A GREAT MISTAKE.

"Of course I will," Bee said a little crossly.

The girls stood still for a few moments then, having reached the end of the walk, and watched the birds dart in and out of the sun-lit masses of ivy on the wall.

"Oh, dear me," Bee began, with a sigh, what changes have come about in six months as I was saying to Doctor March only yesterday! When I first say the old garden, Lucy, I remember how I used to wonder what the Ludlows would be like, and especially that dreadful Miss Thrale."

"You know now," said Lucy, smiling sadly.

"Yes, I know; and I almost wish I did not. I shall be so horribly lonely without you; and I don't believe you care, Lucy, one bit."

"Bee!"

"Well, I don't. I believe you are tired of us all. And certainly we have grown rather dull and stupid of late."

"I have not noticed it," Lucy declared wistfully.

"Not even in Doctor March's case?"

Bee faced her companion with an abrupt movement as she spoke.

"No."

"He is very unhappy then about something; and I don't like to see it, Lucy. George March deserves to be happy if any one does."

"But they say none of us do," Lucy answered, trying to laugh.

"Never mind what they say," persisted Bee. "What do you say, Lucy?"

"I?" The girl turned aside to pick a flower from the border at her feet. "Nothing. What can I have to say about Doctor March's affairs? I am not an old friend like you, Bee; of course he talks to you about them."

"He does not tell me what is making him so restless and haggard poor fellow!"

Lucy was fastening the flower in her belt; her hands hardly trembled.

"Very likely he is anxious about Ada," she replied. "He admires her very much."

"Has he said so?" demanded Bee, curtly.

Lucy shrugged her shoulders.

"Not to me, of course; but there is no necessity for saying so. Any one can see it for themselves."

"I can't for one," Bee declared.

"He has called to see her every day this week," persisted Lucy, pale, but with a kind of anxious defiance in her young face; "and—and I know that he likes my cousin very much. Why shouldn't he?"

"I don't see why certainly, unless he cared for some one else; and I think he does."

"Well, of course that cannot concern us, Bee," said Lucy, a little stiffly. "See! There is Mr. Ackroyd coming—for me, I suppose. I must go in."

"Wait a while!" Bee caught her hand. "Let us see what he wants. It is so much pleasanter here than indoors to day."

Ted's tall figure came through the lilac-bushes, preceded by Niniche, Ada's pug, who was jingling her silver bell and trotting very consequentially along.

"How about that crimson wool?" cried the young man.

"Oh!" said Lucy, dismayed. She had hung the wool over her arm and forgotten all about it.

"We will wind it now," Bee decided. "Let us sit on the bench, and I will hold it for you. I can't trust Ted. He always gets it into a fearful tangle."

"I don't think Mrs. Ludlow will mind waiting a little longer now," observed young Ackroyd placidly, stretching himself on the grass at the girls' feet and throwing his glove for Niniche to fetch.

Niniche was rolling about on the grass and worrying something else; she took no notice whatever of the challenge.

"Why not?" Bee asked.

"She is talking to the Doctor," explained Ted, trying to tempt Niniche with the other glove.

"George?" cried Bee, with very fairly acted surprise. "Did mamma send him? Has he any message for me?"

"I believe he came to inquire about Miss Ludlow. Oh, go along, you stupid little muff!"—this last for Niniche's benefit, who was too busy to see the gauntlet he had thrown down within an inch of her black nose.

The girls exchanged a glance. Lucy was pale; but she smiled and said—

"You see!"

Bee smiled too—scornfully.

"Teddy, get up and hold the wool for Lucy," she said rising. "I want to see George; perhaps he will walk home with us."

Bee ran back to the house, and young Ackroyd lifted his long limbs up from the grass on to the bench under the old ivied tower.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Ackroyd," said Lucy, passing the wool over his great hands. She was looking so very pale now that the young man remarked it.

"You are not strong enough for much traveling," he said kindly. "I wish Mrs. Thompson to the deuce!"

"Poor Mrs. Thompson!" Lucy cried, with an hysterical laugh.

"Ah," said Ted, with satisfaction, "here comes March I see! You just ask him what he thinks about it, Miss Thrale."

Lucy started violently and caught at the young man's sleeve.

"You will hold the wool for me?" she said nervously. "You don't mind? You don't want to go back to the house?"

"Not at all," he answered placidly, looking at her in some surprise. "Are you afraid March is going to order you to stay at home?"

"No—oh, no! What is it to Doctor March?" she said hurriedly. "Oh, Mr. Ackroyd"—as the young man, seeing George coming, stood up, regardless of the wool—"please do not go away!"

Teddy looked at her again. George was brushing past the lilac bushes with his broad shoulders. A sudden red blush had risen to the girl's face.

"That is better," young Ackroyd said good humoredly, nodding. "But I don't see why Mrs. Thompson should bury such roses in her school room either. They don't flourish in Sheffield—ask the Doctor if they will!"

Lucy started up, trying to hide her hot cheeks with her hands, and to look unconcerned.

