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BY

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CHEAP EDITION.

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A DIVIDED HOUSE:

A Study from Life.

CHAPTER I.

A UNITED HOUSEHOLD.

Sometimes when a sorrow is coming
To fill up the chalice of tears,
It casts a long shadow before it—
To whisper of mistrust and fears.

"RICHARD is late to-night, Aunt Sara."

"Is he, dear? I did not notice; but you are such a precise timekeeper. Well, I have finished the story I have been so interested in for months. George MacDonald always leaves his readers with ample food for reflection. He suggests things which the mind must dwell upon till it works them out to a satisfactory conclusion."

"You are growing quite critical, Aunt Sara," said the younger woman, a somewhat amused smile playing about her mouth. "I am not sure that

I do not feel very impatient sometimes with George MacDonald ; but I wonder what can be keeping Richard ? It is very stormy, too."

She moved over to the window and, drawing aside the blind and curtain, peered out into the wintry night. It was very stormy ; indeed, a night of December's fiercest mood. A wild wind was blowing from the north, and snow had been falling in the city since noon ; a fine promise, surely, of a good, old-fashioned, white Christmas.

" He will have fallen in with Harry, likely," said Mrs. Blake. " Of course you are fretting because your tea has been too long infused."

" I don't like it ; nor do you ; nor does Richard," said Mary Osborne. " When does Harry go home for the holidays ? "

" I am not sure, dear, but probably next week," replied Mrs. Blake, and began again to turn over the page of the book on her knee as if it possessed for her an odd fascination. She was a woman considerably past her prime—a widow, also, as was evidenced by her attire. There was nothing striking nor attractive in her appearance. She looked a woman of strong character, and one whose life had not been one of ease.

She had been early widowed, and the struggle to maintain a respectable position, and to fit her only son for an honourable place in life had given to her an independence and self-reliance which in different circumstances might not have displayed themselves. But she had not lost her womanliness ; her heart was tender and good, her manner refined ; she was one of

nature's own gentlewomen. Her son had grown to manhood, and his mother's hour of ease had come.

As a boy, Richard Blake had entered the mercantile house of which he was now practically the head, although the gentleman who had been first his employer and then his partner still retained an interest in the business.

Yes, Richard Blake had been successful in business, and at thirty his income was a very substantial one. Their home, in a quiet but select part of London, bore all the evidences of wealth and taste. There was no ostentatious display or gaudy colouring. Everything was soberly elegant and substantial, the beau ideal of comfort and genuine homeliness. The furnishings of the dining-room in which the ladies sat were of Richard's choosing—quaint carved oak, upholstered in Utrecht velvet, a massive sideboard, and on the neutral-tinted walls a few good pictures. The latter were costly and in exquisite taste, Richard's choosing also, for art was his hobby.

Mary Osborne called Mrs. Blake aunt, and Richard cousin, but the relationship was not quite so close. She was the only child of a cousin of Mrs. Blake's, who had made an unfortunate marriage, and died when Mary was four years old.

Though but newly widowed, and in sore trouble herself, Mrs. Blake took pity on the motherless child, left to the care of an indifferent and not too tender father, and offered her a home in the dingy little London house (it was not the spacious abode

in Bingham Street then). So the little Mary grew up side by side with Richard Blake.

Her father went abroad, and a few years later died in Nevada; so practically Mary Osborne had known no other home than that which sheltered her for twenty years. She was a lovely woman, but hers was the beauty which does not rivet the eye at once, but which steals over the heart like some sweetest melody. She was slenderly and gracefully built; her face was sweet and pleasant: but it was in her eyes her power lay. These mirrors of the soul tell no falsehoods, and make or mar the beauty of the human face. They were grey, large, and lustrous, and capable of a thousand varying lights and shades. In their depths dwelt abounding loving-kindness, gentlest feelings, infinite sympathies, and when the main-springs of the heart were touched, a well of tears. In all his life Richard Blake had seen no woman he thought so fair as his cousin Mary, and would look at her complacently, sometimes feeling proud and glad that she belonged to him and to his mother, and that she dwelt beneath their roof-tree to make it a sunnier and happier and better place. And she? But this history will unfold itself.

She moved from the window by-and-by, and busied herself about the table, which was a picture of taste and elegance and beauty. The tea-table was Mary Osborne's hobby, as it is with very many womanly women. There was no display of silver, but there was exquisite china and spotless damask, and a wealth of winter blossoms which were no fairer to see than Mary herself. Seven was the

tea hour at 10 Bingham Street, and very seldom indeed did the master of the house keep the ladies waiting. At the half-hour, voices sounded at the door, and presently a latch-key was fitted in the lock.

"Harry is surely with him," said Mrs. Blake, laying aside her book, and turning her eyes expectantly to the door.

It opened presently, and two gentlemen entered. Both were young, but that was the sole point of resemblance between them. Richard Blake could be easily recognised by his strong resemblance to his mother. There were the same dark hair and eyes, swarthy complexion and firm resolute mouth. He was tall, and carried his broad shoulders with dignity and manly grace. The other was of slimmer and more effeminate appearance, but his face with its winning blue eyes and mobile mouth, about which a smile always hovered, was a pleasant one to see. Everybody loved gay, good-humoured, debonair Harry Kendal, who never had had a care in the world, and meant to get through life without one if he could manage. His very presence was like the sunshine; there could be no gloom nor sadness when he was by.

Though so widely different in nature, these two young men were warm friends; nay more, the love between them was like that of David and Jonathan, a marvel to all who knew them. Their acquaintance had begun in the most casual way at a debating club of which both were members; but it had ripened into a most intimate friendship. Harry was a medical student studying at the University

of London, and beyond that Richard Blake knew very little about him. He was not at all curious about his friend's relatives, but he had learned that his father was a gentleman of independent means, residing on his own estate in Kent, and that Harry was an only son, who of his own will had elected to study medicine as a profession.

He was a frequent and warmly-welcomed guest in Richard Blake's home, and Mrs. Blake loved him almost as a son.

"Good evening, Mrs. Blake; good evening, Miss Osborne," he said gaily, shaking hands first with the elder and then with the younger lady, and detaining Mary's slender fingers in his a little longer than he need have done. "I am the reprobate, Miss Mary, for I went to Dick's office and kept him there till after seven trying to extract a promise from him, but it was no use."

Mary smiled and looked at Richard; he met that look by an answering smile, which brought a lovelier light into the depths of the grey eyes.

"Come away, then, boys," she said; "Aunt Sara can't wait any longer. You don't deserve any, Mr. Harry."

"Oh! do I not? thank you very much," said Harry, and looked at the gentle speaker with undisguised admiration. Never had he seen her look so lovely and so winsome. Strange that that thought should be in Richard's mind also at that moment! but Mary was quite unconscious of it.

"And what promise was it you were trying to exact from my son, Harry?" asked Mrs. Blake, when they were seated at table.

"I want him to go home with me for Christmas; I promised them last Easter and at midsummer that I would bring my David with me, for my mother is yearning to behold him; but he won't promise even now unless you give consent first."

Mrs. Blake smiled. That was like Richard—his mother first in all things.

"We will miss him very much; but I would certainly say Go," she said decidedly. "How long could you spare, Richard?"

"Ten days, mother; but I would never think of leaving you and Mary alone all that time."

"If you give us a week we will be content," said Harry. "I say, Miss Mary, these are prime cakes; but, look here, Mrs. Blake, why couldn't you give your domestics a holiday and come *en famille?* My mother would be delighted, I am sure, and so would Frances; she always has some jolly girls for Christmas, too, and we generally manage to have a good time all round."

Mrs. Blake smiled, but shook her head; while Richard laughed outright.

"You do not know what you are asking my mother, Harry; she would as soon go up to a cannon's mouth as face your unknown relatives."

"Would you, Mrs. Blake? They are not very formidable, I assure you," said Harry in his eager fashion. "My father is the soul of good-nature and kindliness, and my mother, though rather stately, you know, is just a fellow's mother and the dearest woman in the world. Frances is a famous coquette, but a real jolly girl, when you don't mind her ways. That's all now; won't you come?"

"Thank you, Harry, but I am too old to venture among so many strangers," replied Mrs. Blake. "Some day when your dear mother comes to town you will bring her to see me, so that I may tell her what a good boy you are. Richard, my son, I hope you will accept Harry's invitation this time. It will do you good."

"Very well, mother; when is it you go, Harry?"

"Can't get till the twenty-third," said Harry, dismally. "But it'll do. Frances always has a party on Christmas eve. Don't look so dismayed, Dick; it will do you all the good in life to get a dance."

"I don't dance, Harry, and I am afraid that with my unpolished ways I will cut but a poor figure at your sister's party."

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed Harry. "I could bet you'll be the handsomest man in the room. See if Frances doesn't think so too."

"Your tongue is too long, Harry," said Richard rather quickly. "Mary, you are eating nothing; what can I give you?"

"Nothing more, thanks," replied Mary, and during the rest of the evening she was unusually quiet.

For a shadow, the forecast of what was to come, had crossed her heart; and even Harry's most brilliant sallies and teasing words could scarcely provoke a reply.

CHAPTER II.

AFTERNOON TEA.

"Give me girls for silly talk. They think the world made for 'em to make love and wear fine clothes in. There's nothon' else in their heads."—"Tut, tut, Abel; don't be so hard on the wenches. In spite o' the silly talk, there's a good wife and mother comes out among them once in a while."—*Old MS.*

IT was a picture of ease and affluence, and it may be added beauty. The room was large and lofty and exquisitely panelled in the latest style of art. The furnishings were luxurious but quaint, for the craze for the fashion of a bygone day in upholstery had just come into vogue, and Miss Kendal of Kendal Hall dipped into every fashionable folly of the day. A glorious fire leaped and crackled in the curiously wrought brass grate, casting its ruddy glow upon richly cushioned lounge and tempting easy chair, and lighting up with many a sparkle the dainty tea equipage upon Miss Kendal's pet Queen Anne table.

This luxurious and beautiful apartment was Miss Kendal's dressing-room, and it held four occupants that winter afternoon—all girls in the first blush of womanhood. At the side of her table, presiding over the dainty refreshment spread thereon, sat Miss Kendal herself. She must be of interest to you, reader, if you are to follow with me the windings of this history. She was without doubt a beautiful woman, with a tall and graceful figure, which she carried with queenly dignity. Her magnificent hair, which in the privacy of her own chamber among her bosom friends was but negligently coiled behind her shapely head, was of a bright golden sheen, neither fair nor yellow, but golden; which in the sunlight was wonderful to see. Her features were not quite perfect perhaps, yet the contour of her face seemed faultless. Her mouth was wide, but you forgave that; because when the lips parted in a smile it was all sweetness. Her eyes were dark, magnificent orbs, full of passion, and powerful, dangerous weapons which she knew well how to use. I need not describe her attire to you. Tea-gowns had just come into fashion, and Miss Kendal had not been slow to add these costly and elegant articles of attire to her wardrobe. She knew how to dress, how to enhance her beauty in all ways, for it was at the present time her idol. The other occupants of the room were a select trio whom Miss Kendal had picked out from among the guests then at the hall, and to whom she talked as freely as it was in her nature to do. She lacked her brother's frankness and openness of manner, and unlike him made but few friends. She was not

universally nor even generally beloved, especially among her own sex, for her eyes were keen and her tongue sarcastic, and she did not even spare the mystic three who were with her now.

"I say, Fanny," said little Amy Clitheroe, the daughter of a country rector, who was a distant connection of Mrs. Kendal; "you do look just too lovely in that gown—doesn't she Eleanor?"

The individual addressed, a tall swarthy young lady of aristocratic but not very prepossessing appearance, glanced critically at Miss Kendal, and gave a languid assent.

"It should look nice. I talked to madame well about it. I put it on to-night to get it to sit nicely, you know. This is our last cosy five o'clock alone. To-morrow we must honour mamma's table in the drawing-room," said Miss Kendal, somewhat languidly. "Amy, child, if you call me Fanny again I shall scold you. It sounds so like a little poodle. Please to remember my name is Frances."

"It is the force of habit, dear," said Amy, a trifle humbled. "It always used to be Fanny when we were little."

"Yes; but now we are women, and must act as such," said Miss Kendal, absently toying with her teaspoon. "Come, Eleanor, let me replenish your cup."

"When does Harry come?" asked Amy, the irrepressible. "Isn't he bringing his great friend with him this time?"

"We expect so; and they will be here," said Miss Kendal, glancing at the timepiece, "in about an hour from now."

"I wonder what like he will be?" chattered Amy.

"Who is this friend of your brother, and what is he?" asked Eleanor Tremaine in her cool, sweet tones.

"Harry's friend, Mr. Richard Blake, is a merchant, I believe," said Miss Kendal. "A man who has risen from an errand boy or something akin to it to be the head of an extensive and eminently profitable mercantile house."

There was the slightest possible curve of Miss Tremaine's aristocratic upper lip and a perceptible shrug of her shoulders—indications sufficient of the effect of Miss Kendal's words.

"The question is, girls, how are we to comport ourselves towards this Jonathan of Harry's; my brother regards him as a perfect Bayard, and expects me, I believe, to fall down and worship him at once."

"You scarcely need to ask how to comport yourself, Frances," said Eleanor Tremaine. "Your repose of manner, the instinct of the Vere de Vere, will do all that is necessary when a plebeian approaches you."

"Thanks, Eleanor; your sarcasm is very fine," said Frances, smiling and showing two rows of ivory which were the envy of many of her friends.

"What if Mr. Richard Blake falls in love with you, Frances?" said Amy musingly.

"Would that be something so very unusual?" asked Miss Kendal with a conscious laugh.

"No, but what would you do?"

Miss Kendal yawned, and folded her fair arms above her stately head.

"Ineligibles are not so very difficult to repress," said she serenely. "Only I would be sorry to be unkind to Harry's friend."

Little Amy sighed. She was pretty in her way, but penniless, and at Allingham very few suitors came riding by.

"When do you mean to marry, Frances?" asked Miss Tremaine; "do tell us who could tempt you."

Miss Kendal waited a little before she spoke. Her eyes were fixed upon the glowing fire, as if trying to read her fortune there. Her face was serious, but lovely in its repose.

"When I marry, girls, it will be one quite unlike any I have ever met here or elsewhere."

"Tell us what he will be like, do!" cried Amy, clapping her hands.

"Well—of course he must be handsome."

"Of course, to mate with you," said Amy with emphasis.

"He must be noble and true, unselfish and kind, and as stainless as good king Arthur himself," said Frances dreamily. "Of noble birth, and proud as he is noble; if he has a coronet, so much the better."

"Oh!" cried Amy breathlessly.

"You are ambitious, Frances," remarked Miss Tremaine.

"That is my ideal, girls; all women have an ideal at some time or other, you know," said Miss Kendal. "Now for the probable reality with which I shall be satisfied. I shall marry a rich man without

doubt, and his birth must at least match with mine. I should prefer him to be considerably older than me, because I could then more easily do as I like with him. He must be good-natured and think everything I do perfection; of course I would be very fond of him, and we would slide along comfortably as many do, and our house would be a pleasant one for people to come to, and I would like it to be said that we could dispense hospitalities right royally."

"Would that content you in your married life, Frances," said a sweet voice which had not yet been heard since the conversation began.

They looked round almost in surprise themselves, for while the others had grouped about the tea-table, Gertrude Annesley had stolen away to the wide window to watch the red rising of the winter moon above the lonely pines. She came forward as she spoke, and looked with clear wondering eyes into the face of Frances Kendal.

Gertrude Annesley was not a woman to attract notice in a crowd; she was not one of the many, nay, she was one by herself. Her pale earnest face was lit by shining dark eyes which had a pathetic shadow in their depths telling of trouble past and sorrow to come. She was the orphan daughter of a brave English officer, who had left his only child to the care of a heartless sister who had not faithfully fulfilled his dying charge. She was one of Frances Kendal's school companions, and it must be told had a deeper hold on that selfish heart than any of the others. Somehow under that calm questioning gaze, Frances Kendal felt ashamed

of her words. For the moment she did not speak.

"It was only a jest, dear," said Gertrude. "I prefer to believe that your ideal is the true instinct of your heart; the latter would not satisfy you."

"There is no such thing as satisfaction or contentment this side the grave," cried Frances, lightly springing to her feet. "There, I hear a commotion in the hall, caused by the arrival of the inseparable twain, so, girls, run and make yourselves fair, and we will try which of us can best fascinate Harry's *parvenu*."

CHAPTER III.

THE DAWN OF LOVE.

"'Tis a strange and wonderful thing, this dawn of love! How it creeps unawares into quiet unsuspecting hearts, changing the tenor of life, and even the very current of being itself!"

WHEN the waggonette which had been sent to the station for the late comers swept round the curve of the long and stately avenue of lime trees, and drew up at the imposing entrance to Kendal Hall, Richard Blake turned to his companion in questioning surprise.

"Why, Harry, I had no idea your home was like this, or I wouldn't——"

"Say you wouldn't have come now in the face of the smile on my father's face yonder?" said Harry, laughingly, although Richard was quick enough to note and to admire the genuine tenderness and feeling in the young man's eyes when he looked upon his home. There was no time for further talk, for Harry sprang from the old conveyance

and up the steps to greet with boyish heartiness the fine-looking old gentleman standing upon the threshold of the wide doorway. Richard Blake followed more leisurely, and Squire Kendal came down the steps to meet him. There was no mistaking the true and pleasant smile on his ruddy face, nor the fervent grip of the hand. Richard felt himself welcomed to Kendal Hall even before the Squire's warm and courteous words fell on his ear. Harry had disappeared to look for his mother, the Squire said, and assured Richard that Harry had always been his mother's son.

"I like to see it, Mr. Blake; it is the fashion among young men now-a-days to despise the old folks; but my lad, I 'm glad to say, is old-fashioned in that respect yet. Well, I am sure you are fatigued and hungry; you have just time to dress. Dulton, show Mr. Blake to his room."

A pompous-looking individual in chocolate livery came forward, and, taking Richard's portmanteau, ushered him upstairs. The room set apart for Mr. Blake's use during his visit was a spacious and luxurious apartment provided with every comfort and convenience for the guest. Nevertheless shy reserved Richard Blake did not feel at home, but wished himself back in London, and inwardly blamed Harry for playing him such a trick. Poor Harry had not been at fault. He had spoken often and enthusiastically about his home and kindred, but never in a vain or boasting style. Richard could not but wonder now what attraction his plain abode could have for his friend, not dreaming, O blind Richard! that the sweet face of his

cousin Mary had anything to do with it. He was in the middle of his toilet when Harry joined him.

"Getting into war paint, eh? Well, I've seen them all. Fan looks prettier than ever, and there are such jolly girls here this time. We'll have a rare time of it, Dick. Well, I must go and dress, I suppose. Heigh ho! it is jolly to be at home!"

Richard smiled.

"What a boy you are, Harry, in spite of your five-and-twenty years!" he said; "I wish I felt so uplifted at the thought of the jolly girls as you."

Harry laughed, and retired whistling to his dressing-room. In fifteen minutes he was back ready to go to the drawing-room. So together they went downstairs. To Richard Blake Mrs. Kendal's drawing-room seemed a blaze of light and brilliance and beauty, and he felt rather embarrassed at sight of so many strange faces. But that passed in a moment, and he was enabled to return the kind but somewhat stately greeting of Harry's aristocratic-looking mother with manly grace and dignity. Mrs. Kendal was somewhat surprised to see such a handsome, distinguished-looking man. She had fancied her son's friend a youth like himself, and was prepared to be very motherly and patronising to him. But it was utterly impossible to patronise Richard Blake. He stood a few minutes by his hostess's chair chatting easily, but all the while his eyes were roaming round the room in search of Harry's sister. There were many fair attractive maidens in the room, but none who came up to his idea of Frances Kendal. Will it surprise you that that young lady had been

much in the mind of Richard Blake all that day? Was it a prevision, a strange instinct forewarning what was to come? I think at times strange glimpses of our destiny sweep across us in inspirations for which we cannot account, but which often prove themselves correct.

Presently the opening of the drawing-room door and the entrance of a lady riveted Richard Blake's attention. He did not need to be told that she was Harry's sister; she was so like and yet so unlike after all. She was quietly but most richly dressed in a robe of crimson velvet, which set off her exquisite complexion to perfection. Rich creamy folds of delicate lace were gathered low at her neck by a bunch of Christmas roses, and the same filmy material hid, yet revealed the contour of her white arms. In all his life Richard Blake had seen no lovelier picture than she made as she moved with girlish yet queenly grace up the long room to her mother's side.

"Harry's friend, dear! My daughter, Mr. Blake, whom you will be so good as to take down to dinner," said Mrs. Kendal, and rose. Richard Blake bowed low, offered his arm, then with one shy upward glance from her fine eyes, Frances Kendal laid her finger tips upon it, and they turned to follow the others from the room. In that first brief, but to Richard Blake momentous, meeting of the eyes, did there come to either of them, I wonder, any foreshadowing of the strange future with its deep tragedy, its passion of pain, its crowning bliss? Not to Frances surely, for before they were half way down the broad staircase her

tongue was loosened, and the staid sober man by her side thought her voice the sweetest music he had ever heard.

"We are so pleased to have you at Kendal Hall at last, Mr. Blake," said the sweet caressing voice when they were seated at the table. "We really began to think you quite a myth. May I tell you, just in confidence, you know," she added, with a bewitching side glance, "that you are not at all like what I fancied! Harry is so full of nonsense, so boyish, how can *you* be bothered with him?"

The emphasis on the pronoun was intended to convey a compliment, but poor Richard did not see it.

"I am a plain, blunt man, Miss Kendal, to whom your brother's friendship has been something like sunshine," said Richard gravely. "The question I often ask myself is, how Harry can be troubled with my old-fashioned ways?"

"You are pleased to underrate yourself, Mr. Blake, as all really-worthy people do," said Frances smiling. "It is only the moths of society who are vain of their little selves. Of course you meet many famous and interesting people in your city circles. We country folks have just to content ourselves with the same monotonous round, and so, as a natural result, our interests are narrow and our prejudices strong."

"Indeed! The same may be said of people in cities also, Miss Kendal. I do not see anything of London society. We live very quietly; business men cannot afford much recreation."

"I suppose not. Harry tells us you work very hard. You have no sisters, Mr. Blake?"

"No, but a cousin who has been a sister to me ince we played together," replied Richard Blake; nd the woman by his side felt impatient of the ook which accompanied the words, a look which old that for the moment he had forgotten her, and hat the face and memory of his cousin were upper- nost in his mind. So even before they met rances Kendal was jealous of Mary Osborne.

"Mr. Blake, you are a most ungallant cavalier; lon't you see my plate is empty?" she said petu- antly, and in a moment Richard was himself again, uietly attentive and polite; nor did his thoughts vander again during dinner. In the drawing-room ater in the evening Miss Kendal sang for the uests; and Richard, whose musical sensibilities s well as artistic tendencies were very strong, was ntranced. He had many opportunities of hearing igh-class music, but it seemed to him that all the lory of the finest professional singers of the day aled before Frances Kendal's rendering of a quaint nd simple old English ballad, with which he had een familiar since his boyhood. He would have one to her side to thank her, but in a moment he was surrounded by others eager to praise, so ichard held aloof and watched from a quiet orner her gay coquetting with her admirers. hough to all appearance deeply engrossed, Miss endal was not unobservant of her brother's friend, nd when she saw him deep in conversation with ertrude Annesley a curious frown gathered on er fair brow. Very different in every respect om the gilded youths to whom she was accus- omed was this plain, sensible matter-of-fact man,

and it piqued Frances Kendal to see him apparently so indifferent to her charms. Only once when the ladies were retiring did Richard secure another word with her. As she passed him on her way to the door she inclined her head somewhat distantly, and bade a stiff good-night. But he took a step towards her and offered his hand, and she did not refuse to touch it with her own.

"May I thank you for your beautiful singing? I have heard nothing like it for very long," he said quietly, but very earnestly. An unwonted blush rose to Miss Kendal's fair face, and through it a smile broke like the dawn of a summer morn.

"Thank you," she said, very gently. "You speak sincerely; I am glad if you were pleased." Then she passed on, but that smile changed for ever the tenor of Richard Blake's life. It is a strange freak of nature that to still reserved natures love comes so often like an inspiration, a flash from another world. It is not always with them the slow growth of years.

As was their wont, the favoured trio came flocking to Frances's dressing-room for their nightly chat over the incidents of the day. They were specially eager to hear her verdict on Harry's *parvenu*. But to their amazement she would not speak of him, and begged them to go off to bed as she was very weary. She dismissed her maid also, and sat down by the fire with her fair arms folded meditatingly above her head.

And for the first time in her life Frances Kendal fell asleep thoroughly dissatisfied with herself.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE THRESHOLD.

