

FOR AN ALBUM.

Write something, you say? Well now, let me see;
To scribble nonsense is always my way.
But grant a moment's indulgence to me,
Short as nonsensical will be my lay.

I hope, kind friend, and believe me sincere,
That life's rugged path to you will be clear;
If clouds should appear and darken the way,
Remember that sunshine oft comes with the day.
Montreal. G. T. B.

JOAN:

A TALE,

BY
RHODA BROUGHTON,

AUTHOR OF

"Cometh up as a Flower," "Red as a Rose is she," etc.

PART I.

CHAPTER XXII.—(Continued.)

"Have you come to tell me the sequel of it?" she asks, in a voice which, though a little mollified, contains still a good deal of starch.

"Why do you ask these offensive questions?" he cries, impatiently. "I wish I had a box of cigar-lights that I might strike a Vesuvian, and see whether your face tallies with your cold, east-windy voice. It is evident that you are displeased with me—and why? I have done nothing to deserve it!—but come, let us hear—what do you suppose happened?—what do you think we said or did—when we got there?"

"I have never hazarded a conjecture!" she answers, lifting her small, white chin into the air, and speaking in a tone of equal frostiness and falsity.

"When I came back, it was in ten minutes—believe me it was in ten minutes—you were gone! I went out on the terrace, I ran to all our resorts—to our trellised rose-walk—to our beech-tree—to our hew-hedge—you were nowhere; I called you—but there came no answer."

"Are you still out of humor with me?" he asks, rather crestfallen; then, after a moment, in a tone of doubtful exultation: "Is it possible, Joan—is it possible that you are—jealous of me? It seems too good news to be true; but indeed—indeed it looks like it. As for me, do you know that I am jealous of the very dew that have leave to drench your gown? of the very dial round which your arms are thrown." He steps nearer to her, with his arms passionately outstretched, but she slips from him as if she were a mist-maiden, made out of moon-beams and evening vapor. "Are you angry?" he cries, vehemently; "indeed you have no need to be! I had to come to night. I could not put it off till to-morrow. I thought, 'I may die in the night.' Even if they had all been here—they are all out, are not they? God bless them!—but even if they had all been sitting round, I think I should have had to ask you all the same."

She laughs a little—a laugh that is half a sob.

"What is it that gives this sharpest edge of keen pain-pleasure?" he cries, looking passionately up at the impassioned sky. "O love! do you know that I can fancy no ecstasy in the conventional idea of heaven? the dead-sweet certainty of everlasting fruition would nauseate my palate; it is the uncertainty—the thought that you may die—that to-morrow—to-morrow it may be ended and gone, that makes this agony of rapture."

"You are wrong! you are wrong!" she cries, vehemently; "in love there is no uncertainty. All those who have ever really loved, whether they died to-day or three thousand years ago, love still. Oh, my dear! what good or pleasure could there be in it if we believed that it could pass? In this weak and shifting world it is the one all-sure, all-strong, all-lovely thing! Kill me, sooner than convince me of its mortality!"

As she so brokenly speaks, she lifts her streaming eyes to the stars that are not clearer or more holy than they. And those words and that look her lover carries away with him in his heart, when, five minutes later, she sweetly but resolutely sends him away. I think that they will be buried with him when he dies.

CHAPTER XXIII.

On entering the drawing-room Joan finds the Moberley triad all gathered in the window; all standing, and all with heads close together, bent over some object of interest held in the hands of one of them. At her entry they all turn with exclamations of relief and pleasure toward her.

"What a provoking girl you are!" cries Bell, sharply; "you always manage to be out of the way when anything interesting happens! Here is another note come for you from the Abbey! What can it mean? Surely" (in accents of almost indignation), "they cannot be wanting you back already!—it cannot be another invitation!"

Joan has torn open the well-fingered and stretched envelope presented to her, and hastily scanned its contents.

"It is not an invitation!" she says, answer-

ing the six intent eyes that are focusing her; and, if they had leisure to notice her complexion, they might mark how utterly that small piece of note-paper has abolished from her cheeks the dainty red that love, sea-air, and exercise had printed there; "on the contrary, it is to say that Mrs. Wolferstan is coming here to-day—she will be here about three!"

"Mrs. Wolferstan?"

"Coming here?"

