, you are altered, said Carry.

"And you too, Carry!"

"Yes, I am altered for the worse, but you are altered for the better. You are so stately, and you are grown quite a woman."

"Am I?" And then she looked at Carry earnestly. "I dare not let you go in."

"Don't be afraid for me," said Carry. "I know father has been very angry, and he will be cold and stern; but there is something I shall say to him."

"What is it?"

"I'm going to say, 'Father, your Carry has been very wicked, but her Heavenly Father has forgiven her, and you, dear father, will not cast her from you.'"

The two girls walked hand-in-hand across the kitchen.

"He is quite blind; he cannot see you," said Nell.

Her heart was beating fast, and she was trembling, but Carry seemed calm and steadfast. They paused before the parlour door.

"Is mother there?" whispered Carry.

"Yes."

Another moment, and she had opened the door, and knew nothing more until she was in her mother's arms, and crying.

"Oh, mother, mother, I'll never leave you again! I left him as soon as we

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