"Love with knit brows went by,
And with a flying finger swept his lips
And spake, 'Be wise.'"—*Tennyson.*

RICHARD BLAKE was enjoying a morning stroll in the policies of Kendal Hall. The air was clear and sharp and bracing, but chilly yet; for it was not very long since the winter dawn had crept redly up the eastern horizon. He had walked briskly to the end of the long avenue, and now cut through the trees by a little pathway which led in a circuitous route back to the house. It was very pleasant in the woods in the early morning. The ground was crisp and delightful to the tread, and the out-door world was beautiful to see; for the hoar-frost glittered in the red beams of the morning sun like diamonds of the purest lustre. It was very still. The only sign of life was the wreaths of blue smoke curling upward from the

great house to the clear sky. Now and then a grey rabbit would scuttle hurriedly across Richard Blake's path, or a tiny bright-eyed robin chirp pertly to him from a bare bough or glossy holly tree; yet Richard Blake was unobservant of these. His own thoughts were absorbingly interesting to him, for without a doubt this Christmas visit to sunny Kent was likely to prove a crisis in his life. He slackened his pace presently; and with his hands in his pockets, and his eyes bent on the ground, he pursued his way until he came to an abrupt pause in front of a close-trimmed privet-hedge. Then he saw he had gone out of the way and strolled nearly half-a-mile westward from the house. Through the thickly-wooded space he caught the gleam of water, which told him he was near the river Ken, which ran its winding course through Squire Kendal's lands. Just as he was about to retrace his steps, he caught sight of something else—a gleam of golden hair, the flutter of a bright crimson dress, and a glimpse of a face which had been very vividly before him during the last hour. His heart leaped within him, and a few strides took him through the trees to the water's edge. The crackling of the brushwood under his heavy tread caused the solitary stroller by the river's brink to turn her head hastily. Was it a mistake, or did the sight of Richard Blake bring that warm rich hue to the fair cheek of Frances Kendal? She was confused for a moment, but before he was close to her she had recovered her self-possession, and greeted him with a bewitching smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Blake," she said, gaily. "I thought I was the only eccentric person in the house. The girls laugh at me most unmercifully; but I would not give my morning walk by the river for all the world. I have come here every morning, unless when it was very stormy, for many years."

"Were you here yesterday?" asked Richard, in his quiet way.

"Yes; of course. It was beautiful yesterday. I never feel the cold. The morning air is so delicious. Later all the freshness seems gone."

"It is true," said Richard Blake, and stood looking on the upturned face, which glowed with health and beauty. "It is a pity your friends do not profit by your example."

"Miss Annesley comes sometimes; but she is not so strong as I, and cannot so well stand the bitter morning air. Isn't it lovely here?"

"Very," answered Richard Blake; and together they stood by the side of the river, watching its restless, fitful flow, its tiny ripples dancing in the sun.

"It makes me thoughtful to come here," said Frances Kendal at length, shading her eyes with one bare dimpled hand. "I am not at all a sentimental or poetical kind of person, but I always feel how like our life is to a river. It flows on and on every day, and we do not know how or where it is to end."

"It has its source in the Infinite, and will find its ending there, or its beginning, I should say; for this life is but a preparing for that which is to come," said Richard Blake, finding words at last,

and speaking with a quiet eloquence which surprised his listener.

"That is well put, but it is very solemn," she said, with a slight shiver. "Do you really believe that our life is only given to us to make preparation for what comes after death?"

"There can be no doubt of it. Do you not think so?" asked Richard Blake.

"I have not thought much about it. But if it be so, well—all the pleasures and enjoyments of life must be waste of time; they are not preparation, are they?"

"Well, scarcely. But though I said that this life was only the beginning of the other, I did not imply that because it is so it must be void of any sweetness or beauty. God has given us faculties for enjoyment, and He intends us to gratify them."

"That is better," said Frances Kendal. "Do you know, Mr. Blake, I fancied you too staid and serious to care for anything except religion? I was not quite sure, even, whether you approved of my party the other evening, and that made me cross with you."

A curious smile touched for a moment the lips of Richard Blake, but he did not meet the upward glance of his companion's eyes. Perhaps he preferred that she should not see the expression in his own. "I am glad you have so explained your distant manner," he said; and Miss Kendal bit her lip. Had ever man a better opportunity for saying a pretty thing, and had ever man so wilfully passed it by?

"It is nearly nine o'clock," she said, petulantly

"If you have done moralising on the river of life, will you take me home? I am prosaic enough to be ravenously hungry."

"I beg your pardon," said Richard Blake, humbly, and turned to go at once.

"I always return the opposite way, over the stile and through the shrubbery, but if you are tired of my company you can go the direct way," she said, wilfully.

"Perhaps you would prefer your walk alone. I fear I intruded upon you," he said, quietly, and again Frances Kendal bit her lip. She could not in the least understand this man; he was almost rude, and yet she could not dislike him; nay, more, she was craving for one word of approval from his lips.

Richard Blake looked at her inquiringly, but she made no reply; therefore he turned with her and walked in silence by her side.

"I fear I have unwittingly offended you, Miss Kendal," he said at length. "If so, may I ask your forgiveness? I am not much accustomed to the society of ladies."

To his astonishment a clear, ringing laugh broke from his companion's lips.

"In your anxiety to free yourself from a small dilemma, you pay a doubtful compliment to your mother and your cousin, of whom you speak so highly," she said banteringly. "Are *they* not ladies?"

Richard Blake joined in the laugh against himself.

"Most assuredly they are," he replied. "What

I meant to say was, that I was not much accustomed to strangers. My mother and Mary, being used to my eccentric ways, do not mind them."

"Is your cousin's name Mary?" asked Miss Kendal, with quick interest.

"Yes; Mary Osborne. Has Harry never spoken to you of her, Miss Kendal?"

"Never; I did not know of her existence until you spoke of her," she answered; and a little silence ensued.

"Tell me what like she is," pursued Miss Kendal. "Is she very beautiful, and good as she is beautiful?"

"I do not know that I have ever thought her beautiful. In the strict sense of the word, I believe she is not so," answered Richard. "But I do think her the ideal of perfect womanhood. Her character is without a flaw."

"Indeed! she must be a very uncomfortable kind of person to live with," said Miss Kendal, decidedly.

"Why so?"

"Because, if she is so perfect, she must make one feel so very conscious of one's defects. I prefer the company of ordinary people to that of saints and angels. We of common clay cannot appreciate them here below."

Richard Blake looked perplexed. He could not understand this way of talking; it was a new and rather bewildering revelation to him.

"You are mistaken in thinking my cousin prides herself upon her goodness. It is her utter unconsciousness of it, her humility, which makes it so

beautiful," he said, warmly, not seeing, foolish Richard! that he was only aggravating his fair companion more deeply still.

"How pleasant it must be to be thought so well of! Of course such sentiments can have but one termination—or rather consummation," she said, daringly.

"I do not understand you, Miss Kendal."

"When a man singles out from the world a woman for such unbounded admiration, what does it usually tend to?" she asked, saucily.

Richard Blake turned his head away and bit his lip.

"You are mistaken," he said, very coldly. "We will change the subject, if you please; allow me to help you."

Frances Kendal placed one dainty foot on the bar of the stile, laid her hand in Richard Blake's proffered palm, and, ere she vaulted over, lifted her eyes to his face. All the laughter and banter and half-veiled bitterness was gone from them, and they were dangerously eloquent and tender.

"I was very rude. Will you forgive me?" she said, tremulously. "It was a miserable consciousness of my own shortcomings which made me speak as I did of your cousin."

Not many men could have resisted that exquisite appeal. Did it come from the heart, Richard Blake wondered, or was it only a part of the coquette's policy, one of her most dangerous weapons of warfare? His hand trembled under her touch, and bending his head from its stately height, his eyes looked into hers.

"You made a mistake, and you know it," he repeated, but his tone was not hard and cold now. "I have seen but one woman in the world who ever made me think of love, and she is here." The colour rose in his cheek as he spoke. Frances Kendal quickly withdrew her hand, and sprang over the stile, but not until he had seen the answering flush which rose to her face and dyed it red.

CHAPTER V.

ACROSS THE RUBICON.

"What is all the world to me?
Is it not enough for me
That thy heart responds to mine?"

IN the dining-room at 10 Bingham Street sat the women of Richard Blake's household on the evening of New Year's Day. In Mary Osborne's hand was a dainty piece of wool work, to which she was putting the finishing touches. It was her New Year's gift for her cousin, but she had not needed to make haste with it, for Richard Blake had failed to keep his promise for once, and was still at Kendal Hall. They had looked for him on the previous evening, but instead of his living presence came a post card with the words hastily scrawled upon it that he would not be home, but would write a long letter that night. Need I say how great a disappointment it was to these two; or how empty and desolate the home was without the

absentee! Ah, me! how we women folks bind ourselves up in sons and brothers and husbands, and how we allow our hearts to be uplifted or cast down by them. They had need, I think, to be true and steadfast, and worthy the dependence placed upon them; yet how many are unworthy after all.

"Mary, I think it a real misfortune to have but one child," said Mrs. Blake presently, and the words told something of her heartache.

"Why, Aunt Sara, that is a very treasonable thing to say, in Richard's absence too!" said Mary, with a little smile.

"May be, but it is true. The heart clings too tenaciously to one, and is too dependent upon one being for happiness. It seem a very trifling and rather foolish thing to say, but it is a real pain to me that my son has not fulfilled his promise to me."

"Don't be so hard on poor Richard, dear auntie; we do not know what may be keeping him," said Mary gently. "Who knows, perhaps he may come to-night?"

Mrs. Blake shook her head.

"He will not. I do not think Richard has done his duty to us, Mary. I don't want to grudge him his hard-earned enjoyment, but he knows how lonely we are. I am surprised at him."

Perhaps it may seem to you that Mrs. Blake was hard and exacting, but remember he was her one son, and she was a widow, and had toiled and struggled for him, denying herself the necessaries of life in his early days that he might have enough and to spare. Mothers are unselfish truly, yet

their very unselfishness has in it an alloy of self; their love is a jealous love, which would fain have measure for measure, pressed down and running over; you see it around you every day.

Just then they heard the shrill whistle and sharp tread of the postman outside, and presently the bell rang. The servant brought the letters—two for the master, and one for Mrs. Blake from him.

It was brief enough. Thus it ran:—

"KENDAL HALL,
"SUTTON-THE-WILLOWS, *1st January.*

"MY DEAR MOTHER,—I am exceedingly sorry that I was unable to fulfil my promise to come home yesterday; but Mrs. Kendal had a dinner party and would not let me off. I expected to leave to-morrow; but they are urgent that I should remain till the end of the week. I have reluctantly consented; but I am enjoying myself very well. I had no idea country life at Christmas time was so pleasant as this. You may expect me, without fail, on Saturday evening in time for tea. I hope Mary and you are quite well, and that you have had a happy Christmas. With love to you both, and wishing you the happiest of New Years, a greeting in which Harry heartily joins,—I am, your affectionate son,

RICHARD BLAKE."

Mrs. Blake's lips quivered, and she tossed the letter into Mary's lap. Mary read it, folded it up, laid it on the mantel, and resumed her work. For a time neither spoke.

"I can come to but one conclusion now, Mary," said Mrs. Blake at length.

"What is that Aunt Sara?"

"That Harry's flirting sister has captivated Richard, and is keeping him at her side; not a very pleasant thought for a mother."

Mary smiled slightly, but her eyes were troubled.

"You take little things too much to heart, Aunt Sara. Richard will marry some day," she said, quietly.

"I suppose so. A woman's life is made up of little things, Mary, with a big sorrow now and again to test her powers of endurance. Hitherto I have had no sorrow with my son. Perhaps it was too much to expect that I should never be so tried. My heart is very heavy to-night."

Mary Osborne looked at her aunt in surprise. She appeared deeply moved, and the lines on her brow seemed more distinctly marked. There was no tangible reason why she should be distressed. Yet how often are we borne down by indefinable fears, imaginings of trouble which may never come. Face to face with trial, most of us can bear with at least a semblance of dignity and patience; but how few can bravely overcome vague uncertainty, uneasy previsions for which we can find no explanation or excuse!

"There is one thing I have observed during my life, Mary," said Mrs. Blake, rising and walking nervously up and down the floor. "It is that it is the undeserving who are called upon to bear the most in this life. The drones of existence sip the honey provided for them by the toiling, self-denying bees. It is a great mystery."

"Yes; but the active bee has the completed,

more satisfying life, auntie, if I may continue your form of speech," said Mary. "A fully-occupied life is the happiest, I am sure."

"It may be so. I am not in a good mood to-night, Mary. It is well Richard is not here. I should say very bitter things to him. The remnants of the old passionate nature are in me still. It is easy to be good and amiable when one is not tried."

It was well, perhaps, that Richard Blake's mother could not see him at that very moment, else her heart had been sorer still.

There was a skating party from Kendal Hall upon the lake on Sutton Common. It was a lovely night; the frost was hard and keen, the sky clear as crystal, the moonlight marvellous to see.

It was a gay inspiriting scene. The ice was in splendid condition; and there was plenty of laughing and talking and coquetting among the skaters. But some were too intent upon their recreation to take part in anything else, while others were like to find more serious pastime than skating on Sutton lake.

The beautiful sheet of water was fully a mile in length and took many a winding curve among tall chestnuts and gloomy pines, through which the moonbeams played weirdly and uncertainly, making strange fantastic shadows on the ice.

There was one pair who had reached the farthest limit of the lake, and who were standing there in the bright weird light, apparently oblivious of everything but each other. They were Richard Blake and Frances Kendal. He was standing looking down upon the slight graceful figure in its

costly sealskin wraps, watching with passionate eyes every play of the lovely downcast face.

"Why do we stand here? it is idiotic!" exclaimed Frances petulantly at last. "Let us go back; you have no right to keep me here, Mr. Blake."

"You are right," he said quietly, unable to understand the wilful nature of this woman who, not two minutes ago, had been gentle, tender, conscious, as if but waiting to hear him tell his love.

"Well, shall we turn?"

Miss Kendal tossed the end of her bright silken scarf across her shoulders, stopped for a moment to examine the fastening of her skates, and then darted off, leaving her companion to follow. He did so leisurely, biting his lip in chagrin. He despised himself for having succumbed to the coquette's power; and yet one glance from her eye was sufficient to make him forget everything but her beauty and his love for her. Before turning the final curve which would reveal them to the others, Frances Kendal turned suddenly and glided back to Richard Blake's side. Involuntarily he stood still waiting for what she had to say.

"I—I hate myself; won't you forgive me? I am so rude to you," she said, and the uplifted eyes were suspiciously dim. "I cannot help it. I want to be better, but it is very hard."

A strange light sprang into Richard Blake's eyes, and he took one of the slender hands in a grip which hurt, but she stood it bravely. "If you are playing with me, tell me so and let me go,"

he said hoarsely. "You know I love you; I am a plain man, not worth the winning for the winning's sake. Tell me what you mean before I let you go."

She stood absolutely still, not resisting nor responding to his passionate words. Her head was bent so low that he could not see her face. Yet her whole attitude whispered of hope to him, and his heart beat almost to suffocation. There was a brief interval of intense silence.

"May I go now?" she said at length almost in a whisper. "Our long absence will be commented upon."

"What do I care?" he said quietly but resolutely. "You may not go till you answer me truly. Have you been playing with me, only doing your best to bring me to your feet, as I have heard it is the way of some women to do?"

Again there was a brief silence, and slowly the dawn of a lovely smile broke over Frances Kendal's face. "I was; but——"

"But what?"

"Jest has turned to earnest. Trying to win, I—I—O Richard, cannot you guess?"

Why should I linger here? Love scenes are not of absorbing interest to outsiders; nay, in their very depicting they become only amusing. Richard Blake could not, dared not try to realise what had come to him. Yet there he stood that winter night beside the first and only woman he had ever loved, and whom he had wooed and won in the space of a few days—a strange position, surely, for sober, staid, reserved, matter-of-fact Richard Blake! But

Love, the mighty conqueror and leveller, had him fast, and the whole current of his life would henceforth be wonderfully changed.

To him, in his new manliness and deep devotion, and to Frances Kendal in her womanly tenderness and shy exquisite yieldings to the first love which had ever touched her selfish heart, the chain which bound them seemed to be of purest gold.

CHAPTER VI.

BREAKING IT.

"Ah! well for us all some sweet hope lies
Deeply buried from human eyes;
And in the hereafter angels may
Roll the stone from its grave away."—*Whittier.*

AGAIN Richard Blake failed to keep his promise to his mother. Instead of being home in time for tea on the Saturday evening, as he had said, he travelled from Sutton-the-Willows by the late express, which arrived in London at eleven o'clock. He thought that they would have retired to rest at 10 Bingham Street, but there was a light in the dining-room window which told that he was expected within. His knock was answered by his cousin, for the servants had gone to bed.

"Well, Mary, how are you? Am I to be forgiven—eh?" he said lightly; and stooping, as was his wont, touched the fair cheek with his lips. For the first time in his life he fancied she shrank from

his caress, but then he was just in the mood to magnify trifles, and imagine things which had no existence.

"I am well, thank you, Richard," she replied quietly, and he did not know how sore a heart underlay the gentle words. "You are very late; Aunt Sara is very anxious."

"I am very sorry, but I could not get away. Country hospitality is very pressing. Well, mother, how are you?"

They had now entered the dining-room, and Richard Blake took his mother in his arms and kissed her affectionately. Somehow at sight of him Mrs. Blake felt all her resentment ebbing away; for love is ever the strongest attribute of a mother's heart.

"I am glad you have come home, my son, at last," she said. Surely there was some great attraction at Kendal Hall, or were they kinder to you than Mary and I have ever been?"

"Oh, no," said Richard, and there ensued an awkward silence. It was broken speedily by Mary making some inquiries about his journey, and then the talk flowed on till presently Mary with her usual thoughtfulness went away to prepare a cup of coffee for the traveller. Mrs. Blake's sharp eyes noted that her son seemed nervous and ill at ease; therefore she was not quite unprepared for what followed.

After he had partaken of his refreshment, she rose, saying it was almost midnight, and they must all retire to rest.

"Wait one moment, mother; I have something

particular to tell you," he said rather hurriedly. "No, don't go, Mary; I have no secrets from you." As he spoke he rose and, leaning against the mantel, looked down for a moment into the clear embers of the dying fire. For the moment he had forgotten those beside him, and they knew it.

"I could not in a letter explain to you the cause of my protracted stay, mother," he began at last. "Being a woman, I thought perhaps you might surmise it."

"I am not given to surmising, Richard; I like plain facts stated in plain language," was his mother's reply given somewhat coldly. Mary Osborne turned away a little and busied herself about her ferns in one of the windows where they could not see her face. And she waited there almost, I fancy, as one waits for a sentence of death.

"I went to Kendal Hall simply to please Harry and you, mother; for, remember, you urged me to go," said Richard Blake, and it seemed as if he mentioned that to extenuate what followed.

"I went expecting very little enjoyment, and I have found what I expected least of all, a—wife!"

For a time there was nothing said, and no sound broke the strange stillness but the tick of the clock and the wailing of the wind outside. Mrs. Blake covered her face with her hands; Mary stood very still by her ferns, and Richard kept his eyes on the fire, seeing there the beautiful piquant face of his betrothed.

"Is it Harry's sister?" Mrs. Blake asked at length, and her voice was hard and cold, her whole manner indicative of displeasure.

"Yes, it is Harry's sister, mother. I do not ask you to congratulate me until you have seen her. She is the most peerless women I have ever seen. My wonder is that she should have stooped to a plain unattractive being like me."

Mrs. Blake shook her head impatiently and looked curiously at her son. Strange words these to fall from his reticent lips, especially on such a subject. Surely this visit to Kendal Hall, with its momentous issues, had changed the very current of his being.

"I cannot say I am——" she began, but was interrupted by Mary's voice, which sounded clear and sweet as a bell through the quiet room.

"If you will let me I shall go upstairs, Aunt Sara," it said. "I am sure you and Richard would talk better if I were gone; good-night!" She glided from the room as she spoke, and neither of them had seen her face. Just then it was better so.

"What were you about to say, mother?" asked Richard when the door closed.

"I was only saying, Richard, that you can hardly expect me to be rapturously pleased," she said, slowly. "I suppose I am selfish; all mothers are: but it seems to me that you have been miserably blind to your own best interests."

"My best interests, mother!" repeated Richard, "Have I not won one of the loveliest and best of women? What is that but one of my best, nay, my chief interest in life?"

Mrs. Blake held her peace. Her heart was very sore. She was set aside, and henceforth must occupy a second position in the heart and estimation

of her son. There was another thing which hurt. She had built up many fair castles—had pictured to herself Richard and Mary husband and wife, with little ones growing up about them, who would call her grandma, and be unspeakably dear to her heart because of the love she bore to their father and mother. But her sweet dream was dispelled, and she saw herself and Mary supplanted by a stranger. She was a proud woman, therefore she hid her pain.

"You have not been a laggard in love, Richard," she said, with a slight smile which had in it a touch of scorn. "When I was a girl good wives were not so easily won."

"You do not understand, mother," said Richard impatiently. "To see my Frances was to love her; therefore how could I, seeing her every day, living under the same roof, fail to recognise her worth? It is not love which can stand aside and wait, calculating every turn of fortune's wheel, which can think, and plan, and weigh, and measure before it speaks. True love is a divine inspiration which sweeps over the soul in a flow which there is no resisting."

"O Richard, do not talk so foolishly!" cried his mother. "It may seem true and beautiful to you, but to me it is wholly absurd. I would have love make a man of you. My son, the truest and most enduring love says least of all; perhaps you will live to prove it."

Richard Blake was effectually silenced, but of course not convinced. For a time there was nothing said.

Presently Mrs. Blake rose, and involuntarily a sigh escaped her lips.

"It is the Sabbath morning, Richard," she said, and looking at her son she felt her heart soften. After all he was not wholly to blame, and though she had ridiculed his words they contained a measure of truth; for love is not a thing which can be taken up or cast aside at will.

"My boy, forgive me if I seem hard and unsympathetic. This is naturally a shock to me, but by-and-by when I get this rebellious heart subdued I will be able to talk to you as I should, and as I wish to do," she said, and her eyes were full of tears. "Only tell me one thing; still one misgiving in my heart. I do not doubt that Miss Kendal is beautiful and fascinating and lovable; but, Richard, is she a woman who will be to you what a wife should, a helpmeet and companion in the upward way? Will she make for you a home which will be an altar for the Lord?"

Richard Blake winced and slightly turned away.

"I have no doubt that Frances will be all even *you* could desire, mother. Well, I will not keep you longer; good-night!"

"Good-night, my son! May God bless you and *her!*" said Mrs. Blake, with deep emotion, and went away upstairs. Richard tried to rid himself of these words, but they would not go; and somehow in the solemn stillness of that midnight hour the first shadow fell upon his happiness. In his innermost heart he knew that the wife he had chosen would not be a help to him in the strait and narrow way, but rather a hindrance; for she

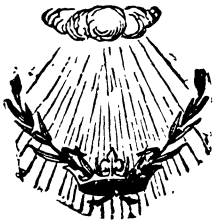
was of the world, worldly; ay, to the very heart's core. But she loved him; that was his hope, the beacon light which pointed to a perfect union. Richard Blake was an earnest God-fearing Christian man; who did good openly and by stealth; who was known in the abodes of sin and misery as one of those who out of their own fulness yearn to fill the empty chalices of other lives less blessed than theirs. In his Christian work would Frances Kendal aid him with all a woman's gentleness and loving-kindness and infinite power? Ah no! it was more likely that she would smile and shrug her dainty shoulders, and say, "Dear me, how odd; how *can* you be so interested in such things?"

But he had hope, and it is hope, that blessed star of heaven, which helps us over rough places, and spurs us on to great efforts, and makes the agonies of earth easier to bear.

Mrs. Blake, on her way to her own room paused for a moment at Mary's door, but it was dark within and all was still, so she did not seek to enter. We may, and yet heart and pen fail me.

People are apt to smile at the mention of unrequited love; it is not a subject which excites much sympathy or compassion. Perhaps it was foolish of Mary Osborne to give her heart without being sought, to allow her life to be bound up in that of another without first ascertaining what was to be the result. But the thing was done; it is done all the world over every day. Often it is never known, and then it is deepest and hurts most keenly. So it would be henceforth with Mary Osborne. She must turn that page which had been the sweetest

in her life history and seal it down for ever. She must take up the life she would most willingly lay down, and so live it that the world might never guess what lay beneath. No easy task. God help her. Yet it is to such sorrows we owe many lives of loveliest consecration to the service of God. The ministry of pain is one of the most potent and most blessed in its results. It can be borne nobly, for it is, after all, but for a day, and the shadows of earth's darkest night point toward the morning.



CHAPTER VII.

TAKING UP THE CROSS.

"Is it so, O Christ, in heaven that the highest suffer most,
That the mark of rank in nature is capacity for pain?"

Sadie.