"Oh, that naughty Niniche," she exclaimed, running across the grass plot as Doctor March was almost upon them; "she is worrying something again! She eats up all our gloves and slippers if we don't watch her, Mr. Ackroyd."

She was gone, trailing the red wool after her across the path and over the grass. Her heart was beating so that she nearly fainted as she stooped to talk to the dog. The sunshiny garden turned black before her eyes. A cold dew broke out on her forehead and round her lips.

Young Ackroyd looked after her; and, as he looked, he gave vent to a long low whistle.

"That is how the wind blows, is it?" he thought, smiling to himself. "March, my dear fellow," he added aloud, as George reached the bench, "something tremendous hangs upon this crimson wool, I believe. Miss Thrale has been winding it up as if for bare life; allow me to transfer it to you. Hold out your hands, and be sure you keep your thumbs well up. There you are. I think I see Bee calling me—I mean I hear her beckoning—you understand."

George stood, bewildered and a little foolish looking, with the wool on his hands. Ted turned on his heel.

"Shouldn't wonder if that red wool were to turn into a telegraph wire, and reach to Sheffield!" he thought sagely, as he sauntered back to the house. "'Miss Thrale to Mrs. Thompson—Engagement off. Better one on,' or something of that sort. She's an awfully sweet sort of girl; wonder March hasn't seen it long ago!"

George March looked, with his heart in his eyes, at the slender figure that was kneeling on the grass. This was his very last chance, as he felt, of speaking to Lucy Thrale before she went away. And yet what could he say that he had not already said, and she treated with indifference—almost scorn?

There he stood, the great strong dark man, with his clever hands and fine brain, trembling at sight of a blue-eyed slip of a girl, hardly daring to approach her or to speak her name, and wondering in a queer dumb rebellion why he should be doomed to carry his deep love and longing within him unsatisfied to his grave.

"I would be so good to her—so loyal—so patient," he thought, clenching his hands with unconscious passion. "I love her so absolutely—every hair of her pretty chestnut head—every fault and virtue in her sweet nature—that I feel as if my love gave me some sovereign power over her—as if it were weak and unmanly to argue with her about it. She is mine. Heaven made her for me, and brought her to me to be cherished. How dare she—my darling, my wife—deny herself to me?"

He had crossed the grass-plot under the white-blossomed cherry trees, and stood behind her now, as she still knelt beside the dog.

"Lucy," he said, "I have come back again, you see."

She started up, deadly white now, the sweet red blush of a few moments before as dead as last year's roses.

"Yes," she answered calmly. "Ada is a little better to-day. Does she know you are here? Will she not see you?"

The dog was barking and leaping up for the paper which Lucy had taken from its mischievous paws.

"Down, Niniche," the girl cried in a shrill voice.

"I came to see you," George said rapidly, "for the last time before you go away."

"But I am not going away to-day or to-morrow," returned Lucy impatiently. "It is too soon to say good bye; and I must go back to the house. My aunt will be wanting me."

She began to walk across the grass, twisting the paper round and round her fingers, looking straight before her.

"Bee is with her," the young man said firmly. "You must not go, Lucy; you shall not, until you have heard what I have to say."

Still she tried to escape; but he took her hand—it was as cold as ice—and held her fast.

"Very well," she said half sullenly. "I suppose they are all watching us from the windows, and aunt Letitia will be annoyed; but that does not matter, of course, so long as you are stronger than me, and can make me stop here to listen to you."

He let her hand go at once.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked in a voice full of anguish. "Lucy, you are walking on my heart, and crushing it; but I don't complain."

The girl shrugged her shoulders. Her perverseness and cruelty seemed to George incredible, incomprehensible.

"What have I done to you?" he said. "Is it such an offense to love you, my dear?"

"Oh, love, love—I am tired of hearing you talk of love!" she burst forth impetuously. "You cry out because I tell you that—that I don't care for you; but you don't mind how some one else suffers. You think only of yourself; and that is so easy. If there were nothing else to think of, I suppose we could all be happy."

She had caught up the tangled wool which had dropped at poor George's feet, and was winding it mechanically, with an utmost fierce rapidity, round the paper she held in her hands.

"How some one else suffers!" the young man cried bewildered. "I don't understand."

Lucy broke into a hard little laugh; her breath came fast; she went on winding and winding, and pulling the tangled skein into a great knot.

"Oh, why," she cried—and she shot a swift look at him out of her unnaturally bright eyes—"why is it always Ada's lovers that fall in love with me? One would think they did it on purpose!"

George stared at her startled.

"Ada's lovers!" he repeated. "What do you mean? Why should you say such a thing as that to me?"

He caught her hands again roughly in his. He forced her to turn towards him. The two white stricken faces stared into each other's eyes.

"Lucy," he said again—and now there was a hoarse ring of command in his voice—"what makes you say that?"

"Because"—she freed herself with a struggle and ran past him—"because it is true! You were Ada's lover before you were mine!" she said; and her gray gown vanished among the trees.

George March passed his hands across his eyes, with a laugh that was almost a sob.

