

XXXI.

It was Christmas Eve, and midnight. College term was over; and the inhabitants of Residence had departed for the Christmas festivities of home. All but one. And that one now lay stretched before his brightly-burning grate, gazing abstractedly at the burning coals. A book was in his hands, but its contents formed not the subject of his thoughts and reveries. But with his eyes fixed intently upon the coals before him, he traced in them, as all are apt to do at such a time, a varied history of himself and his thoughts.

His was a peculiar nature. Early cast adrift upon the sea of life, he had never known the influence of home and home associations. Family love—natural affection in any form—was to him a thing unknown. He was thrown in upon himself; and he was trained in a good school, the school of adversity. Suddenly a brighter day had dawned for him, and now he was about to close a successful college career. Even at College, where men are generally known, he was sadly misunderstood. The light-minded he contemned and shunned; and those who might have been his friends were estranged by habits they were unaccustomed to, and characteristics they could not understand. So his was a solitary life. He had read widely and deeply, and had thought much. The Classics he read and re-read, and delighted in, and with many languages he was intimately acquainted. But those problems of philosophy which involve all that is of prime importance in man's life; which deal with the facts of man's existence, his development and his destiny, were the almost continual subject of his thoughts. And his peculiar nature, added to his strange life and surroundings, so influenced his thoughts as to make him solitary, hypochondriacal, almost pessimistic. As his own life was gloomy, so became his view of all that concerns the life of men at large. A few bright spots there had been in his own dull career; but, amid the surrounding gloom, they remained in his mind but as dreams without foundation.

What wonder, then, that now, as he lay before his fire on this glorious Christmas eve, oblivious of the howling of the wind outside and of the snow drifting ghost-like against his window, his thoughts were not such as the thoughts of most would be in such a situation. He thought not of home, of joy and laughter, of Christmas festivities. The festival indeed for him had lost its meaning. He thought not of friends; for he had none near enough to much occupy his mind. No, his was an intellectual, not an emotional, reverie. He dwelt upon the great epochs in the development of the World's thought, of the era-making men and the martyrs in the cause of intellectual and moral freedom. He thought of Jesus, who arose to teach man a truer philosophy than they had ever known, suffering an ignominious death at Calvary. He thought of Socrates—divine, if ever man partook of the nature of divinity—offered up a sacrifice to the ignorance of his own fellow-countrymen. He thought of philosophers and poets and priests in all ages, offered their due homage only by a distant posterity. And then he came down to the present, and dwelt upon the conflicting tendencies of to-day—upon philosophies and religions and creeds. And then he thought of his own position in the world—his past life, his future prospects. And by the uninteresting story of his past, and the indefiniteness of his plans for the future, the subject of his thoughts became less and less defined, and he drifted away into an indefinite, dreamy reverie.

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XXXII.

It was a lovely July afternoon among the hills of one of our northern counties. Here, in one place, was a true trout-fisher's elysium. A clear, sparkling stream, beginning far up the mountain, ran for miles down a deep and woody ravine to the level below. Here one who is an admirer of nature in its wildest or its boldest forms, could wander from the world of men; and strolling, rod in hand, within hearing only of the singing of the birds and the purling of the brook, could hold sweet, uninterrupted commune with nature and with his own inmost soul. Nor was this valley uninhabited on this glorious afternoon. But, walking slowly and thoughtfully up the stream, rod in hand, was a young man of sad and retired, yet interesting appearance. His aspect was that of one whose soul is troubled, whose mind is occupied with conflicting thoughts. A thoughtful observer of him could not but see that he was one whose way was not among men in the busy struggling world. It was, indeed, the melancholy philosopher we left dreaming on Christmas Eve before his fire. And at this time a strange conflict raged in his mind. Emotions strove with emotions. Feelings came back to him from his early childhood—feelings whose manifestations he had seen around him every hour, but which in himself he could not analyze or understand. He wondered if he were meant to live and die alone—a hermit among men,—if the emotions which sway men's minds were not meant for him as for all. He asked himself if he could ever be the object of that tender affection which seems to be the foundation

of society itself, and could ever feel that affection in return. An answer came sooner than he could have dreamed of. While even in this very vein of thought, he turned an angle of the stream, and came in view of a picture which no one, though entirely void of all tender feeling, could ever forget. Upon a mossy stone which overhung the bubbling stream there sat, or rather reclined, a young girl, still in her teens. Being fonder of art than of sport, she had been left behind by a fishing party, with pencil and portfolio. And here she yet remained: but now her pencil was forgotten, and she gazed musingly into the babbling current at her feet. It was a charming picture. Not that the moulding of her face was such as would have crazed the sculptors of Italy or put their art to shame; though the dark loose hair, falling carelessly over a delicately chiselled forehead, brown expressive eyes, not dreamy, healthy cheeks and beautifully moulded mouth and chin, made up a face not easily forgotten. But when are added to these things the charm of a figure with grace and elasticity in every curve, and the surroundings so romantic, can it be wondered at that even in him who now gazed in silent worship upon this scene there were awakened feelings which can never return with equal intensity. And as he gazed, the struggle in his mind ceased not, but waxed fiercer, as more definite. Had he been sent here by irresistible fate, as to the turning point in his strange life? And was this the embodiment in human form of the object of those tender emotions he had of late felt rising and reviving in his mind? He did not know. But he worshipped here, as at the feet of a goddess,—a worship vague and involuntary. Love at first sight had seemed to him an absurdity a ridiculous fiction: but he himself was to prove its possibility. For not otherwise could be described his adoration. At last her dream was over and she started up; wondering how long she had been thus pleasantly employed. A movement of his drew her attention, and their eyes met. She was, at least, interested. But she must not stay here. It was late, and her party must be found. Hastening, portfolio in hand, to cross the stream, she slipped and would have fallen; but (why and how he did not know) he was at her side, and helped her safely over. She was not displeased, and at his apologies for intrusion, the look of thanks that darted from her eyes told more than words could utter. His offer to assist her in her search was not refused, and strolling on they thought more of the present than the lost; and long before the searched for ones were joined, they knew more of one another than they had ever known of themselves. For her there was a new experience, by no means an unpleasant one. For him there seemed to have opened a new existence—brighter, purer, happier than ever he had dreamed of. Could this be but intoxication, from which both must awake, sadder, more dreary than before. Two souls were expanded and purified. Two lives seemed indeed to have been born again.

XXXIII.

He awoke. 'Twas but a dream. Absently he gazed into the coals, now dead. Vaguely, yet strongly, he realised anew the darkness and dreariness of the present. Fallen from a very heaven of ecstasy back to his dull solitude, everything seemed darker, gloomier than before. The howling of the wind was to him the moaning of evil spirits abroad, and the drifting snows pelting against his window-panes were indeed the ghosts of his uninteresting past. And as he still gazed upon the fireless hearth, he thought that so his life had lost even all its interest and joy.

Sedit aeternumque sedebit,
Infelix.

Christmas brought to him but one source of happiness—the content of a dream.

XXXIV.

When Curly had done we all rose up and began to make preparations for departure, well satisfied with our Christmas breakfast, when a cry from Gladys made us pause.

She was holding up a paper in her hands.

'Then you do not want to hear mine?' she asked.

Then she handed it to the professor.

'A simple little thing, but mine own,' she said, looking mockingly at Billy.

Then the Professor read:

'At the corner of the street,

Where the wind strikes rough and rude,

I'm afraid she's had to meet

Fates she scarce hath understood.

For her infant eyes from under

Steals a mute surprise and wonder,