THE Blakes attended the Presbyterian Church. Mrs. Blake had been reared in the Church of England, but in her later years had found a plainer form of worship more to her taste. They were eminently church-going people. The minister of St. Mark's knew that as certainly as he entered the pulpit he should see them in their pew. But the Sabbath following Richard's return from the country, Mrs. Blake was absent for the first time for many months. She professed to be well enough, and said simply that she preferred to stay at home that morning. She was a conscientious woman, and she knew that she could not fix her attention on things Divine that day when things human so absorbingly occupied her mind. So it came to

pass that Richard and Mary walked alone through the clear and frosty air of that New Year's Sabbath morning. When Mary came down ready dressed Richard Blake glanced at her admiringly, as he had done many a time before. She was faultlessly neat in her attire—a brown velvet dress, made with simplicity and taste, a close fitting sealskin jacket, and a brown bonnet, with velvet strings tied demurely beneath her chin, composed her toilet. She was neat, but she lacked a certain careless, nameless grace with which Frances Kendal invested everything she wore. In his own mind Richard contrasted the two; needless to say largely to the advantage of the absentee.

"If you are ready, Richard we will go?" she said. "It is nearly the half-hour."

"Come and kiss me, Mary," said Mrs. Blake. "My dear, you look very nice, but pale. Late hours do not agree with you. The air will do you good."

"Yes, Aunt Sara," replied Mary, gently; and turning her head slightly away left the room, her cousin following, buttoning his gloves the while.

Sabbath morning though it was, Richard Blake's mind, like his mother's was occupied with but one theme, and he longed to speak of it to his cousin, knowing she at least would give him the sympathy he was beginning to feel the need of. But Mary seemed to be in no mood for conversation, and half the distance was accomplished in perfect silence.

"I was at Sutton parish church last Sunday morning, Mary," he said at length tamely enough.

"Yes. Did you enjoy the service?"

"Thoroughly. The music was good; the preaching excellent. The service was decidedly High Church, yet I enjoyed it very much indeed."

A little dry smile touched Mary's lips for a moment; but she spoke no word. Richard saw that smile, and it made him feel uncomfortable. For the first time in his life he felt thoroughly out of sorts with the inmates of his own home.

Two of the worshippers in St. Mark's church that morning found the service dry and profitless; and once during the prayer a mist of bitter tears crept to Mary Osborne's eyes—though her head was bowed so low that none saw it. How small a thing can distract our thoughts in the house of God! the common things of life, week-day weariness and heartaches, which ought to draw us nearer to the Comforter, oftentimes prove the strongest barrier between the human and the Divine. It is easy to forget that all our cares, our veriest weaknesses and failings are of abounding and tenderest interest to "our Father which art in heaven." The cousins again pursued their way through the streets in silence. But when they entered the quiet precincts of Bingham Street, Mary turned suddenly and uplifted her eyes to her cousin's face.

"Richard! before we go in, let me wish you joy from my innermost heart," she said in a voice which had no faltering in it, for she had schooled herself to say the words. "You will believe that none can wish you and Miss Kendal greater happiness than I?" A sunny smile dawned upon Richard Blake's somewhat gloomy face, and regardless of the possible scrutiny from overlooking

windows, he lifted one of the gloved hands to his lips.

"Thank you, Mary; these words are a great comfort to me," he said sincerely. "Without them my happiness would be incomplete."

"A slight flush rose to Mary Osborne's cheek. He *did* value her opinion, *did* set some store by her words after all. She was glad she had forced herself to congratulate him, though the task had not been easy.

"I shall want to talk about Frances to you a great deal by-and-by, and I shall want you to be as truly a sister to her as you have been to me, Mary," he said when they reached the steps of their own door. "Will you do this for my sake, Mary, until you do it for her own? You will love her, I am sure; I have never met any one the least like her in my life."

"Yes, I will do all you ask me, and some day perhaps more," she said, lifting her faithful eyes to his face; and if the words sounded a little prophetic Richard Blake did not heed them then. "And I will love Miss Kendal for your sake, Richard, until, as you say, I learn to love her for her own."

These words sent Richard Blake beaming into the house, and again the world was fair, and there was no jar or discord to mar the music of his happiness. Truly a kind word hath in it a marvellous power!

There was evening service at St. Mark's; but Richard Blake was never present. He had other work to do in one of the lowest mission fields in

the east end of the city. He went out as usual after dinner, leaving his mother and his cousin alone.

There was an organ in the dining-room which Mary played occasionally, though it was her cousin's instrument, at which he generally spent his leisure hours. Mary was no musician. She could play simple tunes with correctness and taste, but the master-touch was lacking, and her performance could never make a listener's pulse throb more quickly or excite the least emotion. It was simply mechanical. She sat down after Richard went out and played over some of the church music to wile away the time, and to occupy her attention while her aunt dozed in her easy chair.

"I wish you would come and talk to me, Mary," said Mrs. Blake, by-and-by; and her tone was rather sharp, for she was all out of sorts. "I am tired listening to the music, and I have scarcely heard your voice to-day."

Mary shut the organ and, coming over to the hearth, sat down by her aunt's chair and laid a gentle hand on her arm. She knew—ah! none better!—something of the bitterness lingering still in the mother's heart.

"Dear Aunt Sara, you are not well to-day. Let me read to you some poetry or a little bit from Dr. Raleigh—shall I?"

"No, no; I could not fix my mind upon it, my dear. I am a miserable, foolish old woman; fretting at what I should be glad of. Come tell me what *you* think of this love affair of Richard's?"

Little did Richard's mother dream what a heart-

probing question she was putting to the gentle girl by her side.

"If it is for Richard's happiness, Aunt Sara, *we* should be happy too," she said, calmly.

"I suppose so. I *know* I am a hard-hearted, jealous-minded woman. But, O Mary! it is hard to be a mother and to have all the plans of a lifetime cast aside so suddenly."

"I think it is Mrs. Gaskell who says, God seems to be against human planning, He so often mars it all," said Mary, with a slight smile.

"There is truth in that, without doubt," said Mrs. Blake, musingly. "The estimate I have formed of Miss Kendal may be wrong; I hope it is; but you have heard Harry repeatedly refer to her as a coquette. Who knows she may even yet be playing with my son, just to throw him over with a broken heart!"

"Oh, hush, Aunt Sara! She has promised to be his wife," said Mary.

"Yes. But that species of our sex have not much respect for a promise," said Mrs. Blake, grimly. "I am very much astonished at Richard."

"When you see Miss Kendal you will not be. I understand she is very beautiful," said Mary, with a scarcely perceptible sigh.

Oh, how she wished it was not necessary to discuss the subject of Richard's love with Richard's mother! It promised to be the hardest part of her daily cross.

"What is beauty in comparison with sober worth?" quoth Mrs. Blake. "Beauty will not make a man's home happy, nor keep the pot boil-

ing, as the old saying goes. The cares of wifehood soon steal away the outward beauty which charms the eye; and if there is no higher foundation than that, marriage is a mistake, Mary."

"Aunt Sara! in justice to Miss Kendal, whom I have never seen, I forbid you to speak in that strain," cried Mary playfully, yet in real earnest. "What has changed you so? You ought to have been at church this morning, auntie. Doctor —— preached from the words, 'The greatest of these is charity.'"

Mrs. Blake smiled. It was impossible to resist Mary's look and words.

"My dear, you are right. I have need to learn of you. My gentle teacher will by-and-by bring me into a better frame of mind," she said, and wondered a little why the brown head was so softly turned away, and why the fair cheek had paled so visibly.

"O Mary! I wish Richard had not been so blind to his best interests. Where would he have found a wife to equal you?"

Mary sprang to her feet, her bosom heaving, her face flushed with shame.

"O Aunt Sara! Hush! that is most cruel!" she said piteously; and then the scales fell from the eyes of Mrs. Blake, and for one brief moment the heart of the woman before her was revealed to her in all its wealth of unselfish love, its passion of pain, beside which hers sank into utter insignificance. Before she could utter a word Mary had flown, and she was left to reproach herself and to brood over this new element in the affair which

was so sorely troubling her. This revelation, so unexpected (for it had never once occurred to Mrs. Blake that Mary might have already learned to love Richard), did not by any means lessen her perplexity.

When Richard returned, towards nine o'clock, he found his mother sitting alone by the smouldering fire, apparently deep in thought. "Where's Mary?" was his first question. Ay, even yet, a room without that gentle presence seemed empty to Richard Blake.

"Mary is not well; she has gone upstairs, I believe, to bed," replied his mother nervously; and he was shrewd enough to see that something was amiss between them.

"She was well enough when I went out," he said. "What has happened? you look distressed."

Then Mrs. Blake did what she had no right to do; what she never would have had done had she allowed herself to reflect a minute—she let Mary's secret out of her keeping.

"You may well ask, Richard," she said: "what has upset me has upset Mary in a much greater degree."

The significance of the words and the tone might have opened the eyes of a less shrewd man than Richard Blake; yet he answered back coldly enough—

"I do not understand you, mother."

"No; men in love have seldom much consideration for the feelings of others," she replied drily. "But do not let your own happiness make you

forget what you owe to her who has been so much to you all your life."

"Mother! you are mistaken; I pray God you are," said Richard hoarsely, and a red flush rose to his brow as he spoke.

Then he abruptly quitted the room, and his mother saw him no more that night. Poor Mrs. Blake! Her indiscreetness had destroyed, for a time at least, the happiness and peace of what had been so long a united household.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRYING MOMENTS.

"A kindly warning finger-post at the parting of the ways."

WHEN Richard Blake left Kendal Hall, Mr. and Mrs. Kendal were not aware that their daughter had pledged herself to become his wife. Mrs. Kendal had not been slow to see his devotion to Frances, and if it at times occurred to her that she treated him somewhat differently from all other admirers, she only set it down as the outcome of some new caprice, and did not give the matter a serious thought. To do Richard Blake justice, he had been most unwilling to leave without speaking to the parents of his betrothed. Shy, reticent, diffident he certainly was, but in matters of conscience he knew no fear. But Frances, who knew so well that it would require no small diplomacy to make her engagement palatable to her mother at least, pleaded so winsomely that they might keep their secret just till he came back in one little fortnight,

that Richard was unable to resist. She promised that before he returned she would have confided her important decision to her mother, and Richard, though feeling that she was making him shirk a duty, was bound to obey. But during that fortnight his mind was not at ease, and his mother and cousin did not find that his love had changed him for the better. When the fortnight ended he was off to Sutton by the afternoon train, which reached Sutton in time for six o'clock dinner at the Hall. Richard Blake felt somewhat nervous, for Harry was not at home, and he had a trying ordeal to face. He got over it better than he expected. The Squire, blunt and outspoken as usual, said with a good-humoured smile and a slap on the back,—

"So you are going to run off with my girl, eh! Too bad of you. But if you can satisfy me that you can keep her comfortably, I 've no objections."

Mrs. Kendal's greeting was somewhat frigid, and from it Richard surmised that she had not received the news with unalloyed pleasure. She was polite and attentive enough to him during dinner, but he felt that she had something to say to him which would ease her mind. And Frances? Ah! she was lovely and tender and caressing. In the radiance of that smile Richard felt all unpleasantness melt away. For her dear sake he could do or dare anything.

"When you have discussed your wine with the Squire I shall be glad to see you in the drawing-room, Mr. Blake," said Mrs. Kendal, when she rose to leave the table.

Richard bowed, and if he was not very well able

to concentrate his thoughts on what his future father-in-law had to say about the game laws, it need not be wondered at. Many a bolder man than Richard Blake might have quailed at the prospect of such an interview with the haughty mistress of Kendal Hall.

"Try the Madeira, Blake," said the Squire, affably; "it will bear criticism. You won't taste its equal in town, I assure you."

"I believe you, sir; but I never drink wine," replied Richard Blake, a little absently.

"Never drink wine! Why, bless me, what *do* you drink?"

"Water," answered Richard, with a smile.

The Squire made a wry face.

"What's that for, eh? Doesn't it agree with you? My medical man assures me there's nothing like Madeira for dyspepsia, and I fancy he is troubled with it pretty often; ha, ha!" he said, with a huge laugh at his own joke.

"I abstain from principle, and because I have seen so much of the evil resulting from its abuse," said Richard, in his straightforward way.

"Well, every man to his taste, and I wouldn't ask you to go against your principles," said the Squire, good-naturedly. "But, I say, let me give you a hint. Don't air these opinion before Mrs. Kendal, at least not just yet. Women, you know, are—are—well, not easily understood; and it might damage your cause, or at least make things not so pleasant. I daresay you have guessed that Mrs. Kendal is not very highly pleased. The fact is she had other views for Frances. The ladies for

ambition, Blake! You see, Mrs. Kendal numbers a peer among her kinsfolk, and I believe she wanted Frances to win a coronet or something of that kind. I have no such ideas. Give me an honest man, the noblest work of God, as somebody says. And I believe you will be good to my girl."

"I will; so help me, God!" said Richard Blake, with an earnestness which brought a sudden moisture to the old man's eyes.

So they shook hands upon it, and then Richard went away upstairs to face his ordeal alone. He half hoped to see Frances in the drawing-room, for the sight of that sweet face would nerve him for anything, but he was disappointed. Mrs. Kendal sat on a low chair in the wide oriel window, with her hands folded on her silken lap, her whole demeanour indicating that she was ready to discuss the important question of her daughter's settlement in life down to the minutest detail. She motioned her future son-in-law to a chair, but he preferred to stand.

"I understand that Frances has told you of the unspeakable honour and happiness she has bestowed on me?" he began at once. "I am here to-day to show you upon what grounds, unworthy though they be, I presume to ask your daughter from you."

Mrs. Kendal bowed.

Really the man could express himself very well, and his fearless manner commended itself to her. Women can tolerate almost anything in a man except cowardice. For that failing they have an immeasurable contempt.

"You are right; Frances has told me," she said, a little less icily; "and if the news was rather a shock than otherwise to me you cannot be greatly surprised. The very short acquaintance, your slight knowledge of each other, and—and—other things"—she added, not caring to express all the thoughts in her mind just at once—"scarcely prepared me for the announcement made to me only yesterday."

Only yesterday! Richard Blake bit his lip; but he would not clear himself at the expense of his beloved.

"I am not blind to the fact that in point of position and everything else Frances is immeasurably my superior," he said with the humility of a man very much in love. "I cannot as yet offer her what she deserves; but I can and do offer her a comfortable home and a true honest love which will shield her from every breath of hardship and sorrow."

Mrs. Kendal waved her hand somewhat impatiently, and her handsome face assumed a slightly scornful expression. "I do not doubt your devotion, Mr. Blake; it is apparent: but when a parent has to decide upon giving a child into another's keeping, it is plain facts and figures which must be dealt with. You see the manner of home in which Frances has been reared. I would not like, nay, I would not permit, her to step lower on the social ladder. She is not one who would wear poverty gracefully."

"While I live poverty shall never touch her," said Richard Blake passionately, for the woman

tried him sorely. "Business men, Mrs. Kendal, cannot easily estimate their income down to the uttermost fraction, but for the last four years mine has not been less than fifteen hundred."

"Fifteen hundred!" repeated Mrs. Kendal slowly, and her tone was not re-assuring, by any means.

"My business is increasing year by year; at no distant day I hope to give Frances a home something approaching to what she has been accustomed to," continued Richard. "In the meantime she is willing to share with me what I have."

"Why not wait till then? Neither of you is old; you can afford to wait," said Mrs. Kendal stiffly.

"Why wait when she is willing, Mrs. Kendal?" asked Richard quietly. "I am almost thirty; Frances is five-and-twenty. Our youth cannot be urged as an objection to an early marriage."

Mrs. Kendal was silent; but the expression on her face was not an amiable one. She was bitterly angry, bitterly disappointed, and yet somehow to this man she dared not show it. The nobility and manliness of his nature almost made her ashamed. She turned her head towards the window and looked away beyond the spreading trees in the park to a stately mansion on the other side of the river; and for a moment there was a constrained silence.

"You would live in London, I presume?" she said at length.

"In the meantime yes; but do not for a moment suppose that I would expect my wife to live in the city all the year round. Every advantage within our means she shall have to the full, Mrs. Kendal."

Again Mrs. Kendal looked towards the mansion in the distance and at length she spoke.

"You see Sutton Grange yonder," she said, pointing with slender finger to the grey towers and turrets clearly discernible in the full bright moonlight. "It is in the market. It is a small estate. Why not purchase it and make your home there? London is not so far distant. Mr. Lancaster of The Willows travels to business in the city every day. Then we would not be separated from our daughter altogether."

Again Richard Blake bit his lip and began to walk restlessly up and down the room. By-and-by he paused in front of Mrs. Kendal's chair and looked her straight in the face.

"It is impossible. What money I have laid aside will be utilised before I marry in purchasing an annuity for my mother. I must also make provision for my cousin, who is my sister in everything but name. These are sacred as well as imperative duties which I am sure you would not ask me to shirk."

"No, no; of course you must provide for your mother; but really your cousin—is it not too much to expect that you should also portion her?" said Mrs. Kendal, with ill-concealed irritation.

Richard Blake reddened.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Kendal, if I decline to discuss these matters. They are purely personal; and my mind is firmly made up," he said quietly but decidedly. Mrs. Kendal rose. She was angry and did not trouble to conceal it now.

"I regret that this interview should have proved

so unsatisfactory, Mr. Blake," she said coldly; "I may as well say to you that I do not approve of this engagement, and that nothing but a desire not to stand in the way of my daughter's happiness would ever have induced me to countenance it. It is not a marriage which will meet the approval of our relatives and the circle of our immediate friends. As to what my cousin the Earl of Ellesmere will say I dare not permit myself to think."

With that parting arrow Mrs. Kendal swept from the room, leaving her future son-in-law to digest it at his leisure. He stood still in the window, where she had left him, so absorbed by his own conflicting thoughts that he did not hear the soft opening of the door, and the light footfall crossing the long room to his side. But presently he was made aware of the presence of his betrothed by the rustle of a robe, and a clinging touch of his arm.

"My darling," he said almost hoarsely, and drawing her to his heart stood a long time in silence.

"Was mamma very hard, dear?" whispered Frances at length.

"Yes, my darling; it cost me an effort to keep within the bounds of prudence," he answered, trying to speak lightly, but his face was stern, his eyes troubled.

"Poor Richard! it was too bad," she murmured caressingly. "Never mind, it is over now."

Over! Only beginning, thought Richard Blake; but he did not say so.

"Did mamma say anything to you about the Grange?" asked Frances, lifting her head and

looking beyond to the home upon which she had set her heart.

"Yes; but——"

"But what, dear?"

"I cannot give it to you yet, Frances; but it, or some other as desirable, will be yours some day, dearest."

"Must we live in London, Richard?" she asked, and oh how quick he was to note the disappointment in her voice!

"Yes, my darling. Will it be a hardship, Frances?"

"I thought you were very rich, Richard? Harry told us so."

"Harry was mistaken. I have enough—some day I will have more; but I am not a man of fortune, Frances," he said quietly. "If—if—you think you have made a mistake," he added, though his voice shook, "if you fear you cannot be happy or content with such as I can give you, it is not yet too late.

"Could you give me up so easily, Richard?"

"Better the sharp pain now than a lifetime of sorrow and unavailing regret. It would kill me if my wife ever showed me that she regretted having married me," said Richard Blake still quietly, but, oh! the throbbing of his heart, the tumult of wild longings, cravings of the spirit surging within! How little the shallow heart of Frances Kendal guessed at the intensity of the nature she had moved to the very depths.

"I will try to be content; I love you, Richard," she said. "I know I am weak; I am very fond of

the good things of life; but because I love you, Richard, I will try to be content."

It was a sweet assurance, but a scarcely perceptible sigh followed the repetition of the word, and went like a knife to the heart of Richard Blake.

Oh but this was a strange and rugged way into which he had come; its very beauty and sweetness were touched with keenest pain! How or whither it would lead him, whether to weal or woe, could only be revealed by that mystic future towards which we drift like mariners upon an unknown sea, praying and hoping to reach some sure haven at last.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE MEETING.

"We should not be in a hurry to fix and choose our own lot. We should wait and be guided"—*George Eliot.*

OTHER, Mrs. Kendal and Frances are coming to town the week after Easter; will you write and ask them to make our house their home while they are here?"

That question Richard Blake, awkwardly enough, asked his mother one morning in April just as he was going off to business.

"To come here and stay, Richard?" she asked.

"Yes, of course; we could not do less, and they will not come on my invitation alone."

"But we are not grand enough for them, Richard," said Mrs. Blake. Perhaps they would not feel at home in our humble abode."

"Oh nonsense, Aunt Sara! We can make them much more comfortable than they would be at a hotel," said Mary pleasantly; for which kind speech her cousin inwardly blessed her.

Mrs. Blake marvelled to hear her, and her conscience pricked her, for beside Mary's unselfishness how mean and miserable her own spirit appeared!

"Very well, Richard; I will write to Mrs. Kendal to-day," said Mrs. Blake, and just then the housemaid called her from the room to see a tradesman downstairs.

Then Richard Blake turned to his cousin. He had long ago settled in his mind that what his mother had told him concerning Mary's feelings was but an imagination of her own. He had watched his cousin, and had failed to find any confirmation of his mother's assurance, and the discovery had considerably restored his peace of mind.

"I tell you, Mary, what I have not yet mentioned to my mother: that the object of the ladies' visit is to go house-hunting with me," he said, nervously.

"House-hunting! Are you to be married so soon?" exclaimed Mary in surprise.

"Through the summer; probably in August," he replied. "There is no need for delay."

"I suppose not. And where do you think of taking a house, Richard? Near Bingham Street?"

"No; I will need to move further west to suit Frances's taste, I fancy," he replied, with a slight smile. "I was looking yesterday at the houses both in Queen's Gate and Brampton Square. There are several to let in both streets."

"But, Richard, those are great houses, surely? The rents must be enormous," she said, and her eyes were troubled.

"In Queen's Gate they vary according to size, of course. Four hundred is the lowest. In Brampton Square, the houses being uniform, the rents are all one figure—seven hundred."

"Seven hundred, Richard! I know nothing about your income; only that seems a great sum to pay for rent alone. Do not think me meddlesome or presumptuous, cousin, but is it wise to attempt so much at first?"

"I can't say. I believe not; but I am in the position of a man who has only one way to go if he would reach a desired haven. Unless I can give Frances just so much, you understand, I must forego the happiness of making her my wife. I cannot face that, Mary."

"Who has placed you in that position, Richard?" asked Mary, a little sadly.

"My future mother-in-law; and Frances herself is not inclined to play the *rôle* of economist. When you see her, Mary, you will not marvel that she insists upon certain rights. She might have married so much better, that I feel I owe it to her to give my utmost."

"Undoubtedly; but *how* will you do it, Richard?"

"I'll just need to apply myself with redoubled energy to business, and extend my connections as far as possible. Hitherto I have been content to keep within very modest bounds, because with you and mother to economise for me I have had but small expenditure. I believe you have spoiled me," said Richard, with a smile. But there was no answering smile on Mary's face, for in her heart

she was convinced that this step of Richard's was wrong from the beginning.

"And what about this house, Richard?" she asked presently.

"I have bought it, and will settle it upon my mother. At her death, it will revert to you. I am also about to purchase an annuity for my mother, and there will be a sum invested for you, Mary."

He was interrupted by his cousin rising from her chair, with flushing face and glowing eyes.

"No, no, Richard; it is kind of you to think of me; but my mind is made up, has been made up, indeed, ever since the beginning of the year."

"Made up—what for?" he asked bluntly.

"You have given me a home all my life, Richard, and so long as I was able to be of some use, I was content to be dependent on you. It is or will be different now. I intend to take a situation as governess or lady-housekeeper."

"Mary, what absurd folly is this?" exclaimed Richard, beginning to walk rather angrily up and down the floor. "I will never permit it; what will my mother do if we both leave her?"

"If I find that Aunt Sara is to miss me very much, I will remain with her and go out teaching or have pupils in the house," said Mary quietly. "But I will on no account accept money from you. Your wife will have a right to it all, Richard; and she could not be blamed if she saw no necessity for you bestowing your means on me."

So saying Mary left the room, for she was unable to pursue the discussion further just then.

Richard Blake went off to the city in rather

a troubled frame of mind; he had not expected this turn of affairs, but he had yet to learn that his cousin was as proud, self-reliant, and independent as she was gentle and kind.

Mrs. Blake's note to Mrs. Kendal was duly written, and brought the reply in a few days. It was courteous in tone, but very distant, and the invitation was declined on the plea that as they would have a great deal of shopping and running about the city it would suit them better to put up as usual at Claridge's; but they would be happy to call at 10 Bingham Street and make the acquaintance of Mrs. Blake.

Mrs. Blake elected to be displeased with the reply. Mary herself, though trying to smooth it over as best she could, felt that the invitation ought to have been accepted. However, there was not much said about it, and after Easter week accordingly the ladies from Kendal Hall arrived in London. During that week it may be imagined Richard Blake was frequently absent from business, and his mother and cousin saw very little of him. One afternoon Mary was sitting alone in the drawing-room, putting the finishing touches to a little water-colour she had taken down at Walton-on-Thames the preceding Saturday, when visitors were announced—Mrs. and Miss Kendal! She rose somewhat confusedly, for their call was quite unexpected. They were alone, having out of some whim chosen a day when Richard was busy at his office.

In a moment Mary recovered her self-possession, and received them with quiet and cordial grace.