"I must be going crazy!" he said. "What fantastic nonsense has that poor child been talking? What does it all mean?"

He took a few paces along the sunny grass. Ada's lover—he!

"I see," he thought, "that this will never end until I have spoken plainly to Miss Ludlow about Lucy. She has sense and tact, and—I will see her as soon as she will let me. If Lucy has been believing this about me, may it not account for——"

The young man began to walk back to the house in strong excitement. A new hope was stirring in his heart.

"My poor little love!" he said. "My poor little motherless frightened Lucy!"

The small crimson ball she had been winding had caught against the bush in her flight, snapping the wool in two. It lay in George's path, and he picked it up and put it away into his pocket-book, pressing it fondly against his side as he did so.

CHAPTER XLVI.

Ada's lover! Poor Lucy's desperate words rang disagreeably in Doctor March's ears for the rest of the day as he went about his work. He felt that before he slept that night he must take steps to secure his pleasant friendship with Miss Ludlow from any misconstruction of that sort, and to convince Lucy that she, and she only, held his heart. His after dinner reflections in the solitude of his study were not altogether unhappy. He began to think, to hope; that he had at last found the clue to the poor child's treatment of him.

True, Lucy had told him plainly enough, and for the third time, that she did not love him; but some undefined instinct in the young man's mind rebelled as strongly as ever against this decision.

"She has been thinking of her cousin, poor darling!" he thought. "After that Meldrum business, it is not to be wondered at. My little Lucy, you must let me take your part now against all your world and my own!"

His eyes fell fondly on the little blue velvet chair; the delicate smoke of his cigarette was floating tranquilly about him; the poor fellow felt less miserable than he had felt for many a day.

"It will be best," he decided after a time, rousing himself, "to write frankly to Miss Ludlow herself, telling her what my feelings are about Lucy. She must be partly prepared for the confession by what passed between us that evening in the garden. If she is able to see me to-morrow, well and good. If not, she will send me a line, and I will wait."

The Doctor wrote his note, still comfortably smoking, and then rang the study bell.

"Let William ride over with this note to King's Road," he directed, "and wait for an answer."

Having dispatched this piece of business, he gave one last look at Lucy's chair, one sigh, half passionate, half bothered, to the uneven course of his true love, and then plunged resolutely into the first pages of a French work in which he was professionally interested.

William returned in due time with a message, and it was Miss Thrale who sent it. The young lady came into the hall herself, the Doctor's groom explained, and told him to say that Miss Ludlow would see his master at any time after twelve on the morrow.

George felt vexed. Why need Miss Ludlow have told people that he had been writing to her? Would not this poor child be more confirmed than ever in her belief about them both? However, all that would soon be set to rights.

The few visits he paid next morning were very brief. The smallest indulgence in gossip was ruthlessly denied his patients or their friends; so that early in the the mild May afternoon he was on his way to King's Road.

The poplars were budding on the tranquil lawn of the small villa; spring scents and colors were breathing and glowing from the narrow brown borders of the little sweep; birds were twittering on the sunlit twigs; the windows of the house were open. A white curtain was fluttering from Lucy's little chamber under the roof.

As the young man waited in the pleasant garden room, with its sunshiny bay windows and lilac scented breezes, something was stirring at his heart and

"Thronged his pulses with the fulness of the spring.

It was there, by that table laden with artistic litter, that he had first talked to Lucy. She had a big apron on and something tied over her head, he remembered; and the lovely young coloring and outlines of her face looked all the sweeter for her ugly disguise.

She had turned him out that day, to be sure; but since then they had stood there together again, and she had put her hands frankly into his and promised to obey his bidding—and he did not know then that he loved her! He had felt no mad desire, such as was always present with him now, to clasp her, to crush her to him, to defy the world to take her from him!

He turned away from his absorbed contemplation of the table and walked to the window.

The garden was full of sadder memories; he sighed as he looked out. He had the tiny ball of crimson wool still in his pocket book. He recalled the girl's sweet scornful face as she wound and wound and flung her hard words at him.—

"You think only of yourself, and that is so easy! If there were nothing else to think of I suppose we could all be happy!"

"How can I help thinking of myself when I think of her and of her happiness?" he thought, smiling sadly. "She is myself. My life is hers. Shall I not guard my life from any hurt that may threaten it? Yes, in spite of her coldness or her anger. May heaven bless her."

The young man sighed again, and pressed the pocket-book that was under his arm close and warm against his side, as he would have liked to press the little hand that wound the ball.

Then the door opened, and he turned round.

It was Miss Ludlow. She wore a loose white dress, and her hair was falling over her shoulders. She looked as if she had been very ill indeed; her hands trembled as she held them out to him. But her calm eyes were lit up with a most unusual eagerness, and her lips trembled with a smile.

"George!" she said, coming rapidly across the room to him. "Oh, George, what has delayed you? I have been watching for you all the day!"

Doctor March drew back with an involuntary movement.

