

Sandal kept assuring herself and others that "Harry never, never would do anything wrong or unkind," every one was apprehensive and watchful. But at last, even suspicion tires of watching for events that never happen; and Sophia sent other letters, and made no mention of Harry; and the fear that had crouched at each home-heart slunk away into forgetfulness.

Into total forgetfulness. When Harry voluntarily came home for Christmas, no one coupled his visit with the remarks made by Sophia four months previously. They had not expected to see him, and the news of his advent barely reached the house before he followed it; for there was a heavy snow-storm, and the mail was sent forward with difficulty. So Mrs. Sandal was reading the letter announcing his visit when she heard his voice in the hall, and the joyful cry of Charlotte as she ran to meet him. And that night every one was too happy, too full of inquiry and information, to notice that Harry was under an unusual restraint. It did not even strike Charlotte until she awoke the next morning with all her faculties fresh and clear; then she felt, rather than understood, that there was something not quite right about Harry.

It was still snowing, and everything was white; but the atmosphere of a quiet, happy Christmas was in the house. There were smiling faces and good wishes at the breakfast-table, and the shifting lustres of blazing fires upon the dark walls and evergreens and wax-white mistletoe. After breakfast they all went to church; and Harry saw, as in a dream, the sacred table spread with spotless cloth and silver cups and flagons, and the dim place decked with holly, and the smiling glance of welcome from his old acquaintances in the village. And he fell into a reverie which was not a Christmas reverie, and had it suddenly broken by his sister singing high and clear the carol the angels sung on the hills of Bethlehem,—"Glory be to God on high!" And the tears sprang into his eyes, and he looked stealthily at his father and mother, who were reverently listening; and said softly to himself, "I wish that I had never been born."

For he had come to tell his father news which he knew would shake the foundations of love and life; and he felt like a coward and a thief in delaying the explanation. "What right have I to this one day's more love?" he asked himself; and yet he could not endure to mar the holy, unselfish festival with the revelation of his own selfishness. As the day wore on, a sense of weariness and even gloom came with it. Rich food and wine are by no means conducive to cheerfulness. The squire dozed and slept in his chair; and finally, after a cup of tea, went to bed. The servants had a party in their own hall, and Mrs. Sandal and Charlotte were occupied an hour or two in its ordering. Then the mother was thoroughly weary; and before it was quite nine o'clock, Harry and Charlotte were left alone by the parlour fire. Charlotte was a little dull also; for Steve had found it impossible to get down the mountain during the storm, and she missed him, and was constantly inclined to fall into short silences.

After one of them, she raised her eyes to Harry's face, and was