"If you will excuse me one moment, Mrs. Kendal, I shall tell my aunt you have come; she has gone to lie down for a little," she said, with her true and pleasant smile. "I suppose you will have guessed that I am Mr. Blake's cousin, Mary Osborne?"

Mrs. Kendal bowed graciously Frances smiled very slightly, and Mary left the room.

"Rather a nice-looking person, Frances," said Mrs. Kendal when they were left alone. "Accomplished, too. That is a very pretty sketch, isn't it?"

"I know nothing about painting, mamma," said Miss Kendal, rather crossly, for she had imagined Mary Osborne a very different person from this sweet, dignified, graceful woman, who comported herself so well in a trying situation.

Presently she joined them again, and resuming her seat, inquired pleasantly how they were enjoying their stay in London.

"Mamma likes it, but I am very sick of it this time. Everybody is out of town for the recess."

"We came simply for shopping, Miss Osborne," said Mrs. Kendal, "and I knew that we would get our business done most expeditiously when there were no interruptions in the way of friends or pleasure-seeking."

"You are wise. But the city is very trying in these hot days. You must feel it after your lovely air at Kendal Hall," said Mary. "You look very fatigued, Miss Kendal."

"I feel it. May I remove my gloves?" said Frances, languidly.

She certainly looked very weary. But though pale, her face was the loveliest Mary had ever seen.

Her costly attire, the most elegant and approved of the spring fashions, became her rarely well, and showed every line and curve of her figure to perfection. When she drew off her gloves, Mary noted that there was but one ring on her left hand, Richard's betrothal circlet, likely—a gem of costly brilliancy, such as it befitted the beautiful daughter of Kendal Hall to wear.

"You are very retired here, considering how near you are to the city's centre," said Mrs. Kendal.

"Yes, we like Bingham Street. It suits Richard for business. Have you seen him to-day?"

"He called this morning just after breakfast, but he was to be occupied all day. We purpose going home to-morrow."

"So soon? Aunt Sara will be disappointed that she has seen so little of you," said Mary; and just then the door opened and Mrs. Blake entered the room. It was a trying moment for these four women, and, perhaps, poor Richard was best away. A keen glance, then a somewhat stiff bow, passed between the respective mothers, then Mrs. Blake turned almost sharply to the elegant figure leaning back languidly in Mary's low chair.

"Is this Frances?" she said, with eagerness, and Frances, rising, offered her cheek to be kissed by Richard's mother. Then they sat down and looked at each other rather stupidly for a few seconds, Mary nervously playing with the leaves of a plant in the jardiniere by her side.

"You have been in town all week, my son tells me," said Mrs. Blake at length. "You have been long in finding your way to Bingham Street."

"We have been so occupied, my dear Mrs. Blake," said Mrs. Kendal, with all the suavity of an accomplished woman of the world, "you really must excuse us this time. Won't you promise to come to Kendal Hall and bring your charming niece with you before the event takes place which is to unite our interests?"

"I cannot promise; I do not travel much—thank you;" said Mrs. Blake rather snappishly. Poor woman, she did not show to advantage. Her grave, stern face, her sombre and severely simple attire, presented an almost painful contrast to the brilliant appearance and youthful garb of Squire Kendal's handsome wife.

"Ah! but you will be persuaded; mustn't she, Frances?"

"Yes, mamma," said Frances, but without cordiality; and Mary felt how sorely lacking she was in respect to the mother of her future husband. It was an unsatisfactory, uncomfortable interview, and all were relieved when the visitors rose to take their leave.

"What stiff people! what a frightful old woman!" exclaimed Mrs. Kendal, with more energy than grace, when they reached the carriage waiting for them. "If you take my advice, Frances, you will not permit your mother-in-law to come very often to Brampton Square."

"I don't intend to, mamma," was Miss Kendal's reply.

"Nor that cousin either; she is one of the sly, soft, gentle things who can make all kinds of mischief and yet keep up their reputation as saints.

She has taught Richard to consider himself a paragon, born for the admiration and adoration of all womankind. You must disabuse his mind of that idea."

"I think I shall be able to manage my own affairs, mamma," said Frances irritably. She was all out of sorts, and did not trouble to hide it.

Meanwhile in the drawing-room they had just left, Richard's mother and Richard's cousin looked at each other blankly, for both were wofully disappointed.

"Miss Kendal is really beautiful," said Mary at length, in a cheerful voice.

"Don't speak to me, Mary. God forgive me if I judge harshly; but I prophesy that between them these two will break my son's heart," said the unhappy mother; and what could Mary say to comfort her when her own heart was as heavy as lead?

It fell to her lot to tell Richard of the ladies' visit. As was natural he was eager to hear all about it, and to be told what impressions had been made on either side. But Mary said very little, and it was not quite reassuring.

"Miss Kendal is so beautiful, Richard, I could scarcely lift my eyes from her face. But she seemed weary and out of sorts. I think it a pity they came alone. If you had been with them it would have been better for us all."

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST STING.

Oh! must the cup that holds
The sweetest vintage of the vine of life
Taste bitter at the dregs?—*Matthew Arnold.*

"I AM tired of this lounging about, Richard; let us go home."

The words were petulantly uttered, and the expression on the speaker's face was one of intense weariness and languor.

Not many young wives weary of the honeymoon trip before it is half over; but so it was with Frances Blake. They had been a fortnight on the Continent, and though a month had been the intended length of their holidays, the bride was already tired of sight-seeing, perhaps tired also of the companionship of her quiet, grave husband; although she loved him as well as it was in her nature to love any human being but herself. They were drifting idly in a little skiff on the beautiful lake of Geneva, above Vevay,

within sight of the lonely Castle of Chillon. It was a day of August's sunniest mood; unpleasantly hot on the dusty roads and exposed mountain sides, but deliciously cool on the lake where the gentlest of zephyrs moved the crystal waters into tiny ripples which glittered in the sun.

Richard Blake looked up suddenly and quickly, and the expression on his face was one of the most painful surprise. He was himself so unutterably, blissfully happy, that to him that quiet and lovely spot seemed the very gate of Eden: he so grudged the days passing one by one, that it was a shock to him to hear such words from his wife's lips. He bent towards her, laying his firm fingers on the dainty ungloved hand, and looked with tenderest solicitude into the lovely but discontented-looking face under the broad sun hat.

"My darling, you are tired; the heat has overpowered you," he said gently. "Let me row back to the chateau and you will lie down for an hour."

She shook her head impatiently.

"No, no! I am quite well; only it is so stupid here. There is nothing to see. Couldn't we go to Baden or some place where there is life? Why, Richard, what is the good of all my lovely dresses if we are to vegetate here all the time?"

"Perhaps I have been selfish, Frances. To be alone here with my wife has been and is to me unspeakable happiness. But I should have thought of you. If you wish it, dear, we can go on to-morrow anywhere you like. Nice will be very gay just now."

He spoke quietly and kindly, but his voice

betrayed his keen disappointment. To him the gaiety of such fashionable resorts would be irksome in the extreme, especially at the present time.

"I have been to Nice in the season before. Let it be Baden, Richard, dear. The Lancasters are there this month, and Colonel St. John and his daughters. Well, shall we go to-morrow?"

Her listlessness was gone. Her face was now lit by a sweet smile, her eyes sparkling and vivacious.

"To-morrow be it. I shall make arrangements when we land. Shall I steer for the shore now?"

"Not unless you wish it, dear," replied his wife, and stooping with matchless grace she touched with her lips the hand resting on hers.

Her husband scarcely smiled. For him the beauty was gone from sky and lake and shore. There was a shadow on the sunshine of his Eden now, for there crept into his heart the consciousness that the wife whom he loved so well, and for whom he had sacrificed much, had not given him all her heart in return. Life with him alone was not sufficient for her. They had been but two short weeks together, and already she was longing for change.

"And, Richard, dear, we will travel home by Paris, at the end of the month. Mrs. Lancaster promised to get me a maid in Paris—a sister of her Marie, who is a perfect treasure."

Richard Blake rested on his oars and looked again at his wife.

"What kind of a maid, Frances?"

"Why, a waiting-maid; a lady's maid, you stupid boy, to dress my hair and alter my gowns—an

indispensable article among a lady's possessions," she said gaily. But Richard looked grave almost to sternness.

"Frances, how many servants are engaged to come home to us already?"

"Only five, dear, and my maid will be six; they have more than a dozen at the Hall."

"Yes, but a city merchant's house and Kendal Hall are two different things, Frances. You know my income, and if you have even a slight knowledge of household management you must be aware that it would take fifteen hundred twice told to support such an establishment. I am sorry to grieve or disappoint you, my love, but you must not engage a Parisian maid, and one of the domestics already engaged must be dispensed with."

He spoke quietly but decidedly, for the time had come when he must lay a firm hand on the reins, else misery and confusion would ensue. It was a keen pain to him to speak thus, to see the hot flush mount to his wife's brow, and her eyes flashing with anger. It was very soon after marriage to have a difference of so serious a kind.

"Why, Richard, do you expect *me* to do the work of a housemaid in my new home?"

"Don't be absurd, Frances; there is no need for anything even approaching to that. I only ask my wife to be content with a quiet life for a time, and the large establishment will come all the sooner. Much as I love you, Frances, I cannot even for you go beyond the bounds of prudence and right, nor can I sacrifice my own self-respect."

Perhaps he spoke too sternly, but he was deeply hurt. His wife made no reply, but drawing her hat down over her eyes, turned from him and amused herself by dipping her hands in the shining water through which they were gliding swiftly to the shore.

"I think, Richard, we had *better* go home to London to-morrow," she said, as he helped her out at the little pier.

"Why, my darling?"

"Because we are spending money here every day!" she said coolly, and walked on to the chateau, leaving her husband to digest her ungenerous speech at his leisure.

He secured the little boat to its fastenings and proceeded slowly up the green slope to the garden of the chateau, with his head bent on his breast in deep thought. There was a rustic seat standing in the shelter of a tall almond tree in bloom, and there Richard sat down, and leaning his head on his hand tried to look into the future, to picture what his home life was likely to be with Frances Kendal. Their wills had clashed already; and on the subject of expenditure they could never hope to agree. What was to be done? It was a painful position for a newly-made husband; and already he was beginning to think that there was truth in the old saying that those who marry in haste repent at leisure. He would brook no delay, and his passionate love had blinded him to Frances Kendal's desire for wealth and ostentatious display of every kind. She was not of that sisterhood who for love can deny themselves, and make home

happy with their sweet unmurmuring content. Sitting there with a load of care and anxious forebodings on his heart Richard Blake prayed more earnestly than he had ever prayed before that he might be given strength to deal gently and lovingly, yet firmly, with the wayward being whose life was now linked to his. At whatever cost he must keep blameless in the eyes of God and of his fellow-men; there must be no incurring of debts which they could never hope to pay, no living beyond their means. On these points Richard Blake was firmly determined. He had a strong will, so also had his wife. It remains for us to see which conquered. Yet how he loved her; how unspeakably dear was every thread of gold on her queenly head! He would have willingly denied himself to give her a moment's pleasure. Would his love win her to a nobler womanhood, whose aim would soar higher than the latest styles in furniture and dress? Time would tell. He rose at length and sauntered into the house. In their private sitting-room he found his wife lying on a couch where, overcome by the sultry air, she had fallen asleep. It was a troubled sleep; and there were tears on the fair cheek and sparkling on the long lashes, which smote Richard Blake to the heart. Perhaps he had spoken harshly to his darling, for she, the petted. indulged child of a happy home had never heard a cross word, and doubtless the tender heart had been wounded by his abrupt and stern remarks about the servants. He knelt down by her and looked into her face with eyes so full of love that they seemed like some

magnet, for presently the golden head stirred on the pillow, and she looked up.

"Is it you, Richard; are you cross with me yet?" she asked, and one fair arm stole about his neck, while the uplifted eyes were filled with all the winning entreaty of a child.

"My darling, forgive me; I was a bear. I don't deserve such a sweet wife," he said; all the firm resolutions of an hour ago melting away in the radiance of that tremulous smile. So, like children at play, they made it up, and again Richard Blake was blissfully happy. Next morning saw them on their way to Baden, where for ten days they took part in all the gaiety of that gay and fashionable resort. At the end of that time they travelled with the Lancasters to Paris, where young Mrs. Blake engaged the sister of her friend's "treasure" as a maid. So she won the day. They arrived in London late on a Saturday evening; and as they were not expected until the beginning of the following week there was none to welcome them to their new home in Brampton Square. Richard only felt it for his wife's sake, but she was not one to fret over such trifles. She was so absorbed in seeing whether all her orders to the upholsterers had been fulfilled that she missed no familiar face in her new abode.

"By-the-by, what church do you attend, Richard?" she asked at breakfast on the following morning.

"St. Mark's Presbyterian, in Albion Road," he replied. "It is just half-way between Brampton Square and Bingham Street."

"A Presbyterian church! Oh, yes! I remember now; you told me that; but of course you will go with me now. I could never feel at home in a dull Presbyterian church. I was talking to Florence St. John about it. They go to St. Peter's, in Eton Square, and the service is deliciously High Church; suppose we try it this morning?"

Richard Blake was dumfoundered.

"But, Frances, is it not your duty to go with me?" he said with a slight smile.

His wife shrugged her dainty shoulders and laughed.

"Oh, come, Richard! you are not going to tyrannise about such a trifle? Suppose we split the difference then—you go with me to St. Peter's in the morning, and I'll go with you to St. Mark's in the evening when I am not too tired; will that do, you tiresome boy?"

She bent towards him with her bewitching smile, and pushed back his hair with her white, jewelled hand. Her caressing ways were irresistible as yet to her husband, so he kissed her and said they would try that experiment for a Sabbath or two at least.

And what of the mission in Seven Dials? What of that faithful band of workers who looked to him as their guide and head—what of the army of needing ones to whom in Sabbath evenings gone by he had been wont to break the Bread of Life? Must his labours among the outcast come to an end now simply because he had built up a home for himself? Was there not a greater call for him out of his abundant gratitude to continue his mission of mercy

to others less blessed than he? These thoughts occupied the mind of Richard Blake, and made the first Sabbath of his wedded life at home miserable and unsatisfactory. He had married a wife indeed, sweet and lovely and fascinating; but was she a helpmeet who would strengthen his feet in the upward way?

CHAPTER XI.

AT BRAMPTON SQUARE.

Oh! the crooked path is tempting,
In its wealth of summer bloom;
But its sunshine, false and smiling,
Must ere long change to gloom.

SAY, Mrs. Blake, don't you think, Mary—Miss Osborne, I mean—is working too hard? She looks ill, and even old; it's a confounded shame."

The speaker, as the reader may have already guessed, was no other than Harry Kendal. He had "dropped in," as he often did, at 10 Bingham Street, one evening, and had been struck by the change in Mary.

"I don't know, Harry. I see her every day, you know, and she always says she is quite well; but now that you speak of it, I do think she does not look so fresh as she did a year ago."

"I should think not either. What's she doing now? Oh, I hear the monotonous grind of the

five-finger exercise upstairs! How many pupils has she?"

"Only three. Mary is not a musician; and it is a task for her to teach music. Painting is her forte, you know; but music and drawing so often go together that she could scarcely get pupils for the one without the other," replied Mrs. Blake.

"I see," said Harry, grimly. "When did you see Dick, Mrs. Blake?"

"About a fortnight ago," replied Mrs. Blake, with a sudden hardness in her voice. "He called for a few minutes. As I said to him, he might as well live in the wilds of Siberia as a mile from us."

"Don't you ever go to Brampton Square?" asked Harry.

"No. Excuse me saying it, but I am not welcomed there. Mothers-in-law are best kept outside, Harry."

Harry bit his lip.

"Frances is a fool, Mrs. Blake. There's something wrong at the Square; I hate to go. There's something wrong everywhere. The world's all at sixes and sevens;" said Harry with an energy which made Mrs. Blake smile in spite of herself.

But there was truth in what he said. Of late there had been many discords, many heart-burnings both in Brampton Square and Bingham Street. But the worst had not come yet.

"When were *you* at Richard's, Harry?"

"To-day; but Frances was as cross as a bear, and Dick wouldn't speak. The only decent person in the house was Miss Annesley, an old school friend of Fan's; but she doesn't look as if she were

enjoying her visit immensely," said Harry. "Hulloa! the sweet symphonies upstairs have collapsed, and I hear the front door shutting. The lesson is surely short and sweet."

Just then the dining-room door opened and Mary entered. She smiled to see Harry, and gave him her hand cordially, as of yore. Yes, Mary was changed. The freshness of her youth seemed gone; her face was pale, and worn, and even sad. Of late old Time had not dealt tenderly with our gentle Mary.

"Why have you sent Julie away so soon to-night, dear?" asked Mrs. Blake.

"She had not practised, and my head ached so that I could not be so patient with her as I like to be, auntie," replied Mary. "Well, Harry, how have you been? What a long time it seems since we saw you!"

"I was here last week; do you think it long?" exclaimed Harry. "I say, you look wretchedly ill! It is a glorious night; you can feel the spring even in this smoky Babylon. Let me take you out?"

"Thanks; so I will. I want to go to Brampton Square to-night, Aunt Sara. I promised Richard. He said Mrs. Blake was wondering why I had not come to see them for so long."

Richard's wife was always spoken of as Mrs. Blake; even his mother never used her daughter-in-law's Christian name. That in itself told that there was a gulf between Brampton Square and Bingham Street. Yes, a gulf indeed; and growing wider every day!

Harry's face glowed with pleasure at the ready assent to his request. He had not outgrown his boyish passion for Mary Osborne; nay, it had grown stronger and deeper and more manly, and of late a new element had crept into it, a kind of protecting tenderness, such as strong men so often feel for gentle careworn women whom they would fain shelter from all the storms of life. Mary quickly made her toilet, and in less than fifteen minutes they were walking together by the quietest route to Brampton Square.

"I say, Mary, what do you suppose is up at the Square?" inquired Harry, abruptly leaving the subject of art and the approaching opening of the Academy which they had been discussing during the first part of their walk.

"Up at the Square! what do you mean, Harry?"

"Oh! Well, Dick and Fan don't seem to get on—do they now? not, at least, as I would like to get on if I had a house and a wife of my own."

Mary was too much troubled to smile at her companion's rather amusing way of expressing himself.

"If their happiness is not quite perfect, we cannot mend it by discussing it, Harry," she said; so gently that he could not take offence.

"Of course you are right—you always are; only I want to say that the blame isn't Dick's, it 's Fan's. It always is and always was. She wasn't the wife for him at all. He deserved a better."

"Oh, hush, Harry! Mrs. Blake is your sister," pleaded Mary.

"Yes, that's what makes me so mad at her when I look at Dick. He isn't the man he was. Well, I won't say another word—upon my honour I won't; but I say, Mary, how different you are from other women! They mostly like to discuss people's failings and differences, especially those of married people."

"Harry, our talk about the pictures was more edifying than this, wasn't it?" asked Mary with a little smile.

"Perhaps it was; but I won't talk another word about pictures. I want to talk about you," said Harry, daringly. "Do you know you are working too hard?"

"Am I? Who told you so?"

"I see it on your face. It can't go on, Mary, you know."

"Well, if it can't go on it must stop, I suppose," said Mary, smiling, still all unconscious of the drift of her companion's remarks.

"Yes, it's got to stop," said Harry with a kind of desperation. "I say, Mary, I know I am a fool. I know you are ten thousand times too good for me, but I *would* love and care for you—upon my honour I would; and you wouldn't have anything to do except keep me in order."

It was a proposal characteristic of the man—abrupt, impetuous, boyish, but sincere as he was to the very heart's core.

"Harry!"

Oh the deep distress in the voice and on the face of the woman by his side! That one word, that look told the downfall of all his hopes.

"Forgive me, Mary," he said humbly. "I—I—thought you didn't hate me. You seemed to like me to be with you. And I love you so dearly; couldn't you manage to put up with me? You might learn to care a little for me, by-and-by. I'd strive to be more worthy, and I'd be so good to you!"

"O Harry, Harry!"

The tears were overflowing now in Mary's eyes, and she stood still, for they were just entering Brampton Square, and as all the windows were closed in for the night, nobody could see them.

"My dear Harry, I am so sorry, I don't know what to say."

"Then you can't have me, Mary?"

There was something intensely pathetic in Harry's handsome face; he was in such terrible earnest.

Mary shook her head.

"I never suspected such a thing, Harry. I have been so grateful for your kindness, your care for me, never thinking what was in your heart. Forgive me if I have unwittingly encouraged you, or led you to hope that my answer would be different."

"You didn't; you are an angel. But tell me why you can't have me? Is there anybody else? That fright of a doctor with the eyeglass who comes to see Mrs. Blake?"

"No, no!"

Then Mary's eyes involuntarily travelled across the square to the stately mansion with the pillared doorway wherein dwelt Richard Blake and his

wife. That look was enough. The scales fell from the eyes of Harry Kendal.

"Of course it was Dick. What a fool I was. I had no chance beside him. Forgive me, Mary, and forget what I said," he said, quickly. "Let us be friends still; and let me assure you I never loved and reverenced you as I do now. You are the best and noblest woman on earth. Good-bye!"

So saying poor Harry wrung her hand and strode off to battle with his pain and manfully master it in solitude. Mary understood, for had she not passed through these very deeps herself? She was faithful to the one love of her life; the blessedness of womanhood had but whispered itself to her and for ever passed her by, but it had left her a better woman than it found her; to her sorrow had been sanctified indeed.

She walked slowly across the quiet square pondering the mystery of life. Oh but it was a ravelled skein! and but for her firm clinging to the mighty Hand which held it, she had lost her way altogether. Thus as we grow older, and sorrows thicken about our path, we feel more and more the unutterable need of a faith which will stand the test, which will sustain even when our eyes are blinded to the wherefore of much we see around us. Oh the sweet peace and blessedness of that faith, that calm trust in a Father who knows all about us, all our innermost needs and heart-longings, far better than we can tell Him! I think sorrow is the very pathway to the gate of heaven.

"Mrs. Blake is out, ma'am, but Mr. Blake is in the library. Will you see him?"

So said Mrs. Richard Blake's smart housemaid when she answered Miss Osborne's ring.

Many of young Mrs. Blake's fashionable friends wondered why she did not keep a footman. To their polite wonderings she would shrug her dainty shoulders and reply,

"Poor dear Mr. Blake has notions, you know. Likes woman servants about the house; and a man's prejudices, my dears, have to be overcome by degrees."

Ay, truly! And if women of Frances Blake's stamp (there are many such) would lay bare their married life to public gaze it would exhibit triumphs of diplomatic skill before which the tactics of the most brilliant statesman would pale.

Miss Osborne hesitated a moment. Her visit was intended for Richard's wife, not for Richard himself. But she knew he would be hurt if she did not wait to see him. Therefore she bowed assent, and the maid ushered her upstairs to the drawing-room. It was a magnificent and beautiful apartment, which would have borne favourable comparison with the neighbouring drawing-rooms in Park Lane. Mrs. Richard Blake had given one of the first-rate London upholsterers *carte blanche* to furnish her house, and when the bills came in to Richard Blake he stood aghast, for he had not the wherewithal to pay. So the young couple began life under the shadow of debt. It weighed lightly on Frances, because she had never learned through the fine experience of poverty the value of money; but it was a burden upon the mind of her husband,

day and night. Mary was not long left alone. In a few minutes she heard a footfall on the stairs, and the door opened to admit her cousin. He was in evening dress and looked every inch a gentleman, but he was not the Richard Blake of old. There were silver threads gleaming among the heavy dark hair and lines upon the broad open brow which thirty-three years of ordinary life could not have brought there. The anxious careworn mouth, the restless troubled eyes, told of inward care. At sight of his cousin the smile of old lit up his face, and he took her hands in a warm kindly clasp.

"Mary, it is good to see you," was all he said; but the words meant much.

"I came to see your wife, Richard," said Mary, quietly. "The maid tells me she is not at home."

"No. You will seldom find Frances at home of an evening. She receives on Wednesday afternoons. But you would not care, perhaps, to encounter her guests then. She and Miss Annesley have gone to spend a quiet evening at Lady Conroy's in St. James's Square. I promised to drop in late. Well, how has the world been using you? You look pale and wearied."

"So do you, Richard," replied Mary, with a slight smile. "But we are both growing old."

"I suppose so. The world seems changed since the old days at Bingham Street."

"I should imagine so. With a lovely wife and a house like this you should be a happier man, Richard."

"You think so?"

Richard Blake took a turn across the long room and then came back to the window. Then he stood a moment looking out on the network of fresh green boughs in the gardens of the square.

"Do you ever go down to the Dials Mission now, Mary?"

"Yes; every Sabbath evening."

"How is it getting on? Well, I hope?"

"Yes. But you are missed everywhere, Richard. They will never get a superintendent like you."

"Ah!"

After that brief exclamation from Richard Blake a long silence ensued.

"You understand, I suppose, what caused me to sever my connection with the Mission," he said at length.

"Perhaps I can guess. Is it not the same which caused you to change from St. Mark's church to St. Peter's?"