"Miss Ludlow," he said, greatly astonished, "I——"

"No, no!" she answered, putting both shaking hands on his arms and holding her pale face up quite close to his. "Call me 'Ada,' as you did in your dear letter this morning. Oh, George, did you doubt what my answer would be?"

She let her flaxen head sink against his shoulder, hiding her eyes against it and clinging fondly to him, to the young man's blank and muttered dismay.

"Miss Ludlow—I beg—for Heaven's sake," he stammered vainly, trying to put her from him, to withdraw himself from her winding arms. "There is some mistake—"

"No," she murmured, still hiding her happy eyes against his breast. "There have been too many between us in the past. I know that now. But I am sure of myself at last, and I can answer as you bade me in your letter. I love you, George! You must never doubt me any more." And taking up his strong brown hand in her two little palms, she covered them with gentle kisses.

"Miss Ludlow," George cried, almost beside himself with bewilderment and pain, "you must not, you shall not do me such an undeserved honor!"

"Ah!"—she looked up now, smiling through a mist of tears—"it is I who am undeserving, George! I know that very well. I am only a poor little frivolous thing, ignorant and weak; but I love you! And I shall be so proud to be your wife!"

"Stop, stop!" he panted; but already a horrible thought was shaping itself in his mind and tying his tongue.

He stood as if turned to stone. He could not speak or stir. He could not silence the loving words that seemed to be ringing the knell of his life's happiness. What horrible juggling had been going on? Whose hand had dealt him this overwhelming blow? The young man shuddered with the force of conviction that seized upon him.

"The letter?" he said in a lifeless voice freeing himself at last from Ada's grasp and falling heavily into a chair. "When did you get the letter?"

"Dear little letter!" Ada knelt down beside him and took it, coloring as she did so, from the bosom of her white gown. "Lucy brought it to me this morning. I was asleep last night when it came, and she would not disturb me. If I had only known!"

Involuntarily George held out his hand, at which Ada broke into a fond little laugh.

"Have you forgotten already what you said in it?" she asked, giving it to him. "George, did you really doubt my feeling for you? It has been very hard to hide it from you all this time; but what is a poor girl to do?"

Doctor March did not answer. He had torn the letter open. It was written in an exact imitation of his handwriting. He could not himself have told it from his own.

"Ada," it said, "I can bear this suspense no longer. Since I spoke to you in the garden and told you how I had learned to love you, I have called several times, but you have been denied to me. Send me one word of assurance that you return my love, as I think you do, and that you will be my wife, or give me leave to come and hear the happy truth from your own lips. Your devoted

GEORGE MARCH.

"Who has seen this?" the unhappy young man asked, crushing it up in his hand. "Have you told any one!"

Miss Ludlow looked in some surprise at his disturbed face.

"Only my mother," she said, in a shy whisper; "and dear Mrs. Throgmorton, George, was here."

With a bitter execration he started to his feet. Ada turned pale at the sound.

"Oh, George," she said reproachfully, "I did not think you would mind Mrs. Throgmorton. She has set her heart on our engagement ever since I came to Barlaston, and——"

She began to cry. Surely an accepted lover had never before acted in so strange a manner.

"Forgive me," George said shortly, as he wiped his brow and walked to the open window for air. "I—I did not know what I was saying."

For a few moments he stood in horrible excitement, trying to think, trying to reason; but the cruelty of which he had been made the victim maddened him. He felt dangerous.

Ada was crying silently where he had left her. She looked after him, with eyes full of pain.

"George," she said at last—and now there was a touch of wounded pride in her gentle voice—"I think that you will acknowledge that you are treating me very strangely. Are you ashamed of your choice already? I was so proud of your love, dear, that I could not help boasting of it."

He turned round. Her humility, her quiet tears, touched him. She too would have to suffer for this act of supreme treachery, he remembered.

"Miss Ludlow—Ada," he began, with sudden resolution, "I wish I could spare you the pain of what I am going to say. Your sweetness, your kindly feeling towards me, for which I can never be sufficiently grateful, make it all the harder for me to explain. But I owe you the truth at least; and I must tell you."

In a moment a soft little hand was over his mouth.

"Tell me nothing against my hero," she said, in a pretty moved voice; "I should not believe it."

The young man took down the little hand, very gently, but very firmly.

"You must let me speak," he said—"indeed you must. This letter——"

Before he could finish his sentence, the curtains parted suddenly, and Lucy Thrale came through, closing them with both hands behind her. Ada ran to her.

"Lucy," she cried eagerly, her pale face all in a glow of light and color, "come and speak to George. You must stay with me always now—with me and with your brother. Kiss me, dear. I am so happy?" She put her arms around the girl's motionless shape and drew her into the room. Doctor March's explanation was interrupted—forgotton in her new joy.

Lucy made no answer to her cousin's tremulous words. She stood, rigid and white, and looked with a blank stare straight at George March.

"Speak to her, George," urged Ada, smiling and hastily drying her tear. "Tell her that she shall live with us always now, that she shall never go away. I must go to mamma, Lucy. Bring George with you."

She ran through the curtains. George went to Lucy and caught her hands in his, crushing them with painful force, scorching her with the indignation of his eyes.

