

HOW IT ALL CAME ROUND.

(L. T. Meade, in "Sunday Magazine.")

CHAPTER XLIV.—LOVE BEFORE GOLD.

For the first time in all her life, Mrs. Home laid her head on her pillow with the knowledge that she was a rich woman. Those good things which money can buy could be hers; her husband need want no more; her children might be so trained, so nurtured, so carefully tended that their beauty, their beauty both physical and moral, would be seen in clear lustre. How often she had dreamed of the possibility of such a time arriving, and now at last it had come. Ever since her dying mother had told her her own true history, she had dwelt upon this possible moment, dwelt upon it with many murmurings, many heart frettings. Could it be realized, she would be the happiest of women. Then she had decided to give it all up, to put the gold-n dream quite out of her life and, behold! she had scarcely done so before it had come true, the dream was a reality, the riches lay at her feet. In no way through her interference had this come about. Yes, but in the moment of her victory the woman who had so longed for money was very miserable; like Dead Sea apples was the taste of this eagerly desired fruit. She was enriched through another's anguish and despair, through the weeping of another's happiness, and that other had saved the life of her child. Only one thing comforted Charlotte Home during the long hours of that weary night; Charlotte Harman had said,

"With her I am safe; dearly as she loves money, with her I am quite safe."

Mrs. Home thought the slow moments would never fly until she was with the sister friend, who in her own bitter humiliation and shame could trust her. In the morning, she and her husband had a talk together. Then hurrying through her household duties she started at a still very early hour for Prince's Gate. She arrived there before ten o'clock, and as she mounted the steps and pulled the ponderous bell she could not help thinking of her last visit; she had felt sore and jealous then, to-day she was bowed down by a sense of unworthiness and humility. Then, too, she had gone to visit this rich and prosperous young woman dressed in her very best, for she said to herself that whatever her poverty, she would look every inch the lady; she looked every inch the lady to-day, though she was in her old and faded merino. But that had now come to her which made her forget the very existence of dress. The grand footman, however, who answered her modest summons, being obtuse and uneducated, saw only the shabby dress; he thought she was a distressed workwoman, he had forgotten that she had ever come there before. When she asked for Miss Harman, he hesitated and was uncertain whether she could see his young lady; finally looking at her again, he decided to trust her so far as to allow her to wait in the hall while he went to inquire. Charlotte gave her name, Mrs. Home, and he went away. When he returned there was a change in his manner. Had he begun to recognize the lady under the shabby dress? or had Charlotte Harman said anything? He took Mrs. Home up to the pretty room she had seen before, and left her there, saying that Miss Harman would be with her in a few moments. The room looked just as of old. Charlotte, as she waited, remembered that she had been jealous of this pretty room. It was as pretty to-day, bright with flowers, gay with sunshine; the same love-birds were in the same cage, the same canary sang in the same window, the same parrot swung lazily from the same perch. Over the mantel-piece hung the portrait in oils of the pretty baby, who yet was not so pretty as hers. Charlotte remembered how she had longed for these pretty things for her children, but all desire for them had left her now. There was the rustling of a silk dress heard in the passage, and Charlotte Harman carelessly, but richly attired, came in. There was, even in their outward appearance, the full contrast between the rich and the poor observable at this moment, for Charlotte Harman, too, had lately forgotten her dress, and had allowed Ward to put on what she chose. When they were about to reverse positions, this rich and this poor woman stood side by side in marked contrast. Charlotte Harman looked proud and cold; in the moment when she came to plead, she held her head high. Charlotte Home, who was to grant the boon,

came up timidly, almost humbly. She took the hands of the girl whom she loved, held them firmly, then gathering sudden courage, there burst from her lips just the last words she had meant at this moment to say.

"How much I love you! how much I love you!"

As these fervent, passionate words were almost flung at her, Charlotte Harman's eyes began suddenly to dilate. After a moment she said under her breath, in a startled kind of whisper,

"You know all?"

"I know everything."

"Then you—you will save my father?"

"Absolutely. You need fear nothing from me or mine; in this we are but quits. Did not you save Harold?"

"Ah," said Charlotte Harman; she took no notice of her friend and guest, she sat down on the nearest chair and covered her face. When she raised her head, Mrs. Home was kneeling by her side.

"Charlotte," said Miss Harman—there was a change in her, the proud look and bearing were gone—"Charlotte," she said, "you and I are one age, but you are a mother; may I lay my head on your breast just for a moment?"

"Lay it there, my darling. As you have got into my heart of hearts, so would I comfort you."

"Ah, Charlotte, how my heart has beat! but your love is like a cool hand laid upon it, it is growing quiet."