"Yes; and yet there is more. I believe that though my wife is desirous that I should appear with her at church on Sabbath mornings, she would not greatly care where I spent my evenings. But at the present time my life is such that were I to go down to the Dials and speak as I used to speak to the poor creatures there I should be acting the part of a hypocrite, Mary."

Mary Osborne shivered slightly, and her lips trembled.

"O Richard, that is a terrible thing to say."

"It is true," he said, bitterly. "Let me speak, Mary; it will relieve me, and I know you to be true as steel. At the present time I owe hundreds

of pounds at least. The debts have been chiefly incurred by Frances, but it is the same thing. To try and retrieve such a wretched position I have plunged into speculations, which are sometimes neither very safe nor strictly honourable, hoping for a chance in my favour. As yet I have had bad luck. The income I derive from my business scarcely pays the house rent and servants' wages; so that we are literally robbing trades-people to make an appearance before a world which does not care a straw whether we sink or swim."

"O Richard, Richard!" said Mary, in a kind of wail. "Do not tell me any more. Let me go. I cannot bear it; I cannot, indeed!"

"I have no home," continued Richard Blake, as if he had forgotten the presence of his cousin, "and a wife only in name. Our marriage is a mockery of the name. We——"

He stopped abruptly, for there was the noise of an arrival or an entrance downstairs.

"I hear my wife's voice," he said in surprise. "Something must have occurred to Lady Conroy. She is not strong. No; sit still, Mary. You must see Frances now. Assume for once, if you can, a little of society-hypocrisy, and look as if our conversation had been of the most commonplace kind."

CHAPTER XII.

A LOVELESS HEARTH.

Much must be borne which it is hard to bear,
Much given away which it were sweet to keep;
God help us all! who need indeed His care;
And yet I know the Shepherd loves His sheep.
Bulwer Lytton.

IN spite of her cousin's advice, Mary Osborne looked flushed and ill at ease when the ladies entered the room.

Richard's wife entered first, a fair vision in shimmer and sheen of satin, with rare jewels sparkling in her hair and at her throat. The hue of her dress was certainly dark, but its elaborate make and trimmings, and its sweeping train, made it suitable for any assembly, however gay and fashionable. Her face, though beautiful as of yore, was marred by its expression of discontent. Frances Blake was not a happy woman. She looked keenly from her husband to the lady sitting near him, recognised her by a distant bow, and threw herself

languidly into a chair. Then she seemed to remember the lady who had followed her into the room—

"I beg your pardon, Gertrude," she said, with the slightest approach to a smile. "Allow me to introduce you to Miss Mary Osborne, a connection of my husband's: Miss Annesley—Miss Osborne."

Mary turned with unspeakable relief to the gentle refined face of Gertrude Annesley, and, impelled by her frank and lovely smile, held out her hand.

Mrs. Blake smiled slightly at this breach of conventional manners; but Gertrude immediately took the offered hand and pressed it warmly. Their eyes met, and these two women, meeting thus for the first time, became friends, for the soul of each spoke to the other in the language of simplicity and truth.

"You are early home, Frances," said Richard Blake, as he placed a chair for Miss Annesley. "I trust you did not find Lady Conroy indisposed?"

"No; she was quite well when we went, but she took one of her hysterical fits, and we were glad to leave. We hurried home, thinking we might be in time to catch you for the Vaudeville. Lady Conroy raves about the new *comedienne* now appearing there," said Frances, looking straight at Richard.

He bit his lip, for her treatment of Mary was rude in the extreme.

"Three nights at the theatre in one week is quite enough, Frances." he said, coldly. "I am

sure Miss Annesley has no desire to see the new *comedienne*."

"I cannot say I have; but I am in your wife's hands, Mr. Blake," replied Gertrude in her quiet way. "But, Frances, you look tired. I think you would be best at home to-night."

The spoiled beauty shook her head impatiently.

"You are quite mistaken. I am never better than when in the midst of excitement and gaiety. I am a perfect butterfly. Had it not been for that tiresome Lady Conroy we might have enjoyed the pleasantest of evenings at Mrs. Lancaster's."

"My love!" said Richard Blake, rather nervously, "you have not asked Mary to take off her bonnet. If she would stay we could enjoy a pleasant evening with some music from you and a game at whist."

"If Miss Osborne is enchanted at the prospect of so much enjoyment let her take off her bonnet by all means. Be good enough to touch the bell, Richard, and Hervett will show her up to a dressing-room," said Frances Blake; and at her words her husband's brow grew dark.

Mary rose, her face flushing most painfully.

"I see I am intruding, Mrs. Blake," she said, with gentle dignity. "Had not Richard told me you wondered why I did not come oftener to Brampton Square, believe me, I should not be here to-night."

A slight flush tinged Frances Blake's cheek, and she bit her lip. She prided herself upon her perfect manners, and yet before this quiet, unobtrusive, yet thorough gentlewoman, she felt ashamed. Gertrude Annesley, looking and feeling intensely

uncomfortable, turned over the leaves of a book on the table beside her. She only looked up to return Mary's look and smile, and this time *her* hand was outstretched in token of farewell.

"I hope we may meet again," she said sincerely.

"Thanks; if you could spare the time my aunt and I would indeed be pleased to see you at 10 Bingham Street," replied Mary as sincerely; then, turning to Frances, she made her a bow as distant as her own and left the room—Richard following.

When the door was shut Gertrude closed her book and looked with sorrowful eyes into her friend's face.

"Frances! what do you mean? What has that sweet and gentle girl done to merit such rudeness at your hands?"

"Don't lecture me, Gertrude; you are deceived in her. She is one of those pretending saints who do so much harm in the world. My husband thinks her perfection; and I know compares her with me—therefore I hate her. She shall *not* come to my house. I believe Richard and she were sweethearts or something before; and I believe she adores him yet," said Frances passionately. "She will turn him against me. My marriage, Gertrude Annesley, was the grand mistake of my life."

"Why so, Frances? Your husband is noble and good, and he loves you devotedly. If your marriage is a mistake, the mistake is of your own making," said Gertrude with warmth. "It is wrong and sinful of you to speak in that strain."

"A great deal you know about it! Wait till you are fast tied to a man whose tastes, habits, and

disposition are as widely opposed, and we will see what you will make of it," said Frances, idly turning her rings round upon her slender finger. "Suppose we order the carriage again, and play the part of uninvited guests in Harley Street? Mrs. Lancaster would be charmed to see us. Richard is off to see his paragon home, and he will go in to the house with her, and with the aid of my respected mother-in-law they will sit in judgment on me as one of the ungodly. O you little fool! are these tears in your eyes? What are they for?"

"They are in pity for you, Frances; for I cannot see the end of the web of misery you are weaving for yourself with your own hands."

"I am content to drift with the tide, *ma chère.* I am a firm believer in a remorseless fate which has us in its grasp, and we cannot escape if we will. That doctrine, that our lives are all mapped out for us, is a very consoling one for those who, like me, strand on the rocks of matrimony."

"It is also misleading, Frances," said Gertrude, gravely. "It may be true in one sense that our lives are ordered for us, but it is also true that we hold the making or marring of them in our own hands. I know you well, so I am not afraid to tell you that you make no attempt whatever to make either yourself or your husband happy. You appear to me to live only to oppose his wishes."

"Indeed! let me lay some of my husband's *wishes* before you, Gertrude, and see whether even you would conform to them all. It would please my husband were I to dismiss all my domestics but one, and myself superintend the cooking of his dinner.

It would please him to see the horses sent to Tattersall's and the carriage back to Drewette's. He would wish me to go to church three times a day and teach a ragged school at night; to hold prayer meetings in my drawing-room and old wives' tea-parties in the kitchen. He would never let me inside a theatre or a concert-room, or permit me to enjoy myself in any way. If I could succumb to all that then I might enjoy the felicity of knowing I was coming nearer his ideal of wifehood. But in the meantime I do not intend to emulate such an ideal, even from afar."

Gertrude Annesley sighed, for she could make nothing of this wayward creature. and such discussion could not mend matters. Therefore to end it she opened the piano and began to play, while Frances still toyed idly with the jewels which, because they were not all paid for, she had no right to wear, her heart full of bitterest, most unhappy feelings. Oh! but she was heaping up a great burden of pain to recoil upon her in days to come.

Meanwhile Richard and Mary were walking together through the streets in constrained and uncomfortable silence. For both the beauty of the summer night was gone, and life seemed a bitter tree, whose fruitage was only sorrow and heartache and pain.

"Dare I ask you, for my sake, Mary, to forgive my wife?" asked Richard at length, in a low and troubled voice.

"Do not speak of it, if you please, Richard," she said, very gently. "You know me well enough to

be sure that there is no bitterness in my heart, but only a vast pity for you both."

"You see what my home life is," continued Richard, gloomily. "In addition to the burden imposed by our extravagant living I have the misery of a loveless marriage to contend against. My wife does not, and I believe never did, care for me. I have tried every means to win her. I have been gentle and kind and indulgent—too much so, I find now, when it is too late."

"Richard! I have no right to listen to you speaking so of your wife," said Mary pleadingly. "Spare me, Richard, and her. She would not like it."

"I am not speaking evil of her, Mary, only simple truth; and it is an unspeakable relief. Do not deny me your sweet sympathy. It is the only oasis in the desert. I know my innermost thoughts are safe with you. I would not have my mother know we are so unhappy for the world."

"She shall never know from me. I will hope and pray for you, Richard," Mary said very low, and unknown to him even then an unspoken prayer underlay the words.

Richard's marriage had been a sore blow to Mary Osborne, but to be made the *confidante* of the misery of his married life was harder still. For such a trial prayer was needed, else she could not have borne it.

"We are perfect strangers, my wife and I," continued Richard Blake; "she never consults me. She goes where she likes, asks whom she pleases to the house, orders what she wills. There can only be one ending to her extravagance, Mary——"

"What?" asked Mary with a start.

"The Bankruptcy Court; which would probably be followed by a separation, seeing that Frances, on her own confession, is not cut out for the *rôle* of a poor man's wife."

"Richard, you must go away; I shall not hear any more," said Mary, and stood still at the entrance to Bingham Street. "I do not like to say it, but I think you are to blame also. You have been weak where you ought to have been strong. No man should allow his wife to become so completely mistress. Do not blame her altogether; be gentle with her, Richard, and remember that perhaps instead of helping her to a better way you have hindered her in it by weak indulgence. Now, good-night; I cannot listen to you again, Richard, for between husband and wife no third person has a right to interfere. Only God comfort and help you and her."

She left him standing there and went slowly on towards the house. Her heart was a chaos of bitterness and sorrow and yearning compassion; and uppermost in her mind, above even anything Richard had said, were the prophetic words of Holy Writ:—

"A house divided against itself shall not stand."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DARKEST HOUR.

And life is thorny, and youth is vain;
And to be wroth with one we love,
Doth work like madness in the brain.
S. T. Coleridge.

WHEN Richard Blake reached his home that night he found that his wife and her friend had gone to spend an hour at the house of Mrs. Lancaster in Harley Street. It was already late in the evening; but early hours were not kept in Brampton Square, Mrs. Blake seldom returning home till midnight. Richard Blake wandered listlessly through the deserted house, and finally came down to the library, where some of his business books and papers waited his attention. But though he sat down and placed them before his eyes he could not fix his mind upon them. Yet they sorely needed calculation and deep thought, for the affairs they represented were in a state of strange

confusion. There were burdening cares in the office as well as in the home.

Richard Blake was much annoyed to hear that his wife had gone to Mrs. Lancaster's. She was a woman of frivolity and fashion, not at all particular about the circle of her friends, provided they were rich and gay. Consequently very objectionable people were occasionally to be met with in her house. Her husband was known upon the Stock Exchange as a most unprincipled speculator, who had amassed a fortune by trading upon the weaknesses and failings of his fellows. At Sutton-le-Willows, where they had their country seat, they had not been received into the best circles, and in London, of course, they hung upon the skirts of society. But Frances Blake, reckless in her love of gaiety and display, had grown less particular about the character or social position of her acquaintances, and was Mrs. Lancaster's bosom friend.

It was of course a subject of frequent remark that Mrs. Blake was so often seen alone in public; and the scandalmongers were not slow to say that she and her husband lived unhappily together. Only a few days previously Richard Blake had just pleaded with, and then commanded, her to cease her intimacy with this lady, and it was as gall to him to have this new proof of how little store his wife set by his wishes. His cousin's words of gentle reproof had gone home, and sitting there in his loneliness he reviewed the past three years, and took himself to task for his share in the unhappiness of the present. It was true what Mary had said. He had been weak at the beginning, when a little

firmness mingled with gentleness might have won the day. Too easily he had let go his hold upon all the earnest and much blessed Christian labours in which he had been engaged previous to his marriage; too easily had the world and the things that are in the world encompassed him and ensnared his heart away from higher good. Instead of guiding and directing his wayward wife, he had allowed himself weakly to be led until he lost control of her in every respect, until they were so hopelessly involved in a frivolous and extravagant way of life that it was well nigh impossible to draw back. But the end was at hand. Some day very soon the crash must come, and the old and honourable house with which he was connected would be dishonoured in commercial circles, and made the common talk of the Bankruptcy Court. Ruin, ruin stared him in the face. Overcome by all these thoughts Richard Blake buried his face in his arms on the table, and a deep groan escaped his lips. He was almost in despair, and in all the wide world there was none to help or speak a kindly word. Ah, no! the world would have nothing but condemnation for him; it would point the finger of scorn at him, and tell how he lived in princely style, riding through life in a carriage, robed in purple and fine linen for which the poor and the honest had to pay. To a man of Richard Blake's mental calibre such thoughts were fraught with keenest agony. Cares could not sit lightly upon him; to him life had ever been a thing of terrible earnest, and it was a great mystery how he had ever been led into such a maze of sin and shame.

Such instances of a man of strong individuality being held in thrall by the influence of a woman have their parallel in every day life. A woman's power is well nigh boundless: let her see to it that it be used wholly for good, else great will be her condemnation.

Shortly after midnight the roll of carriage wheels broke the stillness of Brampton Square, and in a few minutes Richard Blake heard the opening of the hall door and the ladies entering the house. They went directly upstairs, and shortly afterwards he put out the library gas and followed them. In her dressing room, as he expected, he found his wife. She had removed her jewels and thrown off her rich attire, and having dismissed her maid, was sitting idly by the fire with her golden hair all unbound falling like a cloud of glory around her. Oh, but she was fair; lovely enough to turn any man's head! but for Richard Blake the beauty of that face seemed gone, and the brief passion of a day had well-nigh burnt out upon his loveless hearth. She looked round carelessly at his entrance, then reached for a novel from the mantel, opened it and began to scan its pages. Her husband moved over to the hearth and stood there looking down upon her with so intense and earnest a gaze that somehow her eyes were presently raised to meet his.

"Why do you look at me so?" she asked pettishly. "How wretched you look! Are you ill?"

"No," he said, in a voice of curious calm. "You have been at Mrs. Lancaster's to-night again, Frances, I am told."

"Yes; and a most enjoyable evening we spent—Gertrude was quite charmed," said she defiantly.

"I do not believe it. So lovely and pure minded a girl as Miss Annesley would find nothing in common with a woman of Mrs. Lancaster's stamp. May I ask if it is your intention to retain her as your bosom friend in spite of my earnest desire to the contrary?"

"I cannot for a whim of your prejudice, give up the friendship of one who has shown me so much kindness since I came to London," replied Frances, sullenly. "I see no harm in her."

"I have heard her spoken of as I should not like *you* to be spoken of," said Richard Blake. "Yet when you are such close friends I can hardly hope that you have escaped."

Mrs. Blake abruptly changed the subject.

"Well, did you see your paragon cousin safely home? and did you enliven your walk by discussing my faults and failings?" she asked mockingly.

"You made me blush for you to-night, Frances," was the cold reply. "Not one of your servants would have been guilty of such rudeness as you showed Mary to-night."

"I don't like her, never did, and never shall; and whatever my faults, I am honest and open as the day. I cannot put on a mask of friendship when I feel none," said Frances carelessly. "Of course you compared her with me greatly to her advantage, and pictured what a beautiful and good life you could have lived with her if you had married her instead of me. It is a pity for us both that you did not think of that in time."

A flush rose to Richard Blake's brow and dyed it red. How very near his wife's words had hit the mark even she did not guess. She mistook the flush for one of anger, and fearing lest she had gone too far, once more abruptly changed the subject.

"Where shall we go this summer?" she asked. "I was thinking of Scarborough. I have not been there since I was a young girl. I remember it as a lovely place."

"We cannot go anywhere this year, Frances," said Richard Blake coldly. "You will have to be content with a visit to Kendal Hall."

A frown gathered on the brow of Frances Blake.

"It is the same story every year!" she said, passionately. "You grudge me everything; but I *will* go—and with Mrs. Lancaster too! She is to put up at the Grand Hotel to be saved housekeeping worries."

During the outbursts of his wife's passionate temper he generally preserved a prudent silence; but to-night it was doubly hard.

"God knows, Frances, I would grudge you nothing if I had the wherewithal to pay," he said at length in low hoarse tones. "I have frequently warned you before of the probable ending of our mode of life, and implored you to retrench for a time. You would not listen; and now nothing on earth can arrest the calamity which will overtake us. Before the holiday season commences we will be in the *Gazette*, and the chances are that I may be charged with fraudulent bankruptcy."

The book fell from the young wife's hands, and

the lovely bloom faded from her cheek, leaving it deathly pale.

"You are telling me the truth, Richard?" she asked faintly.

"I would to God I could say otherwise, Frances."

Then there was a long silence, during which Richard stood with his face still covered, while his wife gazed blankly into the dancing flames.

"Papa will help us surely?" she said at length.

"He has helped me frequently. But seeing plainly that he was but throwing his money to the winds he refused some time ago to advance any further sums. I cannot blame him. We who have sinned must suffer the consequences," was Richard's reply; and again there was a long silence.

"I wish I had died before I married you, Richard Blake," came at last passionately from his wife's lips, and she burst into a flood of tears.

He looked at her for a few minutes in silence, then his heart yearned over her, and he went close to her and put one arm about her shoulders. Even when she wounded him most deeply he would not turn from her. He would try once more the power of gentleness and love.

"Frances, my darling, this is no time for recrimination. Let us try to look calmly at the future, and see what is to be done. Though we may be stripped of all our worldly goods we have each other left, and it is possible to build up a new life from the ruins of the old, which may be sweeter and dearer and more noble because our hearts are only purified by the bitter experiences of the past," he said gently, yet with yearning passion in his voice.

She remained for a little passive in his embrace. If in that moment her heart was touched the brief softening swiftly passed away, and she rose with a gesture of weariness.

"It is no time either for sentimental talk. The time for that is over for you and me, Richard. I am going to bed. My head aches so I can scarcely see," she said coldly, and moving over to the dressing-table began to put her jewels in their cases, looking at them admiringly the while, for soon they would be wrested from her. Her husband then quitted the room and went down once more to the library. In his present state of mind he could not sleep, and the sweet spring dawning found him pacing restlessly up and down the long room. During the silent watches of the night some unseen hand had surely drawn some deeper furrows on his brow, for his face was as that of an old man.

The sufferings of a lifetime had been crowded into that brief space, and Richard Blake never could look back upon it without horror. When brighter days dawned for him he was wont to say that that was the only period of his life when he felt himself abandoned of both God and man. But with the dawning the light shone in and found him on his knees.

CHAPTER XIV.

UNPALATABLE TRUTHS.

He entered his home—his home no more,
For without hearts there is no home; and felt
The solitude of passing his own door
Without a welcome.—*Byron.*

IN his office in Mark Lane sat Richard Blake on one of the loveliest of June mornings. A pile of letters lay on the desk before him; but on one particular document his troubled eyes were bent, and his face wore an expression of perplexity amounting to despair. It was a bill which would fall due upon the Friday, and this was now Wednesday. It was for a very large amount, and failure to meet it meant immediate exposure of the state of his affairs. The sooner the better, thought Richard Blake; and yet, like others who have been honoured in the commercial world, and who by misfortune or through their own folly have immersed themselves in such a sea of difficulty, he had a most painful shrinking from the crash which

must come. Sitting there in his solitude, a thought which carried some hope in its train flashed across his mind. Down at Walton-on-Thames dwelt Mr. George Devonshire, the former head of the firm, an old bachelor, who had amassed an enormous fortune, and who, though several years had elapsed since the severance of his connection with Devonshire & Blake, might yet retain sufficient interest in the concern to be willing to save it from disgrace.

No sooner did the idea of applying to Mr. Devonshire occur to Richard Blake than he put it into execution. The noon train took him down to Walton-on-Thames, and he was at Devonshire House early in the afternoon.

Its master was at home, the servant said, busy among his flowers, which were his hobby, and upon which he spent a great amount of money. It was his only expensive taste, for he was a man of simple, almost austere habits; for the enforced self-denial of his early years had taken so firm a hold, that even when affluence came it did not bring the desire to spend with it.

Mr. Blake was shown into the library, and it was not long before his former principal joined him there. He was an old, hard-looking man, for he had long since passed the allotted span, and though he had never been robust, his abstemious and simple way of life had preserved him in good health even in his old age. He was dressed in a suit of rough tweeds, his hands were sunburned and hardened by his constant labour in the garden, and a big sun hat shaded his withered features. From underneath it there peered out a pair of grey eyes, which had lost

none of their early keenness of perception. He looked immeasurably surprised to see Richard Blake at that hour.

"Hulloa! what's up?" he said, gruffly; and taking off his hat, rubbed the perspiration from his brow with his silk pocket-handkerchief. "You look ill, Blake. Quite an old man since I saw you last."

"A harassed and troubled mind ages one before his time, Mr. Devonshire," replied Richard Blake. "I will go at once to the point. I am in trouble, and have come to you for help."

Mr. Devonshire did not at once reply. Rumours had reached him from time to time regarding the embarrassments of his old firm, but he had not credited them. Even now he attributed Blake's trouble to something else. Some of his city friends who came occasionally to Devonshire House had given him an inkling of the state of Richard Blake's domestic affairs.

"Well, well; glad to help if I can. What kind of trouble is it, Blake? Domestic—eh? I've heard your wife is a high-flying dame. If you had taken my advice, Blake, you'd have kept clear of womankind. They're the source of all evil. Do you suppose that if I'd had a wife and a lot of extravagant, strong-headed boys and girls I'd enjoy such a peaceful old age? Not I. But come, what's bothering you now?"

"It is not domestic but business cares which are annoying me at the present time," said Richard Blake, though he could with truth have said both. Then, without further parley, he laid before Mr. Devonshire a plain and unvarnished statement of

the affairs of his firm. The old man's face while he listened was a study. Occasionally he would put some abrupt, curt question, but he made no comment until Richard Blake ceased speaking. Then he rose, and began to walk up and down the room with his hands folded behind his back.

"Do you know what you deserve, Blake?" he said at length, pausing in front of the unhappy man before him, with a look on his face before which Richard Blake's eyes fell.

He made no answer.

"I laboured and toiled for fifty years, Richard Blake, to make that business what it was," he said, in slow, measured tones, which Richard Blake knew of old. "I made my fortune in it, certainly, but it was after the best years of my life had been spent in poverty—poverty, mark you—for I made a suit of clothes serve me for two or three years. I lived, as you know, in rooms above my warehouse, because I could not afford to pay a house rent. I kept my own books, attended to all my own correspondence even long after I could have afforded to pay somebody else to do it, and that is how I made my fortune. I made that business from its very foundation, reared it out of nothing, and I was proud of it—of course I was; I had a right to be; it was my life work, and where is it to-day?"

He paused in his indignation, and Richard Blake involuntarily rose. It had been a grand mistake to come to old George Devonshire with the story of his business cares.

"Sit down; I may as well tell you what I think of you when I'm at it," continued the old man,

with the same bitterness. "Well, when you came to me a little lad, I said to myself, 'I like this boy, I'll train him up in the faith. I'll teach him the secret of success, and then, if he is worthy, I'll give him the whole concern when I'm done with it.' Well, I *did* train you; I taught you how to succeed in the commercial world, and, when the time came, I gave you the business, and retired with an easy and satisfied mind, thinking you would prove worthy of my confidence, and that Devonshire incorporated with Blake would still be an honoured name in the commercial world. I was a fool. I might have known you couldn't stand on your own feet, that you'd marry, and let a woman squander the whole concern. Yes, I was a fool; I'd have had more satisfaction to-day if I'd sold the whole concern to the highest bidder."

Richard Blake sat silent under the weight of the old man's scathing rebuke.

"I wouldn't have minded you marrying if you'd waited till you had years on your head, and had taken a prudent, sensible, economical woman like that cousin of yours. She's the only worthy member of the sex I ever met. But no, you had to go courting above your station, and marry a silly, vain, empty-headed thing, who, you might have known, would bring disgrace and ruin to you. No, Richard Blake, I might have helped you out of any reasonable difficulty, but to bolster up a tottering concern, rotten at the core, would be throwing money to the winds, and would do no good to you or any other person."