The girl went on staring at him as if she had not felt his grasp; she did not seem to see him as she looked. And then all the young man's madness and anger turned suddenly cold within him. If he spoke, if he told the truth, what would become of this unhappy child? Where would she hide her head? What could blot out her second great disgrace?

And he had sworn to think of her before every one else in the world—in her guilt as well as in her innocence—he had sworn that she should be dearer to him than his own happiness.

In an instant, as he stood holding her two cold hands and looking into her white face, this recollection rushed across him, putting out the fires of his wrath and rage.

"Lucy," he said, dropping her hands with a kind of groan—"oh, Heaven, Lucy, what have you done? Why did you write that letter?"

CHAPTER XLIII.

Miss Ludlow and Doctor March were engaged.

All Barlaston heard the news before a week had passed; and Barlaston was as much annoyed as if she had not been predicting the event for the last three months.

Bee burst into tears when her mother told her of it—tears that puzzled Mrs. Throgmorton a good deal. The girl remembered her last talk with George in the brown room.

"He has ruined his whole life to give Lucy a home," she thought.

For a few hours Bee was tempted to be false to her friendship, to accuse Lucy inwardly of being cold hearted, selfish; but one look next day at the poor child's face was enough to show her that George March was not the only one who was suffering.

"What does it all mean?" thought her friend in despair. "She will tell me nothing—I have no right now to speak of her to George. And the poor fellow has not mended matters by this dreadful step. Lucy declares she will go away all the same. Perhaps it is best; it would be impossible for her to live with them."

Doctor March decided otherwise.

Lucy had persisted quietly in her determination to leave Barlaston—had finished her packing and said good-bye to her few friends, thereby nearly breaking the faithful little hearts of Pamela and Dotsie, with whom she spent her last day.

But, when she wrote to Mrs. Thompson, announcing the hour of her arrival in Sheffield, that lady replied that, having heard from Miss Thrale's guardian that the young person was not in a fit state of health to take a situation, she—Mrs. Marmaduke Thompson—had considered herself at liberty to form other arrangements, and was already suited with a governess.

"I must look for another place, that is all," said Lucy, drearily throwing down the letter.

But Ada smiled and patted her hand, and threw Mrs. Marmaduke Thompson's communication in the fire.

"I will not hear of it," she said, gently. "Lucy, have you so soon forgotten that your home is to be with me—now? I have spoken to George about it already. It is all settled."

"I would rather go away for a little time," Lucy said looking down at the bread she was nervously crumbling on the breakfast table. "I—I don't think Barlaston agrees with me."

Ada smiled again.

"George won't hear of it," she said; "and I suppose we must let him have his way. He is such a dreadful tyrant!"

Indeed the Doctor had spoken very sternly, if very quietly, on the subject to his future wife before their engagement was many hours old.

"Lucy is to live with us," he said. "She shall never leave us with my consent."

"Except to follow our foolish example some day, I suppose," Ada said, laughing, to which her lover had made no reply.

He did not talk a great deal—indeed in those early days of his courtship he seemed a little absent or absorbed; but there were plenty of eager and happy women to talk for him.

The sad little villa was full of new life and vivacity. Mrs. Ludlow absolutely forsook her sofa for hours at a time and went up and down stairs without assistance. Her friend Mary Throgmorten was as much delighted, as fussy, as important, as if it had been Bee's marriage she was anticipating. All day long the Upper Brunswick street pony carriage was trotting between King's Road and Beaudesert gardens, while of course a good deal of alteration and brightening up was considered necessary for the bride's comfort.

It had been suggested to the Doctor that this would be an excellent opportunity for leaving his bachelor barracks and removing to a more fashionable locality. Mrs. Throgmorton even pointed out an extremely desirable house, bright, airy, commodious, which was to let not very far from her own, and told George that she was sure Ada or any young wife would find it a good deal more cheerful than number nine.

It appeared however that Doctor March had a strong objection to leave Beaudesert gardens, an objection that was shared by good Mrs. Batters; but he admitted that, if Ada particularly desired the change, he would yield to her wishes.

He repeated this to the young lady herself at their next interview; and Ada declared that she should scold dear Mrs. Throgmorton for attributing such whims and fancies to her, adding that the dear quaint old house where George had lived for so many years before she, Ada, had known him was already sacred in her eyes.

"I may have pretty things and flowers about the rooms, may I not?" the gentle bride elect said, smiling up into her lover's sober face. "And I may alter the furniture just a little? I believe I am a tiny bit jealous of the house you have known so much longer than you have known me. I want it to put a fresh face for our marriage, dear, so that over after it will only remind you of me."

The Doctor, it seemed, was willing to endure any amount of new furniture and improvements, except in one room—his own study—which he obstinately refused to have touched. Indeed one evening, on his return home, having missed a little low chair which had always stood there close to the fire—a little blue velvet chair, which was certainly out of keeping with the sombre fittings of the room—the young man angrily rang the bell and demanded to know what had become of it.