"To-day!" cried the three voices, in each of which awe, astonishment, and rapture, are mixed in differing proportions.

Ten minutes later, Joan, escaped from her family's conjectures and lamentations, is sitting in her own little bare room. On her knee is outspread her future mother-in-law's missive:

"DEAR MISS DERING:

"If I hear nothing to the contrary, I shall be with you this afternoon at three o'clock, as I wish to speak to you on a subject of the most vital importance.

"Yours, truly,

"SOPHIA WOLFERSTAN."

What that subject of most vital importance is, Joan has no difficulty in conjecturing. And since, in less than two hours, a battle is to be fought, she is already arming herself with spear, shield, and buckler, for it. In order to harden herself against, and take the sting out of, the many depreciating remarks that she is aware will, during the next three hours, be addressed to her, she is saying them all over, in order, to herself.

She sighs heavily, and her eyes raise themselves from the drugget to the wash-stand, and fasten upon the mutilated ewer, which is now, so to speak, reduced to be only a torso; its handle having lately gone to join his long-lost brother, the spout, on the ash-heap. She smiles sardonically, "Certainly, it is a singular house in which to come to look for a wife!" By-and-by, in self-defense, she begins diffidently to reckon up her counterbalancing advantages. "I am well-born and well-bred," she says, half aloud; "I have an old and stainless name—older, more stainless, than their own; there are absolutely no dark stories about any of us; we have always held our heads up, and looked the world straight in the face."

As she so speaks, her dejected head lifts itself, her bent figure grows straight; there come a greater dignity and confidence into her whole bearing.

"Let her say her worst!" she says, with low energy; "she shall not part us two!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

The hospital clock has reached only the second stroke of three, when the Wolferstan carriage draws up at the door of Portland Villa.

"Punctual to the moment, you see!" says the Dame, beginning to talk at once and quickly; "did not I tell you that punctuality was my one virtue? Never in all my life have I missed an appointment, or been late for a train; it is well to have even a small virtue in perfection; is not it?"

"Is it a small virtue?" says Joan, politely. But Mrs. Wolferstan does not heed her remark.

"It is always a mistake beating about the bush, is not it?" she says, laughing nervously; "always better to go to the point at once—straight to the point;—I always go straight to the point; do not you?—I am always an advocate for truth—truth, at any price, I always say; well, the truth is, I came to speak to you about—about Anthony!"

"You are too late!" says Joan, rising and stretching out her hands before her, as one that warns off another, and speaking in a resolute, clear voice—"you have come too late—a day too late! Yesterday—last evening, Anthony asked me to marry him!"

"And you said 'yes'?" cries the other, rising too.

"I said 'yes.' Is there any reason why I should not say 'yes'?"

They stand facing each other; Joan tall and pale, and resolute; her two hands straightly clasped together, and her courage gathered up; for is not this the brunt of the battle?

"What!" cries the elder woman, her voice rising to the neighborhood of a scream, "what!—you can stand there and look me, his mother, in the face and ask, 'is there any reason why I should not marry your son?'—you too, whom I credited with such sound sense!"

"Are you going to tell me that a marriage with me must be a disadvantageous one for any man, much more for one who, like your son, might ask and get so much?" says Joan, speaking in a low voice, but quite calmly and gently. I know it! I quite agree with you!—Are you going to tell me that I am poor—almost destitute—that I have very undesirable relations—that I have sunk to a grade in society far below your or my own natural level? It is all quite true! I quite agree with you; but he knows it all too, and he has overlooked it!"

"I protest that I am quite unable to follow you!" says Mrs. Wolferstan, coldly. She has sat down again as if exhausted—"I never was so mistaken in any one in my life!—you affect to be alluding to the drawbacks that there are to a union with you, and you pass over in total silence the one insuperable objection; in comparison with which all the others are trifles light—as air!"

"What do you mean?" asks Joan, slowly, her blue eyes widening in a painful wonder; "as

God lives, I have told you all the drawbacks to myself that I know of."

"How!" cries the other, in accents of unfeigned amazement and dismay; "are you serious? but indeed there is no appearance of insincerity about you; is it possible that you do not know the—really it is difficult to know how to word it—the deplorable—the lamentable circumstances?"