Again Richard Blake rose and began to move to

the door. That his spirit was miserably crushed was evidenced by the fact that he had no word to say in self-defence—none, for every word which passed George Devonshire's lips was but bare and simple truth.

"Before you go let me give you a piece of advice, Blake," said the old man. "After the failure (you won't likely get a settlement) look out for a place as clerk or manager to some other person; you haven't sufficient balance to stand on your own legs; and when you've left your fine house and given up all your party-going and party-giving, don't forget the lesson of the past. Try and remember, and teach your wife and your children, if you have any, to remember, that, if you want to live a peaceful and happy old age, free from unpleasant memories, you must live honestly in the sight of all men, and give every man his due. There is one text I would recommend to your consideration: 'Owe no man anything, but to love one another.' If report speaks truly, the latter part of it is as applicable to your case as the former."

He had had his say and now allowed Richard Blake to depart. He had not spared him, but he had spoken out of the sincerity of his heart. If there was one sin more heinous than another in the eyes of George Devonshire, it was the sin of a man living beyond his means—spending what was not his own, forgetting the principles of honour and honesty in the love of ostentatious display. It was the vice of the age, he was wont to cry; and he never ceased to lay it down as his maxim that, supposing a man's income to be twenty shillings a

week, whatever the claims upon him he was in duty bound to live upon nineteen. It was the faithful, unflinching carrying out of that principle, he was also wont to say, which had enabled him to rise from abject poverty to affluence, from obscurity to an honourable position in the world.

In no enviable frame of mind was Richard Blake on his way back to town. He was crushed, humbled to the very dust. He could almost have prayed for death. I believe there is no greater mental anguish than that endured by men of Richard Blake's calibre when they find themselves upon the eve of bankruptcy, especially if it has been in a measure their own doing. It is no marvel that some seek relief, or rather oblivion, in self-destruction, for the load of their agony is more sometimes than the human heart can bear. But Richard Blake, though utterly crushed, was not coward enough to take, or even think of taking, his own life. There were germs of manly independence, of a noble spirit, in him still, which would assert themselves after the worst was past. He did not again seek his office, but went straight from the station to Brampton Square to acquaint his wife with the fact that on the morrow he intended to place his books in the hands of a firm of solicitors, and announce the state of his affairs to his creditors. He forgot that this was her reception-day, and that the house would probably be filled with the giddy throng who were wont to spend an hour or two at Mrs. Blake's "Wednesday afternoon." The sight of several carriages at the door, however, brought the fact to his mind, and the shadow deepened on

his face. His warning to his wife had been fruitful of no good; she had not for a moment changed the tenor of her way. Nay rather, she became gayer than ever since that painful evening, as if determined to enjoy to the uttermost the brief time she had to spend in her luxurious home. He hesitated a moment whether he should return to the city; but finally he entered the house, opening the door with his own latch-key. He went straight to the library and, ringing the bell, ordered some refreshment to be brought to him there. When he had partaken of it he went upstairs to his dressing-room to wash the dust of his journey from his hands and face. As he passed the drawing-room, the door being slightly ajar, he had a good view of the interior. It was full of guests; among whom he recognised Mrs. Lancaster, and others of that objectionable set. At her dainty tea-table sat Frances, attired in an elegant costume of silk and velvet, and looking the picture of animation and beauty. Looking upon that unclouded face, hearing the sweet music of her laugh, who would have thought that such a shadow hung over her. Ah! but young though she was, Frances Blake was an inimitable actress, and it is thus every day the world is deceived! An exceedingly bitter smile touched Richard Blake's lips as he turned away. Would anything touch that vain and frivolous heart? was there a power on earth strong enough to awaken her to the reality of life? No; but the day was coming when the Word of God, sharper than a two-edged sword, was to pierce the heart of Richard Blake's wife.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FINAL CRASH.

Though dark, and thorny, and rough the way,
O lose not faith, my friend!

AT breakfast in the morning-room at Kendal Hall sat the squire and his wife, discussing the affairs of their daughter's husband. By the morning mail a letter had come from Frances stating that as circumstances demanded that they should leave the house in Brampton Square, she was coming down to Kendal Hall for an indefinite time. There was no mention made of her husband, or what he was to do in her absence; the letter was full of self, of her discontent, her grievances, her indifferent health. Mrs. Kendal was full of most anxious solicitude concerning her daughter: but the squire's face, when he perused the characteristic epistle, wore a peculiar expression, in which scorn largely commingled.

"A nice, dutiful kind of wife Frances has been

to poor Blake," was all his remark, as he tossed the letter aside and went on with his breakfast.

"What do you mean, Harry?" asked his wife rather indignantly. "I am sure Frances has made a good mistress of his house. He may be proud of her. She is greatly admired in London."

"It depends upon what constitutes a good mistress of a house," said the squire drily. "My ideas may be old-fashioned, out of date in this railroad age, but to my thinking a *good* wife is one who has her husband's best interests at heart and who regulates the expenses of the household according to the amount of his income. Frances's reckless expenditure since her marriage has been a shame and disgrace, and you have encouraged her in it, Maria."

It was not often that the good-natured Squire spoke out thus plainly, but it had a visible effect upon his haughty wife.

"Well, well, Harry, supposing she has been a trifle extravagant, let us excuse her on account of her youth and beauty. She will learn experience by-and-by," she said in a conciliatory tone. "Let us leave discussion of Frances's faults and failings and consider what is to be done. The question is, Are you quite agreeable to face the disgrace of seeing your son-in-law in the Bankruptcy Court?"

"It cannot be averted now, Maria," was the Squire's unsatisfactory reply.

"Really, Harry, you are most absurd. Do you mean to say you are not going to help them?" exclaimed Mrs. Kendal, impatiently.

"Bless me, Maria, am I made of money?

Haven't Blake and Frances between them squandered two thousand pounds of mine already? No; I'm not going to help them. They've brought it on themselves, and they richly deserve to taste poverty now."

Mrs. Kendal sat silent, wondering what she should say next. Really, the Squire was in a very perverse, headstrong mood this morning.

"Look here, Maria. Try and take a sensible view of things," said the Squire. "Supposing, now, that I was to set Blake so far on his feet again that there would be no need for them to leave their house, no need for a public exposure of any kind, would they change their mode of life, think you? Would they lessen their expenditure and be content with ordinary comforts? No; because they would get off too easily, without having learned the value of money. Therefore, I hold that if I stand aloof and allow them to depend on their own exertions, I am proving myself their best friend. Poverty is a fine school for such as Frances, and were it not that she is my daughter I'd not let her come here just now. She has no right to leave her husband in the midst of the ruin she has so largely helped to bring upon him."

The Squire paused, breathless with his long speech, and, as if fearing the result of his plain speaking, rose and left the room.

His wife sat long alone, pondering the thing and trying to contrive some means of averting the inevitable. It even occurred to her to apply to her cousin, the Peer, but on second thoughts she concluded that an application of that kind would

not be likely to raise her family in the eyes of the Earl.

At that very hour Richard Blake and his wife were sitting at an uncomfortable, unsociable breakfast in the morning room of their house in Brampton Square. Between them there seemed to be a great gulf fixed, which widened every day. Richard looked anxious and harassed, Frances pale and out of sorts.

Since they sat down at the table not a word had passed between them. When the silvery chime of the timepiece rang nine Richard Blake rose.

"You will excuse me rising, Frances. It is imperative that I should be in my office at half-past nine. I have much to arrange before the meeting at twelve o'clock," he said quietly. He referred to a meeting of his creditors to be held at noon that day.

"Don't apologise; I have finished," she replied. "When will you be home for dinner?"

"It will probably be late; don't wait for me," he answered, and turned upon his heel to quit the room.

"Richard, could—could you give me some money to-day?" asked his wife.

"How much?"

The question was uttered in a curt, brief way, which made her wince.

"A few pounds; I—I forgot to tell you I had written to mamma promising to go home to-day," she said in rather a constrained voice.

"Home!" repeated her husband. "Oh, yes, to Kendal Hall, I presume you mean?"

"Yes, and I have not enough to pay my fare to Sutton," she said in rather an aggrieved fashion.

"How much is it?"

"11s. 6d."

He took out his purse, and laid a sovereign on the table.

"I cannot give you any more. When do you mean to return?"

"I don't know; I have not thought about my return."

Richard Blake stood a moment with his eyes bent upon the floor.

"Have you given the servants notice to quit, Frances?"

"Yes, a fortnight ago. Their time will be up on the 27th."

"I presume you will not be back by that time; that it is your intention to remain at the Hall until it is all over."

"Perhaps it would be better."

"For you, perhaps it would," he replied, with a touch of scorn in his voice. "I was foolish to expect any consideration at your hands; but there have been instances when a man turned, and not in vain, to his wife for comfort at a time like this."

"Of course, if you insist upon me staying, I shall," said Frances irritably; "but really I could do you no good, and probably would just fret myself to death."

"I do not insist upon it," replied Richard Blake, "go by all means, and enjoy yourself if you can."

"You will come down sometimes?" she asked.

"It is not probable. I cannot afford to spend a

guinea a week for travelling as I once could. When my affairs are all wound up and I have decided what to do, I shall come and see you, Frances—not till then."

There was a moment's silence. Both felt constrained, and Frances Blake's conscience was busy at work. She did not require to be told that at such a time her place was at her husband's side, and that it was her duty to try to atone in some degree for the past. But selfishness prevailed. She thought of all the pleasant luxury of her early home, of her indulgent parents, of the blessed freedom from care of every kind, contrasted all these with the gloom of her own home, with her harassed, careworn husband with his quiet scorn and few but biting words, and her heart was hardened.

"When do you go?" he asked presently, opening the door.

"At one o'clock."

"Ah, I shall just be facing my ordeal then," he said bitterly. "It is pleasant to be a woman, to run away from such disagreeable things. Well, good-morning."

"Good-bye, Richard; try and not be vexed with me," she said, and coming towards him held up her face to be kissed.

"Vexed with you! God knows I am not, Frances. I have more need to pity you. May God pity and help us both," he said with a strange sad smile, and bending forward lightly kissed not her lips but her brow. Then he went away.

When the door closed upon him, Frances began to cry helplessly, she did not very well know what

for, but her tears were of short duration, and in an hour she was busy with her packing, her heart full of pleasant visions of home.

Late that night a visitor came to 10 Bingham Street in the shape of Richard Blake. Mrs. Blake the elder, who had failed very much of late, was already in bed, but Mary was still in the dining-room poring over a book. She started up when the bell rang, and when Richard Blake entered the room she looked unutterably surprised. He was haggard and worn, and his face bore traces of the keenest mental anguish.

"Richard, what is it? What has happened? Is your wife ill?" she exclaimed in alarm.

"No, has my mother gone to bed?"

"About an hour ago. It is nearly eleven, Richard."

"Is it? I seem to have lost count of time. I 'm glad my mother is in bed. I can talk more freely to you. Well, Mary, it is all over now."

"I was thinking of you and praying for you to-day, Richard. How has it gone with you?"

"Fairly well, the world would say. They were very lenient with me. I 've got a settlement, which I didn't deserve; but some of them, remembering what I used to be, took pity on me."

Mary breathed a sigh of relief.

"From what you said the last time I saw you, I feared you would not get a settlement. Well, you must cheer up now and begin again," said she hopefully. "The future may be very bright yet."

Richard Blake listlessly shook his head. He seemed like a man utterly crushed, out of whom the

very spirit of manliness had gone. It was but the reaction after the unnatural excitement, the fierce mental strain, which he had endured so long.

"Oh, nonsense, Richard; don't shake your head so dolefully. Many have failed in business and succeeded again. You know that. Why should you be so downcast? How is Frances? Bearing up well, I hope? I would have come to Brampton Square, Richard, but for fear of intruding."

"Frances! I don't know. She is off, you know, to Kendal Hall."

"Off! Has she left you, Richard, at a time like this?" exclaimed Mary, unable to hide her feelings.

"Yes, a devoted wife, isn't she, Mary?"

Mary Osborne was silent. She would not unite in condemning, but she could find no words to justify the conduct of Richard's wife.

"I've made up my mind, Mary. I shall just wait to see the house sold off and other things wound up; then I'm off to the Cape," said Richard presently.

"To the Cape!" repeated Mary blankly. "Will Frances go?"

"Frances! no. She has left me. She did not even say she intended to return," he said bitterly. "I am in earnest, Mary. I will *not* continue in business here—I should never succeed. Confidence in me is lost, and I could never regain the position I once occupied in the commercial world."

"And nothing less would content you. You are very proud still, Richard," said Mary sadly.

"Am I? God knows I have little enough to be proud of. What a wretched life this is, Mary! At

times one does not care how soon it comes to an end."

"We hold the making or marring of it largely in our own hands," said Mary. "In spite of all this trouble, Richard, don't lose faith in God's goodness. There will be better days in store."

"I wish I could think it. Oh! Mary, what would I not give if Frances were a woman like you!"

"Hush, hush, Richard," pleaded Mary, "don't lose faith in your wife; her heart will turn to you yet."

"If it would I would have an incentive to go on. Frail though she is, Mary, my heart clings to her with a fearful yearning. It is her coldness which has made my despair so hopeless."

"If you go away to the Cape her heart will waken to its love, Richard. I do not despair of seeing you happy together yet. This is a fierce discipline, Richard, but like the pruning knife it may be for lasting good."

Richard Blake rose, and the look of hopeless despair was gone from his face, and a brighter, better light shone upon it.

"God bless you, Mary, my more than sister. It is such as you who preserve our faith in womanhood," he said hoarsely. "I shall see you again. Good-night!"

"Good-night, dear Richard," said Mary, with earnest shining eyes. "May He help and guide you and Frances through these thorny ways, and in His own time give you peace."

When she was left alone she fell upon her knees and prayed long and earnestly that these lives so

dear to her, so nearly shipwrecked, might be yet bound together by the cords of love, and be able to breast bravely the world's stormy sea.

Surely since the prayer of the righteous availeth much, that heartfelt petition was heard and answered.

CHAPTER XVI.

FAREWELL.

"Not wisely, but too well."

AT his mother's request, Richard Blake took up his abode at Bingham Street for the next few weeks during the winding-up of his affairs. The house in Brampton Square was sold off, and on the day of the auction it was noticeable that many of Mrs. Blake's former friends were among the bidders. It was a grand tit-bit for them, and how they revelled in it! How they condemned the extravagance which they had helped to increase! How they recalled past hospitalities and entertainments in that splendid mansion, and spoke of them as disgraceful, and wondered that the crash had not come long ago.

They whispered to each other that there had been a bitter quarrel and estrangement between Richard Blake and his wife, and that she had gone home to her parents while he remained in town. They said it was "awful" and "very sad," but not surprising;

they always knew it would end in something like this. The world's knowledge and penetrating foresight is very wonderful, and oh, its charity is boundless! But I need not enlarge; it is no new truth that the world delights to trample on a man when he is down.

There was peace in the old home in Bingham Street, which was very grateful to the storm-tossed soul of Richard Blake. His mother, grown gentler, never referred to his fallen fortunes, to the folly which had brought the ruin upon him. In sorrow for him she laid aside the old railing spirit and showed only her motherliness. And Mary? But you know what she was; sweetest counsellor, gentlest sister, truest friend of all.

I have read somewhere that that quality, so rare in woman going solitary down the hill of life, and so beautiful because it is so rare, of being able out of the content of their own nature to make others content, is one of the most blessed influences upon the earth. It is the outcome of self-abnegation, of consecration to the service of God and humankind, therefore it *must* be blessed. Such was the influence of Mary Osborne—felt wherever it went.

In the course of a few weeks everything was wound up, and the names Devonshire & Blake became a thing of the past in the world of commerce. It was a great blow to the old man at Walton-on-Thames to read the history of the disgraceful failure of his old firm, and it but confirmed him in his conviction that the soul of truth and honour in trade was dead, and that extravagance was the crying evil of the age.

During these weeks few and brief were the letters Richard Blake received from his wife. What she was doing or how she was feeling at Kendal Hall he had no means of knowing, for she scarcely alluded to herself in her short epistle. Harry was in Germany. He had taken a roving fit, and was desirous of travelling for a year before settling down. So he was in ignorance of the change in the fortunes of his sister and her husband. But when he heard of it he was not surprised. Richard Blake took out his passage to the Cape before he went down to Kendal Hall to see his wife. It was a trial for him to face the Squire and his wife, especially the former, knowing that the opinions he held regarding certain things very much resembled George Devonshire's. And then he could not quite rid himself of the idea that he had spoiled Frances Kendal's life. But she had come to him quite willingly, and indeed had spoiled both their lives with her own hands. But there was not an atom of selfishness in Richard Blake's nature, and any feelings of bitterness against his wife had long since died away. He pitied her with a vast pity, and would willingly have released her from her marriage tie, knowing it was irksome for her. Yet he loved her; wayward, erring, cold though she was, he would have laid down his life to save her a moment's pain. Strange that his heart should so cleave to a selfish, worldly woman like her; truly his great love had been his ruin—with him it had been "not wisely, but too well."

He went down to Sutton without announcing his intention to his wife. On the platform at Charing

Cross he encountered Mr. Lancaster, who would have spoken, but Richard passed him with a distant bow. That very man had assisted in his ruin, had tempted him into worthless speculations, and had been the first to condemn him when that ruin came. Also his wife's influence had done Frances boundless harm, which might never be effaced. For all these reasons Richard Blake desired to drop all acquaintance with Mr. Alfred Lancaster of the Willows. That gentleman watched Richard Blake enter a third-class carriage, then jumping into his own luxurious compartment, related his friend's story, with many embellishments, to his travelling companion.

It was afternoon when Richard Blake walked through the fields (already grown white unto harvest) to Kendal Hall. Every bye-way and leafy lane was familiar to him, and inseparably associated with that brief madness which had ended in his unhappy marriage. Oh, if the past could only be undone; if he could sweep aside the bitter waters of memory; if the mind could only dwell upon things sweet and pleasant it would be well! and yet if these sad memories awake in us a desire for better things, they are wholesome and not to be banished from our hearts.

Richard Blake chose a bye-path to reach the Hall, and it brought him by way of the lake, where often, in days gone by, he and Frances had idly drifted in the dainty "Firefly," talking happy nonsense, all unconscious of that which was to come. Surely these were only dreams and fancies of a restless brain, he thought, so far away and

unreal did they seem beside the sad reality of the present. Presently, turning aside from the quiet water, he came in sight of the house. He stood still a moment looking at it. It was Frances's home but not his; he was homeless now; his was the house divided against itself which could not stand. No home! Beneath the stately rooftree before him he never had been truly welcome, and now, would his presence be even tolerated there? Perhaps not, but he would not long oppress their sight; he had but come to bid his wife good-bye before a foreign land claimed him perhaps for ever.

I cannot describe to you the state of Richard Blake's mind. He had gone through so great and fierce a mental struggle that now, as if through exhaustion, he was at peace. It was the peace of indifference, the carelessness of one who had lost the sweetness and the brightness of an aim in life, and now simply existed. It was the inevitable reaction after the long and severe strain upon the brain and nerve powers.

Walking with slow and almost reluctant step through the shrubbery he came suddenly, without any preparation, upon his wife. She was sitting in a little arbour, which also in by-gone days had witnessed many of their happy meetings. There was a book lying open on her knees, but she had fallen asleep. His footfall, deadened by the rich softness of the velvet turf, did not disturb her, so he could look without restraint. She wore a black dress, and the snowy folds of a soft white wrap enveloped her head and shoulders. But the corner which had been drawn over her head had fallen

back, revealing the shimmer of her golden hair. One white arm and hand supported her chin, the hand upon which shone, without companion or keeper, the plain golden wedding ring. She was deadly pale; her eyes looked out from shadowy hollows; the sweet perfect mouth seemed sad and drooping; the whole face thin and sorrowful, as if she too had passed through the fire. Oh, how the heart of the man before her yearned over her! How he longed to clasp her close to his hungering heart—to carry her far away from all the hollowness and deceit and misery of the world they had lived in, away to some blessed land, where it would be possible for them to begin life anew, built upon the strong foundation of mutual love and faith! His arm, stirring the interlacing boughs of the willows about the doorway, caused Frances Blake to awake with a start and open her eyes. At sight of her husband a red flush swept across her face, but she held out her hand.

"So you have come at last, Richard," she said, and to the ears of her husband her voice sounded hard and cold. "I was beginning to despair, and to think you had left the country without letting me know."

"I would not do that, Frances," he said, gently, and lifted the offered hand to his lips. "But I have come to say good-bye."

"When and where do you go?" she said in a quiet, passionless voice, as if she had been asking the most commonplace question.

"The day after to-morrow, in the *Pembroke Castle* to Natal."

"Indeed!"

She put up her white hand and drawing the folds of her shawl close about her throat, moved to the door.

"You had better come in then. Of course you will stay till to-morrow."

"I think not; what end would it serve? unless you wish it, Frances," he said eagerly, longing to hear even that assurance from her lips.

"I would not ask you if your time is to be fully occupied," she said, and walked away towards the house.

He followed her, with eyes bent upon the ground, through the long open window into the library, and thence up to the drawing-room.

"Mamma, here is Richard," she said, quietly, and sat down in a shadowy corner of the room, where her face could not be seen.

Mrs. Kendal's greeting was icy in the extreme. She merely touched the tips of her son-in-law's fingers, and that without so much as rising from her chair. Somehow that roused him, and he found his voice and spoke even with something of the dignity and manliness of yore.

"I cannot expect to be welcome here, Mrs. Kendal, but I shall not intrude long. I have but come to bid my wife good-bye, and to make some arrangements regarding her with Squire Kendal before I leave the country."

"Oh, where are you going, may I inquire?"

"I sail for the Cape the day after to-morrow, Mrs. Kendal," he said courteously but briefly. "When or where can I see the Squire?"

"He has gone to a meeting at Bray, and should

have been home ere this. I hear his horses' hoofs. I daresay you will find him in the library," was the reply, and Richard Blake took the hint at once. His wife sat on in her shadowy corner, looking straight before her, as if seeing, yet seeing nothing. Evidently Mrs. Blake was not herself to-day; where was that queenly grace of manner? that dignity of repose? that haughtiness characteristic of her in the past?

Richard Blake *did* find his father-in-law in the library. He did not offer him his hand, fearing lest it might be refused. A slight bow passed between them. Then the Squire spoke.

"U'm! you have turned up at last, Blake," he said drily.

"Yes, sir; there was no need to come before. I could not expect a welcome. I have not come either to excuse the past or to make promises for the future, Squire Kendal," said Richard Blake, quietly, for he was driven to bay in this house, and made to feel himself the worst of all mankind. And yet the fault had lain as much with Frances as with him; but he was content, ay more, glad, to bear it for her, so that she was spared reproach. "The day after to-morrow I sail for Natal, and I have simply come to ask for Frances shelter under your roof until I can either come or send for her."

"That is a needless request. She is *my* daughter, and since there is no one else to provide for her I must."

It was a bitter thrust, and it went straight as an arrow to the mark.

"You are mistaken, sir. Although I request the

shelter of your home for my wife, I shall pay for that shelter," he said, striving to keep cool. "I expect to succeed in business abroad better than of late I have succeeded at home."

"I 'm sure I hope so," said the Squire, with increased dryness; then there ensued a painful and awkward silence.

"Of course you think I am a bear," said the Squire, at length; "but upon my word it is a very unpleasant thing for a man to have his daughter flung back upon his hands like this. It causes so many remarks, and altogether numiliates a man."

"Spare me your reproaches, sir," said Richard Blake passionately. "God knows my own are hard enough to bear."

So saying he abruptly quitted the room, and went upstairs to the drawing-room.

"Will you put on your hat, and walk a little way with me, Frances?" he said, without looking at Mrs. Kendal.

Frances rose at once, put her shawl over her head, and preceded him downstairs. They went straight to the arbour where they had met not an hour ago.

"Well, good-bye, Frances," he said quietly, though his whole soul was a chaos of agony, of unavailing regret, of indescribable, unutterable yearning like to overwhelm him.

"I am to stay here while you are away?" she said, in that same strange, still voice.

"Yes, that is arranged. I shall write, and directly I am able I shall either come or send for you, if you will come to me, Frances," he said, still quietly.

"Very well," she said. "Good-bye."

He put his arms round her, and drew her face to his breast. Shall I write it down? Burning tears started in his eyes and, overflowing, fell upon her golden head. He angrily dashed them aside, as if ashamed that he should be so weak.

"My darling, tell me you forgive me for having made you my wife. I would free you, my poor Frances, if I could," he said.

She drew herself back.

How could he know that his words stabbed her to the heart?

She lifted her colourless face, and kissed him of her own accord for the first time since the halcyon days of their honeymoon.

"Good-bye, Richard! It was a mistake all through," she said. "But write sometimes, and I will come when you are ready, for we cannot break the bonds."

So saying, and as if unable to bear any more, she glided away from him into the house, up to her own room.

She stood still there and pressed her hands to her eyes as if to shut out some unpleasant vision. He was gone, and he had not once said "Come with me!" Nay, he had assured her he would set her free if he could. Oh, what misunderstandings arise out of pride, the prejudices, the hardness of our hearts! What sorrows we heap up for ourselves with our own hands; how often do we sweep away unconsciously the greatest good lying at our very doors!