"Charlotte, you are right in reminding me that I am a mother. I must treat you as I would my little Daisy. Daisy trusts me absolutely and has no fear; you must trust me altogether, and fear nothing."

"I do. I fear nothing when I am with you. Charlotte, next Tuesday was to have been my wedding-day."

"Yes, dear."

"But it is all at an end now; I broke off my engagement yesterday. And yet, how much I love him! Charlotte, don't look at me so pityingly."

"Was I doing so? I was wondering if you slept last night."

"Slept! No, people don't sleep when their hearts beat as hard as mine did, but I am better now."

"Then, Charlotte, I must prescribe for you, as a mother. For the next two hours you are my child and shall obey me; we have a great deal to say to each other; but first of all, before we say a single word, you must lie on this sofa, and I will hold your hand. You shall try and sleep."

"But can you spare the time from your children?"

"You are my child now; as long as you want me I will stay with you. See, I am going to draw down the blinds, and I will lock the door; you must not be disturbed."

It was thus that these two spent the morning. When Charlotte Harman awoke some hours later, quiet and refreshed, they had a long, long talk. That talk drew their hearts still closer together; it was plain that such a paltry thing as money could not divide these friends.

CHAPTER XLV.—THE FATE OF A LETTER.

Hinton had left the Harman's house, after his strange interview with Charlotte, with a stunned feeling. It is not too much to say of this young man that he utterly failed to realize what had befallen him. He walked like one in a dream, and when he reached his lodgings in Jermy Street, and sat down at last by his hearth, he thought of himself in a queer way, as if he were some one else, a trouble had come to some one else; that some one was a friend of his, so he was called on to pity him. Gradually, however, it dawned upon him that the friend was unpleasantly close, that the some one else reigned as lord of his bosom. It was he—himself he was called on to pity. It was on his, hitherto so prosperous, young head that the storm had burst. Next Tuesday was to have been his wedding-day. There was to be no wedding. On next Tuesday he was to have won a bride, a wife; that other one dearer than himself was to give herself to him absolutely. In addition to this he was to obtain fortune, and fortune was to lead to far dearer, far nobler fame. But now all this was at an end; Tuesday was to pass as any other day—grey, neutral tinted, indifferent, it was to go over his head. And why? This was what caused the sharpest sting of the anguish. There seemed no reason for it all. Charlotte's

excuse was a poor one; it had not the ring of the true metal about it. Unaccustomed to deceive she had played her part badly. She had given an excuse; but it was no excuse. In this Hinton was not blinded, even for a moment. His Charlotte! Her, seemed a flaw in the perfect creature! His Charlotte had a second time turned away her confidence from him. Yes, here was the sting; in her trouble she would not let him comfort her. What was the matter? What was the mystery? What was the hidden wrong?

Hinton roused himself now. As thought and clearness of judgment came more vividly back to him his anger grew and his pity lessened. His mind was brought to bear upon a secret, for there was a hidden secret. His remembrance travelled back to all that had happened since the day their marriage was fixed—since the day when he first saw a troubled look on Charlotte's face—and she had told him, through unwillingly, that queersy of Mrs. Home's. Yes, of course, he knew there was a mystery—a strange and dark mystery; like a coward he had turned away from investigating it. He had seen Uncle Jasper's nervous fear; he had seen Mrs. Home's poverty; he had witnessed Mr. Harman's ill concealed disquietude—all this he had seen, all this he had known. But, for Charlotte's sake, he had shut his eyes; for Charlotte's sake he had forbidden his brain to think or his hands to work.

And now—now—ah! light was dawning. Charlotte had fathomed what he had feared to look at. Charlotte had seen the dread reality. The secret was disgraceful. Nothing else could so have changed his one love. Nothing but disgrace, the disgrace of the one nearest to her, could bring that look to her face. Scarcely had he thought this before a memory came to him. He started to his feet as it came back. Charlotte had said "Before our wedding-day I will read my grandfather's will." Suppose she had done so, and her grandfather's will had been—what? Hinton began to see reason now in her unaccountable determination not to see Webster. She had doubtless resolved on that very day to go to Somerset House and read that fatal document. Having made up her mind she would not swerve from her purpose. Then, though she was firm in her determination, her face had been bright, her brow unfurrowed, she had still been his own dear and happy Charlotte. He had not seen her again until she knew all. She knew all, and her heart and spirit were alike broken. As this fact became clear to Hinton, a sense of relief and peace came over him; he began once more to understand the woman he loved. Beside the darkness of misunderstanding her, all other misunderstandings seemed light. She was still his love, his life; she was still true to herself, to the beautiful ideal he had enthroned in his heart of hearts. Poor darling! she would suffer; but he must escape. Loving him as deeply, as devotedly as ever, she yet would give him up, rather than that he should share in the downfall of her house. Ah! she did not know him. She could be great; but so also could he. Charlotte should see that her love was no light thing for any man to relinquish; she would find that it weighed heavier in the balance than riches, than fame, that disgrace even could not crush it down. Knowing all, he would go to her; she should not be alone in her great, great trouble; she should find out in her hour of need the kind of man whose heart she had won. His depression left him as he came to this resolve, and he scarcely spent even an anxious night. On the next day, however, he did not go to Charlotte; but about noon he sat down and wrote the following letter:—