"I know nothing!" answers Joan, her composure breaking a little, and speaking in quick and shaken tones; "I am in the dark!—I see that something dreadful is coming; if you have any mercy—if you have any humanity—let it come quickly!"

"Is it possible?" says the other, in a scared voice; "who could have imagined such a thing? is it possible that you are ignorant—that you have not heard—that no one has ever told you about—about—your father?"

"My father! I know absolutely nothing of him! I have vaguely heard that he was rather wild, and that he died when I was ten months old; is there anything else to hear? anything bad?"

"This is too shocking!" cries Mrs. Wolferstan, rising hastily, and making for the door; "you must excuse me, I will leave you! I must go home! I will write; you may depend upon me; as soon as I reach home I will write!"

"You will not write!" says Joan, rapidly crossing the room; standing with her back against the door, and speaking in low, stern tones, steadied by an enormous effort—"you will tell me—tell me now—before you leave this room!"

"It is absolutely impossible!" says Mrs. Wolferstan, whimpering, and feeling with futile fingers for the useless door-handle. "I never was able to break anything to anybody in my life! I never had the nerve for it; I refer you to your aunt; she knows the whole affair; she will tell you."

"You will tell me!" repeats Joan, still in the same resolute, low voice, as she stands— inexorable guardian—with her straight young back against the door-panel. "You will tell me; you have begun and you must end; if I can bear to hear, you can bear to speak!"

"I never was placed in such a position in my life!" says the elder woman, trembling all over, and aimlessly fumbling for her smelling bottle; "I, too, who have always—all my life—been physically incapable of giving pain to any one! I, who never could bear to see a fly killed—but—since you insist upon it—since you use compulsion—since you give me no choice—I suppose I must be driven—though certainly no one in the world is less fitted for the task than I—to tell you that—that—your father—"

She stops.

"Go on!"

Again she stops, dead short, gasping.

"Go on!"

"By—by—well, it is not my fault—you will have it—forged his employer's signature—he had been taken into the employ of a provincial banker as clerk—to a check for a large amount. Out of regard to the family, and especially out of regard to your grandfather, whom all the world revered, the banker abstained from prosecuting, and, I am told, honestly tried to hush up the matter. But" (with a shrug) "how impossible it is to keep things of this kind quiet. In a day the affair had got wind, in a week the whole country-side, high and low, gentle and simple, knew it. Soon afterward, fortunately—one may really say, providentially—your father died. There, I hope you are satisfied now!" sinking down on a chair, and breaking, behind her swaddling veil, into a torrent of feeble tears.

There is a silence, a dead icy silence, at least in the room; for outside God's good air is full of merry noises—the holiday shrieks of the scampering Campidoglio children, the triumphant clucking of the Sardanapalus hens. After a while:

"What," says Joan, in a rough, slow whisper; reeling as one drunk, while her haggard eyes roll round the miserable finery of the little garish room—"what—is—this—you—have been saying? There—is—something—wrong—about my ears! I—hear wrong." Another pause. "What," her voice rising with sudden leap into an anguished loudness, as, staggering forward, she convulsively clutches the wrists of the cowering old woman, while her eyes turn the full agony of their blaze on her face—"what! do you know who it is that you are speaking to? Do you know that it is I—Joan Dering—whom you have been telling that her father was a forger? that it was only by accident that he did not die in a felon's jail? You have lost your wits, I say! you have lost your wits!" spasmodically shaking the frightened hands that she holds.

"I have done nothing of the kind," says Mrs. Wolferstan, thoroughly alarmed and sobbing angrily; "let me go! you have no right to be so violent! I have not said one word for the truth of which I cannot vouch. I am hardly likely to be inventive on such a subject; ask your aunt—ask anybody."

The sound of her peevish, tremulous voice seems to bring Joan back to sanity.

Slowly she looses her hands, and tottering blindly back against the wall.

"It is true, then!" she says, under her breath. "True—true—true!" repeating the word over several times, as if it were one of unfamiliar sound and strange meaning.