Mrs. Batters explained that at Mrs. Throgmorton's suggestion it had been removed to some other room to which it had originally belonged.

"See that it is brought back, please," said Doctor March very sternly, to the good housekeeper's infinite surprise. "And let it be understood at once that no one enters the study without my permission."

So the little blue velvet chair was re-established close to his writing table, and George March spent the long lonely nights that followed his engagement to Ada Ludlow in looking blankly at it and wondering sadly over the fate that had befallen him.

In a few weeks he would be married, and married to a woman he did not love, Six months before hom he would have laugeed such a possibility to scorn! How stoutly he would have denied that he could ever be brought to such a pass—that he, who had felt it weak, wrong, disloyal to yield to the vague pity and interest that Bee Throgmorton had roused in him in the time of her girlish trouble—who had thought it his simple duty to see her suffer rather than betray her by any word of his into the desecration of a loveless marriage—that he would before long be drearily counting the days that were left him until a woman far less dear to him than his old friend and playfellow should come into his house, into his life, there to remain as long as they both lived!

"It is not Ada's fault, poor girl!" he had decided from the first. "Heaven knows I had no thought of winning her love; but I can only feel grateful for it! If things had happened otherwise, I suppose she would have gone away and learned in time to forget, and would have been happy with some one else. But now"—he sighed heavily—"whoever suffers, it must not be Ada. She has done nothing to deserve it."

And then his eyes would fall on the little chair by the hearth, and he would remember that it must remain empty now, as empty as his heart, until the end.

Lucy had gone to Croome. As soon as his engagement was announced, he had suggested to his kind friend Mrs. Ackroyd that she would be doing poor little Miss Thrale a kindness in giving her a week of the sweet country air; and Lucy, free from the overhanging dread of Mrs. Marmaduke Thompson and Mrs. Thompson's children, went willingly enough. She was not sorry to be for a time out of sight and hearing of the marriage preparations; she felt that it was a relief not to have to meet Doctor March daily as her cousin's lover.

Every one was very glad to see Miss Thrale again at Croome. The children were wild with joy.

"Oh, Doctor March," said placid Mrs. Ackroyd, with rather unusual warmth, "I always thought it was Lucy you liked, and not Miss Ludlow! And so did Lady Sarah. But there is no telling; is there?"

Doctor March had found time to go out to Green Knowe once, and only once, while the pale little visitor was there. And Mrs. Ackroyd had given him the opportunity which he demanded, sadly enough, to speak to Lucy.

"Lucy is out with the children," she explained. "Do you mind following them to the wood and telling Roberts to bring Pamela and Dotsie in? I am going to take them to the village with me."

George did not need a second bidding. He found Lucy—not his darling now, not his any more—standing beside the shining water and holding the children by the hand. The mild May air and light were playing round her pretty slender shape, a little soft wind was bending the reeds at her feet; her head was uncovered, and the sun was reddening the rough bronze waves of her hair.

"Oppity, Oppity!" the children cried in an ecstasy; and she turned and saw him coming through the delicate shafts of the silver beeches, with all the young sunlit green of the wood behind his dark figure.

She advanced to meet him at once, and held out her hand.

"How is Ada?" she said quite calmly and naturally; and her sweet face broke into a smile.

"Thank Heaven, she can smile again!" thought poor George wistfully. "It is so long since I have seen that look on her face, poor child!"

Indeed Lucy seemed like her old bright simple self again in other ways. She looked at him and spoke to him as she used to look and speak before any trouble arose between them. All the ugly wilfulness and hardness that he had lately noticed in her manner with so much pain had given place to a touching half unconscious humility and sweetness—a change which set the poor fellow's heavy heart aching more desperately than ever for all that he had lost.

"I need not ask if you are better, Lucy," he said, gently; "I can see it in your face. I may call you 'Lucy' now?"

"Of course"—smiling a little tremulously. "I am a great deal better. Everyone is so kind to me here."

"That was it," George thought with a sad smile. "Every one was so kind to her!" That was Lucy's heaven. There were no more unfriendly looks or words to dread; her friends approved of her; her timid startled heart was at rest; and two lives—perhaps three—were ruined.

"My dear," he said, with infinite tenderness; "I would not disturb your happiness if I could help it; but, before I go back to town, before we go our separate ways in life, there is something I must say to you."

Lucy looked up at him, trembling a little.

"It can do no good," she urged; "but, if you wish, I will listen."

They had begun to walk back to the house; but they paused then at the reedy margin of the mere.

A delicious chirping of birds and rustling of little leaves was in the air; the world was entering gladly into its wonderful ever renewing youth; the year seemed to be rejoicing in the freshness of its spring; but Lucy, for all her sweet face and her seventeen years, felt strangely old and dull and indifferent as she stood by the water, side by side with George March, and waited for him to speak.

The poor fellow was trying to master himself, to take his eyes from the trembling girl who stood so near him—so far from him; close to his hands—a lifetime distant from his heart.