On Wednesday afternoon the *Pembroke Castle* sailed.

CHAPTER XVII.

REACTION.

So we are led,
By ways we know not of,
Into the better way.

THE world seemed very much changed to Frances Blake. Friends were few and cold, the select circle of society in Sutton-le-Willows had not so much homage for Richard Blake's wife as it had for Squire Kendal's daughter. The circumstances not being fully known, a diversity of opinion was held regarding her position. Some said there had been a bitter quarrel, which ended in an open rupture; others, that Richard Blake had deserted his wife, and all united in shrugging their shoulders and in saying that it was decidedly queer. She was not included in the invitations sent to Kendal Hall. Formerly no social gathering had been considered complete without the Squire's handsome and accomplished daughter. But it was not so now. She

was eclipsed by the lesser lights, and was made to feel that she was nobody in society, that she had no position of her own. To a woman like Frances Kendal, who all her life had been a person of paramount importance, who had been accustomed to flattery and homage and admiration, such a change was most galling. Then, within Kendal Hall itself there was a great difference. She was only tolerated in her father's house, and she knew it. Her mother had never really forgiven her marriage, and its unhappy results seemed to justify every objection she had raised against it before it took place. She was a woman of few words at all times, and would never descend to vulgar recrimination, but in her quiet way she made Frances feel—and keenly, too—the humiliating nature of her position. So, for all these reasons, as I said, the world seemed changed to Frances Blake. She was most unhappy. First, there was nothing but bitterness in her heart against her husband, against her parents, against the whole world. Then that gradually died away, and there came in its place an agony of unrest, of wild and painful longings to flee to Richard. By-and-by that passed also, and then she sank into a state of listless indifference and lost all interest in life. She went about the house a dull, heavy-eyed spiritless creature, who looked as if she had drunk life's bitter cup to the very dregs. She would wander for hours in the fields and woods, lingering often by the river's brim, which seemed to possess for her an odd fascination.

In six weeks the first letter bearing a South African post-mark came to Kendal Hall. It was

very brief, almost formal, merely stating that the writer had arrived after a pleasant voyage, and was about to proceed up the country to Kimberley. Brief, unsatisfying as it was, Frances Blake cherished that letter. *How* she prized it, ay, and what bitter tears fell upon it, how little the writer of it guessed! Her health was indifferent, and even the sweet, clear, bracing air of the early autumn failed to restore the languid, exhausted frame. In August, Mrs. Kendal went to Scarborough, but did not expect nor ask her daughter to accompany her. Frances was not sorry. In times past she had been the gayest of the gay at that fashionable watering-place, but it was different now. She would not greatly care to meet all her old friends, to encounter their pitying looks or wonderingly impertinent remarks. She was glad to be left alone at the Hall to spend her days as she liked; and it was in this pleasant solitude that Frances Blake found herself face to face with her life for the first time. She tried to banish self-reproach; to keep away from every thought or memory of the past; to forget all the brief, strange dream of her married life. But that was impossible. There was with her night and day visions of that past. Sometimes the memory of the tender, devoted care which had been lavished upon her before her own hands had shut her husband's heart against her, swept over her with an agony of longing, of unavailing regret. Then the haunting spectre of self-reproach because of how she had repaid that love and care made miserable her waking hours. Now that miles of sea and shore lay between her husband and herself she knew how

she loved him. It was an utterly new experience for Frances Blake. Hitherto she had not been accustomed to be denied or to deny herself anything. She had said, and it was done; she had but expressed a wish, and it was fulfilled; but now her training was to be in a different school. She was to know the heart-sickness of hope deferred, the agony of a longing unfulfilled—that pain, like to which there is no other upon the earth, of being separated, perhaps for ever, from the being we hold dearer than self. With the awakening of the heart to human love there came another experience, also quite new, to Frances Blake. It was a vague desire for something higher, diviner, more lasting than anything earth could offer. She had heard of God as a Friend, a Comforter, especially to those oppressed by sorrow or care. She had read of the peace which passeth all understanding, which can still every tumult in the heart of poor humanity. In prosperous times, when fortune smiled, she had not felt the need of any such Comforter; she had never had a thought beyond the moment with her, but now the longing would not be stilled. She opened her Bible, read it carefully, pored over its many assurances of hope and peace and joy to those who believe, but therein found no comfort. She was as one whose eyes are holden, who cannot see. In her blind and feeble groping, her hours of dark, deep loneliness, there came to her a strange yearning to see Richard's cousin, Mary Osborne. She remembered with tender, lingering regret her gentleness of tone and manner; her kind true smile; her sisterly bearing towards her who

had so ill-deserved it. She also remembered with keen humiliation and shame her treatment of the gentle girl—her rudeness the very last time she had been beneath her roof. She tried to banish the desire to see her. She told herself Mary would never forgive her; yet something whispered that not only would that gentle heart forgive, but that she would comfort and help her out of any difficulty. So it came to pass that one afternoon, greatly to the astonishment of the servants of the Hall, young Mrs. Blake journeyed to London alone. When she arrived in the great city there came upon her a desire to behold once more the house of her married life. She drove in a close cab from the station to the West End and walked slowly up Piccadilly to Brampton Square. The house was closed. It had found yet no purchaser or tenant, for the ticket intimating that it was to let or sell was still at the door. She drew down her veil hurriedly, and walked away again with trembling limbs, and, without being conscious of it, proceeded towards the Park. She chose a seat there, and sitting down under a spreading tree watched the gay throng in the Row, and the stream of carriages rolling up the wide avenues. She recognised many of the carriages and their occupants. Not so long ago her well-appointed brougham had held its own among them, but that was over now. She did not fear recognition, for who would ever see in the plainly attired, closely veiled figure Richard Blake's gay and fashionable wife? She seemed to forget that time was fleeting, until with a start she pulled out her watch and saw that it was half-past six. She

rose then, and turned with weary feet towards the city again, treading the familiar way to Bingham Street. When she reached the entrance to it she paused reluctantly, for it was not Richard's cousin alone she would need to meet, but Richard's mother, who might well heap reproaches on her head. Well, she deserved them all, and she would accept them humbly, as she ought, as part punishment for her sin.

Her knock was answered by the tidy housemaid, who had been with Mrs. Blake for many years. At sound of the sweet refined voice the girl started, and said somewhat hesitatingly,

"Mrs. Richard Blake?"

"Yes. Are the ladies at home?"

"Yes, ma'am. Will you come in, please?" said the girl, greatly amazed at the change in Mrs. Richard's manner and appearance.

When the door was closed, Frances turned and laid her hand on the girl's arm: "Kindly show me into the drawing-room, and ask Miss Osborne to come to me, without saying who I am;" and the girl obeyed at once. The drawing-room was unoccupied of course, the ladies preferring always to sit in the dining-room. Mary did not long keep her visitor waiting. When she entered, Frances was standing in the window with her back to the door, so that Mary did not immediately recognise her. But when she turned, and putting back her veil from her pale face, held out a pleading hand, the tears welled up in Mary's gentle eyes.

"Mrs. Blake—impossible!" she exclaimed, and clasped the proffered hand; and then, moved by

something she saw in the beautiful eyes, she leaned forward and kissed her on the lips—the first kiss which had ever passed between these two women, but not the last.

"How and when did you come, dear?" said Mary, and led her to a chair, for she saw that she was weak and weary and far spent.

"I came from Sutton this afternoon, but I have been wandering about for an hour and more," said Frances. "No—thanks: I must not take off my bonnet. I must go home to-night."

"Must you? I think not. Aunt Sara would not permit that, nor would I," said Mary, cheerfully. "Come, I will take you to my bedroom, and then tell auntie you are here."

Like a child Frances obeyed; but when they reached the upper chambers, and Mary was about to leave her, she turned and laid her hand on her arm.

"Will—will—Mrs. Blake be glad to see me? I—I have no claim upon her," she faltered; "only I thought of you and her so much that I was impelled to come."

"Dear Frances, I am quite sure Aunt Sara will be more than delighted to see you," said Mary, but did not feel so very sure after all, for Mrs. Blake had said very many hard things about Richard's wife. But surely the sight of that pale face, with the sad mouth and wearied eyes telling of an aching heart, would sweep away every hard and bitter memory of the past? Trusting to that, Mary sped to the dining-room, where her aunt was busy alternately with her book and her knitting.

"Dear Auntie, guess who is here—who has come a long way to see you?" she said, breathlessly.

Mrs. Blake shook her head.

"I have not the slightest idea, child. Tell me."

"Richard's wife!" said Mary. Then seeing the expression on her aunt's face, she knelt down by her chair and folded her pleading hands on her arm.

"And, dear Aunt Sara, she looks so worn and pale and sad, and I am sure her heart is very sore. Be good to her, auntie. Let us try to keep her with us a little while. I think she so needs rest. For Richard's sake, dear auntie; and who knows we may thus help them both to a happier life?"

"It is not my duty She was good neither to my son nor to me," said the proud mother, rebelliously. "What right has she to come here?"

"She is Richard's wife, auntie, and we have no right to turn her away from us. Dear Aunt Sara, let your heart speak. Let me bring Frances to you. When you see her you will be so sorry for her that you will love her with all your heart."

Mrs. Blake shook her head and shaded her eyes with her hand. Mary rose and left the room. In a few minutes the sound of footsteps and the soft opening of the door made Mrs. Blake rise from her chair. She turned her head, and her eyes fell on Richard's wife. It was as Mary had said. She was conquered.

"My dear, my dear!" she said tremblingly, "what has come to you? Have you been ill? I am grieved."

She got no further, for Frances crept into her arms and laid her head on her breast.

"Forgive me," she said brokenly, "for Richard's sake!"

Oh! if Richard in his lonely home in that wild African settlement, could but have beheld that scene, what joy it would have infused into his barren life!

But not yet. The rugged discipline necessary must be borne a little longer, the lesson mastered to the very end.

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNUTTERABLE YEARNINGS.

"How beautiful to watch the sweet waters of humility and love stealing over a proud spirit, and making it meet for the kingdom."

VERY gentle, very tender was Mary Osborne with Richard Blake's wife. She skilfully managed to keep her aunt from talking much of Richard before Frances, and so the quiet evening slipped away without anything jarring upon its harmony. Mrs. Blake retired early, and the two younger women were left alone in the dining-room. Then, as Mary had expected, Frances began to talk of herself. She walked restlessly up and down the room for a few minutes, with her white hands lightly clasped before her, and her eyes bent upon the floor. Mary tried to busy herself with some work, but her thoughts wandered so that she came but little speed with it. She was glad when Frances stopped her restless walk at last, and pausing by her chair looked down into her face.

"Don't you wonder what brought me to London to-day?" she asked abruptly.

"I may have been a little surprised, but I was none the less glad to see you; and so was Aunt Sara," said Mary truthfully.

"So you say, and so I believe. I cannot understand women like you, Mary Osborne. I have never met any like you. How can you be so good?"

Mary smiled slightly, and shook her head.

"I am no better than others, dear, only my life has been so quiet I have never been tempted as many others are," she answered gently.

"Then see how humble you are! How you deny yourself the credit of your goodness!" exclaimed Frances. "Yes, yes, you are good. Richard told me so long ago, and I know it now."

Slowly the tinge of red touched Mary's cheek, and she bent her head over her work once more, for her eyes were troubled. If Richard had been in the habit of praising her to his future wife, the cause of Frances Blake's coldness to her from the beginning was partially explained.

"Hush, dear, if you please. Let us speak of you. I was and am concerned to see you look so poorly."

"I? Oh, yes! I am not well. How can I be? Mental and physical strength are inseparable, are they not? and my mind is not at rest. I am a very unhappy woman, Mary Osborne," said Frances, resuming her restless walking to and fro.

"But you will be happy yet, please God," said Mary, gently.

"Do you think so? How?" said Frances, and pausing in front of Mary again, she looked wistfully into her face. "Looking into the future I see no such certainty, not even a chance of happiness. I am parted from my husband for ever, and I love him."

The last words, spoken almost in a whisper, sent a thrill of joy to Mary Osborne's heart.

"Of course you are astonished. Let me speak. It was the need of such relief which drove me to London to-day," said Frances in low, clear tones. "This longing for human sympathy comes to even the most matter-of-fact persons at times, and it has come to me, who have never given way to such weakness before. Yes, I came to-day to speak of my husband to you, because my heart is breaking for him at this moment."

She broke off with a quick sob, and there was a brief silence.

"I have been a wicked woman, Mary, for my conduct *was* wicked. No milder term would suit it; but I have had my punishment. How long is it since Richard went away? Not yet two months? Why, it looks like a lifetime to me. I have been so desolate, so miserable, in all ways. I have even wished that I might die. I am not my father's daughter as I used to be. Kendal Hall is not to me the home it was. I am made to feel my position there—to know that I have in a manner disgraced them. I do not complain; it is my just reward; but it is none the less hard to bear. What am I to do?"

Mary let her work drop on her knee, and leaning

her head on one hand, looked full into Frances Blake's face, her gentle eyes full of tears.

"Do? What have you thought, or what do you think of doing?" she asked. "What does your heart say?"

"If I obeyed the impulse of my heart at the present moment, I should take my passage to South Africa. Would not that be a very foolish step, Mary?" asked Frances, with earnest, shining eyes.

"Not foolish, only not quite practicable nor advisable; yet—" answered Mary with a slight smile, "come and sit down here, and let us talk it over. My dear, my dear, my heart is so glad for you and for Richard that I could cry for joy."

But Frances did not sit down. She seemed unable to be quiet or still; that she was deeply moved was evidenced by the restless movements of her hands and the strange trembling of her lips.

"No; as you say, it would neither be practicable nor advisable," she said musingly. "Besides there is the fear in my heart that my love may have come too late."

"Hush, hush; if ever man loved woman, Richard loved and does love you, Frances."

"Ah! how can I be sure? When he bade me good-bye that day at Kendal Hall, he did not say 'Come with me,' and yet my heart was breaking for these words. I must have starved all the love out of his heart else he had asked me, Mary."

"But, Frances, how did you speak? Did you let Richard understand that?"

"No; I was prouder then than I am now. Oh,

what pain this pride works; and how completely it masters us at times!"

"But you will write, Frances," said Mary eagerly, "and you will let your heart guide your pen?"

"I *have* written. Richard's letter was very short, and to me it seemed cold and distant. Again pride ruled my will, and, obeying the impulse of the moment, I sat down and answered it in tone and words corresponding to his own."

"But you will write again to-morrow, Frances?" pleaded Mary, "and let love conquer pride. Then so soon as it could be arranged you will take the South African voyage."

Frances shook her head.

"That may not be for a long time, for a reason I will tell you by-and-by," she said; and there was a strange, deep light in her eyes, whereat Mary wondered. Then a long silence ensued. At length, waking from her reverie, Frances came and knelt down by the side of the woman who, through weal and woe, had so truly been her friend. Oh, how sweet and fair was the uplifted face of Richard Blake's wife at that moment; how beautiful in its new tenderness, its wistfulness, which was as that of a little child asking a question from a parent.

"Mary, suppose my husband forgives me, will God forgive me? You know Him. He is your friend," she said in a low voice. "I have read the Bible, and tried to think of holy things; I have prayed too, but I cannot feel anything of the peace which shines so beautifully in you, which is the mainspring of your lovely life."

"Dear Frances!" With what infinity of tender-

ness did Mary's hand linger on the sunny head. "Is the Divine less than the human? If we can forgive, will not God forgive? Is He not our Heavenly Father, to whom we are unspeakably dear?"

"I like to hear you speak, but I do not quite understand. You see my life has been so different from yours, so far removed from everything good and high and noble. Do you know I can scarcely recall one well-spent hour. Vanity, vanity, all vanity, Mary; can all that be forgiven?"

"All that? You have read, dear, that though our sins be red like crimson they shall be made white as snow, by simply casting them at the foot of the Cross."

Again Frances shook her head.

"It seems simple, but yet I cannot understand. I cannot grasp it. Perhaps some day soon the light will break upon my soul. You will pray for me, Mary, and to-morrow we will speak of it again. I am so wearied to-night. I think I shall go to bed. *Will* you let me share your room? I have grown so nervous of late. I cannot stay alone at nights. What if I die before my husband knows of my repentance?"

"Hush, dear; no fear of that. You are but worn out. Yes, come upstairs with me," said Mary, and rising laid a gentle hand upon her companion's arm.

Frances leaned her head upon it, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XIX.

ABIDING PEACE.

A soul in mercy led
Home to its surest rest.

JANUARY was wearing to its close. It had been a bleak and wintry month, a month of heavy rains and destructive gales, which left their mark behind alike on sea and shore. It was not by any means a pleasant month to spend at the coast, and, in common with the majority of watering-places in winter, Merlin-on-Sea was like a city of the dead. The wide stretch of sandy beach, the little pier so gay and busy in the season, were deserted; and the row of villas facing the sea, such desirable residences in the summer time, were shut up. Life was confined to the High Street of the town.

Yes, it was undoubtedly quiet at Merlin-on-Sea during the months of winter and early spring, and for that reason, and because, though it stood upon

the coast, it was a sheltered nook, it was chosen by the two ladies who came down from London while the year was yet young. Their advent was a kind of God-send to the dwellers in Merlin-on-Sea; and they became subjects of endless surmise and comment. Both were young, and both fair to see; one indeed strikingly beautiful, but she looked fragile and delicate; evidently it was on her account they had come to inhale the fresh breezes on the Merlin shore.

They took rooms in a cottage residence at the end of the street nearest the beach, and when the weather was favourable were much out of doors. They seemed much attached to each other, and one was never seen without the other.

On a grey and cloudless afternoon these two might have been seen walking arm in arm up and down the beach, quite near to the waves, so near that the foam broke at their very feet. It was a wild, grey, restless sea, tossing under a wintry sky, and they could hear distinctly the hoarse roar of the billows breaking against the cliffs round the headland. Merlin was snugly sheltered in a little bay, where even in rough weather the sea was comparatively smooth. They paused beside a chain of jagged rocks, and both looked out to sea. Their faces were grave and sad, and the eyes of one were full of tears.

"We have been long enough out to-day, Frances," said the other gently. "Come, let us go home."

"Not yet," said Frances Blake; "I cannot be at rest in the house. I am better here. There is

something in that wild tossing sea which soothes me. If it were sunny and beautiful I could not bear it."

As she spoke she leaned heavily on her companion's arm, and her head dropped slightly on the faithful shoulder, ever ready as a resting-place for her.

"But, Frances, dear, it is not good for you to indulge in morbid fancies. We came here so that the fresh sea breezes might make you strong and well. Unless you try to be more cheerful, dear, I shall think it a mistake that we ever came here."

"Perhaps it was. Didn't Dr. Alleyne say that unless I had a change I should not live? It was not change of air I want, Mary; and sea breezes cannot cure the hunger of the heart. Do you think Richard *will* be dead? Should I give up hope altogether and try and resign myself to my life, such as it is?"

"My dear, *I* have not given up hope yet. I am no believer in superstitions, Frances, but I *do* think that in a case like this there would be some conviction brought home to your heart, if—if your fears were so well-grounded as you think. The time has seemed long to us, but remember the difficulties in the way of getting letters forwarded from the interior of Africa," said Mary hopefully.

"Well—but, Mary, it was in September I had the last letter, and it was no answer to mine. You remember it merely said he was about to journey into the interior on some business which was likely to be remunerative if it was successful. These last words implied much. I fear it was a dangerous

mission, and one which has proved fatal. Otherwise how could five months have elapsed without a line reaching me? Can you answer that, Mary?"

"I can only repeat that there might, nay, there must, have been many difficulties in the way of getting letters forwarded," repeated Mary, still gently. "Come now, Frances; see, the day is closing in. Come away home."

She drew her arm within hers, and they turned their faces towards the town.

Just then, through a parting in the gloomy clouds, a feeble ray of sunshine, the first they had seen for days, fell across their path. It touched the face of Frances Blake, and showed how worn and thin it was, how unlike the bright, beautiful face which had once captivated Richard Blake. Ay, Frances Blake had passed through the deeps since then. She had tasted of remorse, of bitterest most unavailing regret; she had borne the heart-sickness of hope deferred, the yearning which cannot be satisfied. For only two brief epistles had reached her from that far-off land whither her exiled husband had gone, and now this was the second month of another year. Ah, indeed, had her remorse, her love, come too late? would he never know that the heart of his wife had turned to him at last with all the love of which she was capable, and that was much? had he gone to his rest on that far shore all unconscious of the woman's heart hungering at home for his return?

Mary Osborne had remained the steadfast friend of Richard's wife, and when the physician had peremptorily ordered a change for the Squire's

daughter, Mary had been found willing to go with her into her solitude and make it less hard to bear. Mrs. Kendal was very grateful, for a sojourn at an out-of-the-way corner like Merlin-on-Sea, in the depth of winter, too, would not at all have suited her. The Squire, heartily sorry now for his poor, delicate daughter, came often to Merlin, and saw that fruit and flowers and all sorts of dainties were systematically sent to the little cottage by the sea; also his admiration for Mary Osborne was unbounded. Harry came sometimes when he could be spared by his patients, for the Squire's son had settled down to life in earnest now, and was making for himself a reputation in the northern city where he had cast his lot.

"You are tired, Frances," said Mary gently, feeling her companion leaning more heavily upon her. "We have stayed out too long."

"No, let me stand here a few minutes just to look at the sea; it seems to bring me nearer, somehow, to Richard, and I shall not be able to come out to-morrow."

Mary let her have her way, and they stood for a few minutes in silence at the garden gate looking towards the restless sea, which was tinged by the weird, yellow gleam from the edge of the lowering clouds.

Then, shivering slightly, Frances Blake laid her hand on the gate, and they entered the house. The cosy sitting-room was warm and pleasant, and the red glow of a cheerful fire sparkled on the appointments of the tea-table.

Hearing the ladies come in, good Mrs. Boscoe

bustled in with the teapot and set it on the table. Mary turned her head to thank her, and then, unfastening her friend's wraps, bade her lie back among the cushions, for she was plainly wearied out. Frances did so, and languidly closed her eyes. Mary, looking on, noted with anxious heart the great purple shadows encircling them, the wanness of the cheek, the lines about her mouth. Ay, Richard's wife was far from well, and Mary resolved to send without delay for Squire Kendal and his wife.

"Mary, suppose I die; I fear I shall," said Frances presently, fixing her hollow eyes on the sweet face before her—"what then? Do you think there will be any place in heaven for such as I?"

"Surely." Mary took the cold hands in her firm, warm grasp, and chafed them tenderly. "I have often spoken and read to you of the love of God. It is a Father's love. You know something of that."

"Yes, papa is very good to me; but then I have not sinned against him as I have done against God."

"Dear Frances, it was not the righteous Christ came to save, but sinners, such as we all are," said Mary, earnestly.

The weary head tossed uneasily on the pillows.

"Yes, yes, so the Bible says; but though it is plain enough, I cannot grasp it as you do. It is easy for you to believe; you have always been good. But I—think of my married life, Mary; of the wrong I did to others beside my husband—

I cannot recall one well-spent hour during the whole of the time I lived in London."

"My dear, do not let that trouble you now. God knows all that, and is waiting to forgive you, if you will but ask Him. My darling, He knows all your heart-sickness; if you will but look up to Him, He will comfort you as none else can."

"Tell me, Mary, have you ever had any great trial in which God comforted you?" asked Frances.

"Yes. My life has not been without its cross, Frances. What life is? It is not sunshine which will prepare us for our other home, but sorrow; and so our hearts are weaned away from this world and fixed on that which is to come," replied Mary, very low, and Frances listened, not guessing the nature of that trial, nor how largely she had contributed to it.

"I would like to believe, to feel that peace which must be in your heart; it is so plainly shown in every action of your life. I feel just like the drift-wood tossed upon a fickle wave," said Frances, wistfully. "I want something to lean against. All my friends were but summer-day props, who could not weather a storm. Show me the way."

"My dear, how can I show it you? It is just at your feet. Only look up to God as your Father; let your heart rest upon the assurance of His love, and you *will* know His peace, which passeth all understanding."

Frances covered her face with her hands, and the woman kneeling by her prayed. A long silence followed. At last Frances spoke in tones low and tremulous, yet wondrously sweet.

"Kiss me, Mary. God has forgiven me; I can bear whatever lies before me with patience *now*, because I know He loves me."

So, after her long tossing on the sea of unrest, of worldly care and pain, Frances Blake anchored in the sure waters of God's love. Desolate she was. Bereft of that she loved best on earth, bitter, bitter was the reaping of the whirlwind she had sowed in days gone by. It indeed seemed as if she had drank the cup of sorrow to its dregs. Yet peace remained, the only true peace which we of earth can know—that rest which abideth only in God.

A few days later, in the chill, grey dawn of a wild February morning, Richard Blake's first-born son saw the light.

CHAPTER XX.

IN A FAR COUNTRY

"JOHN, is it not time Mr. Blake was putting in an appearance again?"