There is another lead-footed silence. Mrs. Wolferstan is ruefully regarding her wrists, on which Joan's agonized grasp has left distinct

red marks. Joan herself is still leaned against the wall, which alone seems to prevent her falling; her hands clenched together in icy wedlock, her eyes stiffly fixed; her red mouth pinched and pale, her dimples murdered and dead. Then she speaks in a harsh, marred voice, with gaps between the broken words:

"They knew it, then, all along—all these years the people at Dering knew it!—among whom I held my head so high and lorded it over them because they were not so purely born as I! They knew it, and they did not taunt me with it—did not throw it in my teeth. Great God! they were forbearing!" lifting her arms and clasped hands high above her head, and then letting them despairingly drop again.

"I suppose that they thought it kinder to keep you in the dark," says Mrs. Wolferstan, querulously; for the tears she has shed have taken all the gum out of her eyelashes, and sent smeary runlets down her partly-coloured cheeks; "though, for my part, I think they were extremely ill-judged!"

"Kinder! kinder! kinder!" cries the girl, with a mild laugh, her voice at each word scaling new heights of woe. "Do you call that kind? If they had been kind, they would have taught me, as soon as I could speak, that I was not like other children; that I had no right to play with them, or have hopes of a future like theirs. As soon as I could understand anything they should have told me that God had sent me into the world branded—branded to my life's end!"

At the last words she falls forward on her trembling knees before a chair, and her stricken head sinks heavily on the gaudy, faded worsted seat. There she lies, absolutely motionless, without a moan or a cry; only now and then a short dry sob tells that she still lives.

After an interval—a long, long interval, neither of them ever knows how long—Joan slowly lifts her face—a face across which is forever written the superscription of an unutterable woe. Then she speaks in a collected, even voice, no longer hoarse or distraught.

"When you first came here to-day," she says, addressing Mrs. Wolferstan, and holding her by the solemnity of her great and woeful eyes, "you told me that when you had explained yourself I should agree with you. You are right; I do agree with you." No answer. Another heavy silence. "You came," says Joan, slowly, still in the same composed tone, with not even a gasp or catching of the breath, "to rescue your son from the infamy of marrying a forger's daughter. Well, you have succeeded—he is safe. And now, will you go, please? I think I should be glad if you would go."

Mastered by the silent tragedy of her eyes, the other turns without a word and moves limp and crestfallen to the door, but before she can turn the door-handle Joan is again beside her.

"I was wrong," she says, "discourteous; I ask your pardon. If I had been in your place I should have done as you have done; probably I should have done it more harshly, for, in the face of such a peril, one could not be scrupulous, or pick one's words. I bear no malice. Good-by."

As she speaks she puts out an ice-cold hand, and the other, taking it, silently goes.

CHAPTER XXV.

The hour draws nigh when Wolferstan and his love are again to meet, for sweet good-night speech by the twilight waves. For a quarter of an hour he has been trudging impatiently up and down on the soft, loose sand and sour, small grass of the dunes, his quick look turned sometimes seaward, but oftener toward the inland landscape, where, in the utter mellow stillness of heaven, spread the shaven cornfields, the steamy meadows, the red cottage-roofs, and heavy-weighted apple-orchards.

To his hurrying thought, his love's steps seem tardy. Each moment that she delays is so much coin filched from their treasury. As he so childingly thinks, there becomes visible to his intent eyes, a figure, small and indistinct from distance, outlined against the pallid primrose of the sky. It is she, at last. His first impulse is to go hastily to meet her, but a superstitious feeling restrains him.

"I will not go to her; she shall come to me; we will meet on the same spot where we met this morning; it will be a good omen."

So he stands still and watches her. She seems to him to come but slowly; and her feet trail but heavily after each other. But she is close to him now. He had meant to have reproached her; but as he looks upon her, his reproaches die away in utter joy and pride. Dumbly he holds out his arms to her. Dumbly, too, she comes up to him, and speaks in a clear voice: "Kiss me."

"You are surprised at me!—you wonder what has made me suddenly so forward!—ah!" (with a long sigh), "one does not stand much on forms when one is saying 'good-by!'"

"Good-by!" he cries, startled; then quickly recovering his happy confidence—"ah! you mean 'God be with you!' I hope he will; now that you are beside me, he is more likely to be."

"Nay," she answers, looking at him with a solemn tenderness, "I mean 'good-by'—farewell—whatever other word most means leaving-taking!"

"Leave-taking!" he echoes, alarmed and puzzled; "why should we speak of leave-taking!—are you going anywhere?"

"Ay!" she says, with a bitter smile; "I am