He was resolved to have no misunderstandings this time, no equivocal speeches. He would speak very plainly, very frankly; he would try to convince this motherless child that the mistaken sacrifice she had begun was a solemn wrong done to herself and to the other people beside, and that it was her duty, while yet there was time, to renounce it.

He had sent Lucy to Croome because he had desired to give her a little time to think. He felt that the girl was not strong enough to endure such a nervous strain as had lately been put upon her. She had been living for weeks past in an overwrought and unwholesome excitement that had dazzled her and blinded her sense of right and wrong—an excitement under the influence of which so great a creature might well have been led unthinkingly into the grievous error she had committed—might even have been betrayed into believing that there could be an admirable or a glorious side to the forging of a letter.

The young man used those exact words in speaking of what had been done; they sounded horrible.

Lucy did not wince; she only stood very white and still, and her tears were dropping heavily on her clasped hands as she looked across the mere with a blank stare and listened.

"No one knows ur secret but me," George went on as calmly as he could; "and I cannot speak until you tell me to do so. But I hope you will tell me to speak, Lucy. I came here to-day that you might tell me."

She did not say a word, but her tears kept falling—falling on her bosom and on her clasped hands.

"To tell the truth now will be, I know, to cause a great deal of pain and confusion; but what is that to the mortal agony we should bring upon each other, and on another person, by keeping silence? Lucy"—a sort of tender authority came into the Doctor's voice which she had found very sweet in other days—"you used to be brave—don't you remember?—you used to do what was right for right's sake when I spoke to you and showed you how you were in fault. Are you going to persist, foolishly and cruelly now, in a lie?"

Still there was no answer except Lucy's tears.

"I acknowledge all the difficulty of the confession," George went on—"the peculiar difficulty it presents to you; but, if you would trust me——"

She made an imploring gesture.

"I am not speaking of my love for you, Lucy," the young man explained, with a break in his kind rough voice—"that is unchanged, and will never change as long as I live, but I will not urge it upon you any more—I mean only that, whatever happens, you shall have a brother's protection from me. Be true to yourself, my dear, and trust me a little. Lucy, tell me to speak out and break off this marriage!"

Silence still. George began to feel, with a terrible weight at his heart, that he might as well have spoken to the marble dryed he had passed a few minutes before in the park. He turned away and took two or three paces along the bank of the mere. Lucy did not stir; she still stood looking, with tightly clasped hands, across the water. But her heart was beating so fast that it nearly choked her. She tried to think, to reason; but she could not. She saw no other way out of the web of difficulties than the miserable way she was taking.

"Oh, it will come right—surely it will!" she was saying to herself wildly, while George March walked away from her along the bank. "He cared for Ada first, and he will care for her again when I am gone away. They will be happy then and he will forgive me."

Then another darker remembrance crossed her poor tortured little brain and made her shudder.

"How can I help it!" she cried aloud, setting her teeth and rocking herself to and fro in pain. "How could I speak?"

Indeed the struggle was too great for her strength. She knew this so well that she would willingly have given it up and laid down and died, if such a thing could have been. She wondered with a great sob why she had not died in her illness, and so have been out of everybody's way. Whichever way she looked, the future stretched before her so sad and gray and dull that it filled her with unspeakable terror.

George turned when he reached the boat-house and walked back to her again. She saw him coming; in a moment more she would have to speak.

"Were you listening to me just now, Lucy?" the young man asked; and she answered "Yes."

"And what have you to say to me, my dear?"

She looked at him then, with tears still running down her cheeks—at his kind haggard face, his beseeching eyes. Perhaps, if right and her own desire had not taken hands, she would have acted differently. But she felt that to do what George asked was to seek her own happiness at the cost of the girl she had already unintentionally wronged. It was all very hard and cruel, she thought; but at least she herself would suffer the most.

"Have you nothing to say?" urged George in his fierce anxiety.

"Nothing," she answered, with an irrepressible burst of sobbing—"nothing, nothing. Oh, pray go away and leave me. I do not deserve that you should talk to me at all."

A cloud passed over the sun and darkened the ruffled bosom of the water. The young man rubbed his eyes wearily with his hand and gave a short sigh.

"Lucy," he said, with wonderful patience and kindness, "if this sacrifice concerned yourself alone—foolish and wicked as I think it—you might perhaps be justified in carrying it out. But have you any right to condemn me to lifelong wretchedness for the sake of some mistaken feeling about what you owe to your cousin? I speak sensibly, you see, and selfishly. I cannot look at such a thing in a sentimental light at all."

"I have no right," the girl answered humbly still sobbing; "but I cannot say what you want me to say."

"And so you condemn me to fulfil this engagement which has been thurst upon me?"

A low cry broke from her.

"Oh, don't say that—pray don't say that!"

"You know very well, you poor child, that I would rather cut my throat than tell what I know without your consent." The poor fellow's voice was husky and boken with grief and passion. "What would become of you then? They will take you away, and I should never see you again."

"That would be best," Lucy answered, drying her tears and trying to control the quivering of her lip. "And I have made up my mind to go in any case. I have written to Madam Vernon. I will go back to the convent, and then I shall be out of everyone's way."