"MY DARLING,

"I gave me up yesterday. I— I don't mind telling you this now—stunned, surprised, pained. Since then, however, I have thought much; all my thought has been about you. Thought sometimes leads to light, and light has come to me. Charlotte, a contract entered into by two takes two to undo. I refuse to undo this contract. Charlotte, I refuse to give you up. You are my promised wife; our banns have been read twice in church already. Have you forgotten this? In the eyes of both God and man you are almost mine. To break off this engagement, unless I, too, wished it, would be, whatever your motive, a sin. Charlotte, the time has come, when we may ruin the happiness of both our lives, unless very plain words pass between us. I use very plain words when I tell you that I

most absolutely refuse to give you up. That being so, whatever your motive, you are committing a sin in refusing to give yourself to me. My darling, it is you I want not your money—you—not—not—

—But I will add no more, except one thing. Charlotte, I went this morning to Somerset House, and I read your grandfather's will.

"Now, what hour shall I come to you? Any hour you name I will fly to you. It is impossible for you to refuse what I demand as a right. But know that, if you do refuse, I will come notwithstanding."

"Yours ever,

"JOHN HINTON."

This letter, being directed, was quickly posted, and in due time reached its address at Prince's Gate.

Then a strange thing happened to it. Jasper Harman, passing through the hall, saw the solitary letter waiting for his niece. It was his habit to examine every letter that came within his reach; he took up this one for no particular reason, but simply from the force of this long established habit. But having taken it in his hand, he knew the writing. The letter was from Hinton, and Charlotte had told him—had just told him—that her engagement with Hinton was broken off, that her wedding was not to be. Old Jasper was beset just now by a thousand fears, and Charlotte's manner and Charlotte's words had considerably added to his alarm. There was a mystery; Charlotte could not deny that fact. This letter might elucidate it—might throw light on so much that was needed. Jasper Harman felt that the contents of Hinton's letter might do him good and ease his mind. Without giving himself an instant's time for reflection, he took the letter into the dining room, and opening it, read what was meant for another. He had scarcely done so before Charlotte unexpectedly entered the room. To save himself from discovery, when he heard her step, he dropped the letter into the fire. Thus Charlotte never got her lover's letter.

Hinton, bravely as he had spoken, was, nevertheless, pained at her silence. After waiting for twenty-four hours he, however, resolved to be true to his word. He had said to Charlotte, "If you refuse what I demand as a right, nevertheless I shall exercise my right. I will come to you." But he went with a strange sinking of heart, and when he got to Prince's Gate and was not admitted he scarcely felt surprise.

CHAPTER XLVI.—"THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS."

It is one of those everlasting truths, which experience and life teach us every day, that sin brings its own punishment, virtue its own reward; peace, the great divine reward of conscience to the virtuous; misery and despair, and that constant apprehension which drains discovery, and yet which in itself is worse than discovery, to the transgressors.

"The way of transgressors is hard."

That Bible text was proving itself once more now in the cases of two old men. John Harman was sinking into his grave in anguish at the thought of facing an angry God; Jasper Harman was preparing to fly from what, alas! he dreaded more, the faces of his angry fellow creatures.

Yes; it had come to this with Jasper Harman; England had become too hot to hold him; better fly while he could. Ever since the day Hinton had told him that he had really and in truth heard of the safe arrival of the other trustee, Jasper's days and nights had been like hell to him. In the morning, he had wondered would the evening find him still a free man; in the evening, he had trembled at what might befall him before the morning dawned. Unaccustomed to any mental anguish, his health began to give way; his heart beat irregularly, unevenly; he lost his appetite; at night he either had bad dreams or he could not sleep. This change began to tell upon his appearance; his hair grew thinner and whiter, he stooped as he walked, there was very little apparent difference now between him and John.

He could not bear the Harman's house, for there he might meet Hinton. He dreaded his office in the City, for there the other trustee might follow him and publicly expose him. He liked his club best; but even there he felt scarcely safe, some one might get an inkling of the tale, there was no saying how soon such a story, so strange, so disgraceful, pertaining to so well-known a