A look of despair came into George March's face. This is what he had been dreading. He felt that from that moment his doom was fixed past all hope. If he persisted in urging Lucy to speak the truth, he should only lose her irrevocably; she had not strength to face the shame of the confession. It was useless cruelty to demand it of her.

"Do not speak of that, Lucy," he said quietly, after a pause. "If you go back to the convent, I shall have no motive for silence. There would be no marriage at all; I should go away to America—anywhere."

Lucy put her two hands to her head in weary bewilderment; her troubles were not yet over it seemed.

"No marriage?" she repeated stupidly.

George's hard look melted at the sight of her face.

"Unless it gives you a home," he answered gently. "Let everything remain as it is, my dear; I will say no more to distress you. If you will not be my wife, what need I care whom I marry? I would not marry at all if the choice were left to me; but you have robbed me even of that, my poor little Lucy."

"Forgive me," she cried in a choked voice, "and let me go away."

"Hush, dear! In giving my name to your cousin I can at least insure you a refuge and a man's protection. You need both sorely, my poor child! You are too weak, body and mind, to face the world, or a convent either for that matter. Don't let me hear any more of your going away."

"You think I am afraid to go," the girl said, wondering in her heart at his goodness. "I was horribly afraid; but now I do not mind it. I think every one would be happier if I were gone."

"Are you afraid to stay, Lucy?" George asked abruptly. "Do you know me so little as that? You may be sure, my dear, that after to-day I will never speak to you again as—as I have spoken to you."

"I was not thinking of that"—simply. "How could you after you are married?"

George March looked at the candid sweet face with eyes haggard and full of desperation. If she had only loved him!

"Of course not," he answered shortly; and he walked away from her again along the bank of the mere.

The wind was whistling among the reeds, the sky was overcast, a few sad drops began to fall.

"Come, Lucy," the young man said, returning, "we must go back to the house. You will get wet."

She walked on obediently at his side.

"I will not stay now to see Mrs. Ackroyd," he explained. "You will say good bye, to her for me. And remember, dear, you are my sister now; I have a right to take care of you."

TO BE CONTINUED.

GOOD NATURE.

Of all the virtues and graces, there is none, perhaps, that wears better, that is more comforting and comfortable to live alongside of, to have in the house with one, than good nature.

Beauty is pleasant to look upon, but fades in a few brief years; and sometimes, even in its flush and glow, loses its attractiveness, becomes distasteful, if we discover it to be but a mask covering unlovely traits of character. Energy and thrift and faculty are commendable qualities, and, if not embined with a too shrewish or domineering disposition, render their possessor a useful member of society, and a desirable companion on the journey of life. Talent and genius we admire; and cultivated manners are pleasant to meet with; but good nature, that cheerful and sunny disposition that takes the world at its best—that gives smiles for frowns, and gentle words for harsh and bitter ones—that overlooks wrongs and forgets injuries—who shall give it its full meed of praise?

I have in my mind's eye, as I write, a little woman who possesses this virtue in an eminent degree—not that idle good nature that is good natured because it is too sluggish and easy to take the world in any other fashion; but that good nature that is made up from a naturally kind disposition, combined with a temper disciplined and under control; a judgment enlarged; and heart rendered charitable in the school of life; and a mind that has learned through observation and experience how far better it is to pass lightly over the ills and misfortunes and even the wrongs that we bear, than to dwell upon, enlarge and make much of them.

Such a person is Mrs.——. Nor is she one of those who, being good themselves, feel themselves called upon to thrust other people's feelings and short comings in their faces. And yet quiet unassuming as her goodness is, one cannot but be better in her presence; as the example is so lovely and bears such excellent fruit, to pattern after it comes as a natural and spontaneous desire.

People go into her house and come away saying: "What an amiable lady!" "What sweet and pleasant ways she has!"—though they generally add (it is so hard to give absolute and unstinted praise, even when it is due), "but then it is easy enough for her to be good; such pleasant surroundings; such lovely and good tempered children; such a devoted husband!"

Yes, the children are indeed pleasant mannered and amiable. They never see mamma in the sulks, or with an ugly frown upon her face, or scolding the cook or quarreling with papa. And what wonder—since they think mamma perfection itself—they follow in her footsteps and take upon themselves her pretty, gentle ways? Place them under a different guardianship for a few years, and see how they will come out, and whether or no they possess more than ordinary goodness or sweetness of disposition!

Her husband indeed is devoted, and knows that he has a precious jewel in his wife; yet he is far from being perfection, after all; and like many another masculine, when he has an attack of dyspepsia, or business cares weigh upon him, he is a little irritable and unreasonable; or if plain words are to be used, a trifle, and sometimes more than a trifle, cross.

"In the first years of our married life," said Mrs. M. to me one day, "Henry used to be much more fretful and unreasonable than he is now, and I was young, sensitive and inexperienced, and would cry my eyes out over every cross word he said to me. I found this didn't mend matters; and when the children began to come, I said to myself, 'what a