The speaker was a young and pretty woman, seated in a cool and pleasant nursery in one of the best appointed houses in Kimberley. It was the abode of Mr. John Ingram, one of the largest storekeepers and most successful business men in the stirring South African town. The lady was his wife. Twenty years before, John Ingram had emigrated from Scotland, a raw lad of nineteen, fresh from school, possessed of little knowledge of the world, yet with one determination—to make a place for himself in the new continent. He had succeeded well. There were years of hard toil and small reward, seasons of hopelessness approaching to despair, times when the impulse was upon him to throw the whole concern up and return to the slow money-making and orthodox business transactions of his sleepy town. But he remained true to the Ingram characteristics.

His indomitable will, his heroic endurance, and above all his sterling uprightness and unblemished honour, which remained untarnished even among temptations such as few men could have withstood, brought him to success at last. It was no ordinary success, for he was among the earlier settlers in the town, and had thus a better chance than the later importations from the old country. At the end of ten years he was enabled to leave his business in care of a trustworthy manager, and pay a visit to his early home. As was inevitable, he found many changes there. He found the parents he had left in their prime grown somewhat old and grey, brothers he had left lads at school grown bearded men, sisters married and settled in homes of their own, with little children about their knees, who spoke quite glibly of Uncle John from across the seas. He had been made aware from time to time, of course, of the events which marked those changes, but until he found himself face to face with them he had no idea how real they were. Then he began to look and think of himself. Likely he was growing old too. His sister Ellen's little fair-haired girl found some silver threads among Uncle John's glossy curls, and immediately apprised him of the fact. Yes, he was growing older; and though he was loved and made much of in his old home, he, somehow, felt that he was not indispensable to them, that each had his and her own interests and ties, while he had none but business bonds. That visit proved as eventful as it was an unexpected crisis in John Ingram's life. Many of the girls who were his sisters' companions in the

old days were now wives and mothers too, but there was one left, and, somehow, when John heard that Louie Elliott was unmarried still he was glad. I need not enlarge. When John Ingram set sail again from the shores of England there was a sweet-faced, gentle-eyed wife with him, and henceforth Kimberley was home to him. Louie Ingram carried her years well. But yesterday she had completed her thirty-fifth year; yet to look at her as she sat there, her face so tender in its sweet motherliness, you would have said she was ten years younger. Two children had been born to them—little Walter, a wild, stirring lad, with his grandfather's exhaustless fund of fun and spirits, as well as his name, and the little blue-eyed daughter on Mrs. Ingram's knee, who had only been four weeks in the world. John Ingram was lying on a couch lazily scanning the columns of the *Weekly Scotsman*, which found its way as regularly as Saturday morning came round. Of course it was a few weeks late, but what of that? It was the news from a far country, for which exiled hearts ever hunger. He was five years older than his wife, and he looked it every day. There were more than a few stray threads among the glossy curls now, and his figure had grown stout and broad; but he was a fine-looking man, and his face was one which seemed made to be trusted. Needless to say, his wife thought him the handsomest man in Kimberley, and the best. I believe she was right. He looked up from his paper when he spoke, and his glance was one of admiring love.

"I do declare, Louie, you grow prettier and younger every day. I just wish the birds of evil omen by Gala water who predicted for you an early death could see you now."

The happy wife laughed, and that sound was the sweetest music on earth to her husband's heart. She had given up much for him, and it had been the aim of his life to make sure that she never regretted it. That laugh, the music of a happy heart, the serene contentment which dwelt ever on her dear face, told him he had succeeded.

"Did you hear what I said, John?" she repeated. "*Isn't* it time Mr. Blake turned up in Kimberley again?"

"More than time, my dear," he said, and flung aside his paper as he spoke. "In fact, Louie, I am very anxious about Blake—very anxious indeed."

"Was it a *very* dangerous expedition, John?" asked Mrs. Ingram anxiously.

"Rather. A journey into the interior, even on a peaceable errand, is always attended with more or less danger. The Kaffirs, I have proved by experience, are not too scrupulous about their treatment of their white brethren."

"From experience, John? Have you ever been in trouble with the Kaffirs?"

"Many a time and oft. I have had some hair-breadth escapes, with which I have never dared to harrow up your soul. Yes, Louie, I wish to goodness Blake would turn up. I like the fellow, and I would be thankful to see him, suppose his journey should lose me a few hundreds. I'm really beginning to think I had no right to risk his life for the

sake of bartering with these miserable wretches. What do you think?"

"Did you explain to Mr. Blake the nature of the expedition? did you make him aware of the dangers he had to encounter?"

"Of course I did. Bless me, Louie, what do you take me for? Do you think I'd send a man into the jaws of death without warning him? He asked me for the job. He knew as well as I do that it would be a stroke of fortune for the firm. I never saw a man with a clearer head for business than Blake. He beats me all to sticks. The more I study him the more I am mystified about him."

"Do you think he has been disappointed in love, John?" inquired Mrs. Ingram in a sympathetic voice.

"No, I don't. It's been a more serious trouble than that, though I grant that may be serious enough some times. I don't know what *I'd* have done if you had refused me."

"Nobody could have refused my John," said the little wife. "Could she, baby? But, seriously, John, when Mr. Blake comes back we must be very good to him, and have him often here, and try and make him forget his troubles, shall we?"

"Bless your dear heart, yes—we'll give him permanent board here when he comes back if you like. I wish he were back; that's all."

"Don't get worrying over it. I daresay he'll be safe enough, John," said Mrs. Ingram reassuringly. "I feel quite interested about him. If we were very good and kind to him, and he got to feel quite

at home with us, he *might* tell us a little about himself."

"Oh, you little diplomatist! I never thought you were so imbued with curiosity. My own opinion is that he has been involved in business difficulties, and that there isn't a woman in the affair at all."

"You're only a man!" said Mrs. Ingram, wisely. "Why, you stupid John, don't you know there's always a woman in it. Will you promise me a new dress if I'm right?"

"I never bet, Mrs. Ingram," said John, with dignity. "But I daresay you are right. You always are, you know. I am very sorry for him, any way, woman or no woman; and I hope he'll stay with us when he does come back. I'd make him a partner to-morrow if he'd accept it. It would be worth my while, I tell you."

"That is unlike your Scotch caution, John. Surely Mr. Blake must possess an extraordinary fascination for you."

"He is as fine a fellow as I have ever met, and as thorough a gentleman. You don't need to know a man a lifetime before you trust him. How long was our courtship, Louie?"

"Don't ask me, sir. I am ashamed when I think what a shockingly unconventional engagement we had. But ours was different. You see, I knew your people and all about you, not to speak of the mild flirtations we used to have when we were all children together in the dear old Border town."

"Where's Walter, Louie?" queried Mr. Ingram, his thoughts suddenly reverting to his first-born.

"I don't know. I never do know where he is. He knows every man, black and white, in the town, I believe. He is the funniest child. It is a marvel to me he never comes to grief."

"A' body's bairn 's aye in luck, I 've heard, Louie, and nobody would have the heart to harm our wee Walter," said John, softly. "Everybody loves him for his mother's sake."

"O John, you old flatterer! Why, there is Walter shouting at the pitch of his voice," she exclaimed, starting up. "And I believe he 's bringing somebody in with him. Why, bless me, if it isn't Mr. Blake!"

Yes, it was Richard Blake, travel-stained and weary with his long and rough jolting over the wild mountain tracks, the little Walter clinging to his hand as if he found him an old and dear friend.

"Blake, upon my word, I 'm *thankful* to see you!" said John Ingram, taking Richard's hand in a grip of iron.

"And I also, Mr. Blake," said the sweet wife, and the beautiful eyes uplifted to his were full of tears.

"Thank you," said Richard Blake, quietly, yet with earnestness. "I met your little boy at the other end of the street. He said he was watching for me."

"He must have heard us speak of you," said John Ingram. "But come and get refreshed. I suppose dinner will be ready soon, Louie?" he added to his wife. So that kind and happy family strove to make Richard Blake feel at home with them, and they succeeded. He was not altogether

friendless in the strange land, nor did the loneliness of his position oppress him so strongly as it did his wife fretting for him at home. He was too thankful to be freed from the old bonds, to be among people who did not despise him—too glad to see before him once more a prospect of gaining a position in the world. He had been accidentally thrown in John Ingram's way, and that shrewd man of business had not been slow to estimate his new acquaintance at his true worth. An offer of employment in his office had been at once accepted, and when the subject of an expedition into the interior to trade with the Kaffirs had been broached Richard Blake had offered his services so eagerly that John Ingram could scarcely refuse. Besides, he could not have found a better man, as was evidenced by the success which had crowned the object of his journey.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BITTER PAST.

O memories!
O past that is!—*George Eliot.*

"YES, I am *very* glad to see you safely home again," repeated John Ingram's wife, as they took their places at the dinner-table half-an-hour later. "Your mother or sisters would not have thanked my husband for sending you on such an errand."

Mrs. Ingram looked keenly at Richard Blake as she uttered the concluding part of her speech, but he bent his head over the little Walter, who had again stolen to his side, as if drawn to him by some magnet.

"Thanks. But I assure you there was little actual danger in my expedition, Mrs. Ingram," he said quietly, and then he looked at her, and she could gather nothing from his face.

"You are brave to make so light of it, Mr. Blake, but John was anxious too, and he is no coward," asserted the pretty wife, shaking her head.

"Death is often farthest away from those who do not greatly care whether he steals upon them unawares or not, Mrs. Ingram," said Richard quietly still, and gently smoothed away the curls from the earnest eyes of her little son.

Mrs. Ingram's eyes met those of her husband, and he immediately changed the subject. But Mrs. Ingram pondered these things in her mind, and, being of an imaginative turn, conjured up a very pretty romance, in which Richard Blake and some sweet English girl were the central figures. When she went away upstairs by-and-by to put her little ones to bed, John Ingram turned to business talk with his friend.

"I am deeply indebted to you, Blake," he said with honest heartiness, "and I have a proposal to make to you."

"Yes," said Richard, but neither face nor voice betrayed any absorbing interest.

"First of all, then, have you a mind to settle?"

"As well here as anywhere else, I suppose, provided I can get a living," he answered.

"There 's something to be made here yet, though they say it 's played out," said John Ingram, slowly. "The thing is to strike the right vein, and to work it skilfully when it is struck. Do you know I 've made a fortune here, Blake?"

"So I have heard; and you are a young man yet."

"Comparatively speaking, yes; but here a man grows old before his time. I like the place well enough—which is scarcely to be wondered at, seeing I 've been in it twenty years—but I 've never got over the feeling that I 'm only a sojourner in a

strange land; and for my wife's and children's sakes it is my desire and intention to spend the latter years of my life in the old country."

"I am astonished that you should still feel an alien after so long a stay here," said Richard, musingly.

"It is true. The love of the old home sticks to some men to the last, while others never feel it. There are few advantages here for children; I should not care to see Walter in business in this town, and I know that my wife's heart is across the seas as well as mine."

"Mrs. Ingram seems happy and cheerful," said Richard in a slightly constrained voice.

"Yes, God bless her; she gave up everything for me, and made a paradise of this wretched place because she loved me," said John Ingram with unwonted emotion. "Ah, Blake! the best of *us* can never come near to a good woman in unselfishness and devotion, and a wife teaches us many things about ourselves we didn't know before, our own unworthiness among them. You will find that out some day, when you are blessed as I have been and am."

"All women are not like Mrs. Ingram," said Richard Blake a little harshly, and abruptly rose.

John Ingram started slightly, for it seemed as if his wife might not be so far at sea in her surmise after all.

"Well, well, what am I saying? A lot of stuff likely," he said hastily. "What I meant to be at was, that if you are willing to settle in Kimberley, what do you say to a partnership with me?"

Richard Blake looked much surprised.

"You are very good, but I have no money, no securities to offer, nothing in fact which you have a right to expect from a man you would ask to share your business," he replied.

"I don't want anything. I haven't known you very long, but it has been long enough to make me trust you. The advantage won't be all on your side. Don't think it. I know very well what I 'm doing, Blake, so if you agree just say so, and we 'll shake hands upon it and discuss terms another time."

John Ingram again looked with a start at Richard Blake. A change seemed to have come over the man. He stood erect, his bearing seemed prouder, more independent, his face brighter than he had ever seen it before. These words, "It has been long enough to make me trust you," had wrought the charm, and Richard Blake felt that an honourable place in the world might yet be his.

"God bless you, John Ingram," he said huskily. "Some day I will be able to thank you, but not now. It will be my endeavour to prove worthy of the rare and undeserved confidence you have placed in me."

"Nay, not undeserved," corrected John Ingram, with a sunny smile. "I have proved you. You needn't have come back to Kimberley now, you know, unless you had a mind to. Some day, perhaps, when you get better acquainted with me, you 'll tell me something about your troubles in the old country."

"I failed in business and came off in disgust with

myself and all the world," said Richard, briefly. "I 'll tell you the rest another time. Well, I won't trespass on your kindness longer to-night. Will you make my apologies to Mrs. Ingram, and let me off to my own quarters?"

"If you wish it, yes; but you know you are welcome to come and go here when you like. I can speak for Louie as well as for myself, I know."

"Thanks," said Richard Blake, and wrung the offered hand like a vice.

Oh, but it is a blessed thing to grasp the outstretched hand of friendship when the world is darkest to us! John Ingram's words fell that night upon Richard Blake's heart like the sweetest dews of heaven. When Mrs. Ingram re-entered the room she found her husband alone and apparently deeply absorbed in thought.

"Has Mr. Blake gone away, John?" she asked in rather a disappointed tone. She was as much interested in Richard Blake as John was himself.

"Yes, dear; he was tired, and I said I would make his apologies to you. Well, Louie, I've offered, and he has accepted, partnership. Was it wise in me, little woman?"

"You should know best, John; but I am sure you can trust him. What beautiful, true, kind eyes he has! Of course you smile. That is a very silly reason to give for trusting a man, but eyes can't tell lies, aren't they the mirrors of the soul? Besides, unless Mr. Blake was a good man Walter would not love him so. I am amazed at the child. Just think what he did to-night!"

"I couldn't guess, Louie," said John with interest.

"He had said his prayers, and I was about to lift him into bed, when he said suddenly, 'Oh, mamma, I 've forgotten something.' Then he knelt down again and said, 'O Lord, I forgot to say, "Bless dear Mr. Blake, and don't let him go away any more among wild men, for Jesus' sake. Amen." Wasn't that to the point, John?" said Mrs. Ingram with a smile and a tear struggling for the mastery in her eye.

"Very much to the point, indeed," was John's reply, and somehow after that a silence fell upon them both.

Meanwhile the subject of their talk has reached his own lonely lodging, and locked his door. Then he opened his trunk and took from thence a letter case, a dainty thing in finest morocco, with clasps of gold, a relic of the old luxurious Brampton Square days. If Mrs. Ingram could have peeped over Richard Blake's shoulder as he sat at the table and took out the contents with tender fingers, she might have flattered herself that she was a very far-seeing and penetrating woman. There was a bundle of letters held together by an elastic band, a photograph in an ivory case, and a tiny piece of tissue paper, in which was wrapped a lock of hair, every thread of which was like living gold. Richard Blake touched the spring of the ivory case, and oh, how fair a face revealed itself to his stern gaze! He looked at it very long, yet without change of expression, without any tenderness creeping into his face. Then he shut it with a quick sharp click, tossed it aside, and took from the elastic band the last letter he had slipped within it. He carefully

spread out the dainty fashionably-tinted sheet, from which emanated a faint sweet perfume like wood violets in the spring. The words written thereon were few, and not of absorbing interest. We may read them with him :—

KENDAL HALL,
SUTTON-LE-WILLOWS, *August*, 18—.

DEAR RICHARD,—I duly received your letter apprising me of your safe arrival. I am pleased that you had a pleasant voyage, and that you are satisfied with the new country. I hope your expectations of it will be still further realised. I am not quite so sanguine as you, for we had a gentleman dining here the other evening who has travelled far, and it is his opinion that there is no more money to be made in the South African settlements. That is papa's opinion too. He thinks you would have done better in Queensland. However, now that you are out, I suppose you will need to make the best of it. I am glad to gather from your letter that leaving England cost you so little pain. I am quite well. Thanks for your kind inquiries about my spirits. If they are not exhilarating, perhaps I am to be excused. I shall be glad to hear from time to time how you are keeping, and I shall not fail to answer your letters regularly.—I am, your affectionate wife,

FRANCES BLAKE.

Brief and cold enough of a truth. And these were the last words which had reached him from a far country! If Frances could have guessed what bitter pain that letter (written in a hasty moment when "pride ruled her will") was to inflict upon her husband's heart, how it would but serve to harden

him against her, ay, even while he was heartsick with love for her, she would never have written it. Already it had been repented of, as we know—ay, seventy times seven, and words of loving entreaty for forgiveness had been sent after it, but they had not reached the eyes for which they were intended and never would now, for Richard had shifted his quarters many times since these penitent words had been penned, and so had missed his English letters He did not greatly care. He had waited anxiously for the first epistle from his wife, and when it came it chilled him to the heart. He read and re-read it that night until every word was imprinted on his memory. Its tone seemed to reproach him, although it was not intended to do so. He pictured to himself how contemptuously they would discuss him at the Hall, thinking it impossible, or improbable, at least, that he could do any more good from a worldly point of view. A grim smile touched his lips, and he slowly gathered together these relics of the past, and replaced them in his trunk. He would trouble his English kith and kin no more. For a time he would be as dead to them; he would let them think or say of him what they willed, and he would labour on. For what end? To make a great fortune; to build up for himself a name and a place in the land of his adoption; and then if the desire for triumph still remained, to return in the pride of his success and shame them into silence. And from that day he threw himself heart and soul into the business of which John Ingram had so generously offered him a share. His partner was amazed. It seemed impossible to

weary Richard Blake; he had the energy, the perseverance, the indomitable working powers of seven men. Money flowed into the coffers of Ingram & Company. But while the balance in favour of Richard Blake grew bigger and broader in the bank day by day, he remained a moody and miserable man; and at the end of two years Louie Ingram was as far from penetrating the secret of his life as she had been at the beginning, so she gave him up in despair.

CHAPTER XXII.

BRINGING IT HOME.

"The veil is rent sometimes, and we see that what we thought nobleness in our own actions was only a form of selfishness. It is a wholesome lesson."

"NOW, Mr. Blake, I will take *no* refusal. It is to be such a quiet affair. Just half-a-dozen friends to dinner, and a little music afterwards. Even a hermit could scarcely object to that. Say we we may be sure of you on Thursday night?"

So said Mrs. Ingram to her husband's partner one Sunday evening as they were walking home from church together. Hitherto all her persuasions had failed to induce Mr. Blake to make one at the happy social gatherings for which she was famous.

"I am not a company man, Mrs. Ingram," he said, making use of the excuse which had served him so often before. "And I should probably act as a kind of damper on your pleasant evening. Pray excuse me. I am best left to myself."

"Nay, I will not excuse you," said Mrs. Ingram, wilfully. "We expect some friends whom I am very anxious you should meet. Good evening. I shall look for you at six o'clock on Thursday evening, and if you fail me—but I know you will not. Come, Walter."

So saying the little lady tripped away to join her husband, who was walking with the clergyman in front, and Richard Blake, against his will, was obliged to consider himself bound for Thursday evening.

Mrs. Ingram hardly dared to expect him. Nevertheless he appeared a few minutes before the appointed hour, and a smile of real pleasure lit up her sweet face as she offered him her hand. Mrs. Ingram's dinner parties were celebrated in Kimberley. They were always small, and as she had the happy knack of bringing together people who suited each other (the greatest secret of all successful social gatherings) there never were any jarring discords to mar the harmony of an evening in John Ingram's home. Then her *menu* was always delightful, her table exquisitely appointed; and she and her husband were such good entertainers in themselves that their invitations were never refused.

When Richard Blake entered his partner's drawing-room that night he recognised all the guests save one, a handsome, distinguished-looking young lady, who was introduced to him as Miss Maynard. He took her in to dinner, and found her a pleasant, well-informed, and thoroughly enjoyable companion. Mrs. Ingram's eyes shone with brighter lustre when she saw how attentive Mr.

Blake was to her friend, and how earnest and apparently interesting was their conversation. She loved both these two, and had a plan in her head concerning them which, like so many human plans, was made but to be set aside. It was truly a pleasant evening. There was music, but not too much to prove irksome, varied by quiet and enjoyable talk about literature and art and society at large; for Mrs. Ingram permitted no business talk in her drawing-room. Richard Blake came out of his shell, and even John Ingram, who knew and admired his friend so much, was amazed to hear his critical and appreciative remarks upon topics so far removed from the business of his daily life. It but increased the mystery which hung about his past life, and deepened John's conviction that Blake had been "something" in the old country.

The guests left at nine, but Richard, being quite at home at Ingram House, sat still playing with little Walter, who had been allowed to sit up an hour beyond his usual bedtime.

John Ingram stood a few minutes discussing the events of the evening, and then went down to the study to write a letter, leaving his wife and his friend alone.

"Now, Mr. Blake, confess that you enjoyed yourself; that you had a pleasant evening in spite of your determination to be bored and generally unhappy," said Mrs. Ingram playfully.

Richard laughed.

"You are very hard upon me, Mrs. Ingram. Yes, I had a thoroughly enjoyable evening. Time

has not sped so swiftly with me for long," he answered readily.

"Our friends are all nice," said Mrs. Ingram. "Is not Miss Maynard a beautiful and amiable girl?"

"Very much so, indeed," replied Richard. "She does not reside in Kimberley, surely?"

"No; she is on a visit to her aunt, Mrs. Van Derne. Her home is in Durban. Her mother was a widow, but has lately married again, and so home is not what it was to poor Emily."

"I should think it likely that Miss Maynard will not be long allowed to lack a home," said Richard Blake, quietly. "Especially in this benighted land," he added with a smile.

"Mr. Blake!" said Mrs. Ingram, suddenly breaking the brief silence which ensued, "why don't you seek some good woman and make a home for yourself here? Do not think me impertinent, but if you only knew how dear you are to John and to me, and how sorry we are to see you so lonely and unhappy, you would not be vexed with me for asking you such a plain question."

Richard Blake put down Walter from his knee and began to walk restlessly up and down the room. Looking at his face, which betrayed the keenest emotion and agitation, she regretted her question.

"Because you are so truly my friend, Mrs. Ingram," he said at length, rather unsteadily, "I will tell you the truth: I have a wife in England!"

Mrs. Ingram's face grew pale with the very intensity of her surprise. Even her wildest imagination had never reached this, had never got beyond

a love disappointment or family troubles. Her eyes grew very troubled, and there were no further questionings on her lips.

"You have heard the adage, Marry in haste, repent at leisure. Mrs. Ingram, such was my experience, although my repentance was on my wife's account rather than on my own," said Richard, quietly. "I was not suited to her in any way; I could not give her such as she had been accustomed to, and so—she was not happy."

Then briefly, yet concisely, he related to John Ingram's wife all the story of the past. What a relief it was to the man's sore heart to unburden himself thus, I cannot try to tell you! In the middle of the story John Ingram opened the door, but his wife motioned to him and he at once withdrew. The little Walter climbed into his mother's lap and fell asleep there, while she listened with absorbing interest to the history of Richard Blake's life.

When he ceased she did not speak for a little; there were some things she must ponder in her heart, for she did not quite understand them yet.

"I cannot quite comprehend how your wife allowed you to come away here alone," she said at last. "Did you ask her to come with you?"

"No; it was useless. I had spoiled her life for her, Mrs. Ingram, and the truest kindness I could show her was to rid her of my presence," replied Richard, bitterly.

"You did not ask her to accompany you?" repeated Louie Ingram.

"No; I knew too well what her answer would

be ; besides, she was better at home among her own people. What had I to bring her to? How was I to know I was to find such friends here as you and John?"

"But another thing I cannot understand. Why have you not sent or gone for her long ere this? You see it is possible to build up as pleasant and happy a home here as in England. Why have *you* not done so?"

Richard Blake was silent for a moment. Somehow, brought face to face with it now, the resolution he had thought so noble, the line of action for which he had commended himself during these past years, seemed not only mean and pitiful, but wrong.

"You cannot quite understand how I was placed in regard to my wife's relatives before I left England, Mrs. Ingram," he said. "They despised me. They blamed me utterly and entirely for our wrecked fortune, forgetting that Frances had helped to wreck them. Why, that day I left, my father-in-law looked at and spoke to me as if I were a felon convicted of some heinous crime. A man cannot endure for ever, Mrs. Ingram ; therefore I resolved that they should hear no more of me until I could prove to them I was not the useless hulk they thought."

Graver and more troubled still grew the sweet face of John Ingram's wife.

"And you have never written to your wife all these months?" she said slowly.

"Never since I apprised her of my safe arrival and a few lines following, telling her I was about to start on an expedition to the interior."

"O Mr. Blake—your poor, poor wife! I am very sorry for her! How could you be so cruel, so unkind to her?"

"Not more so than she was to me!" said Richard hotly, roused into self-defence as much against his own consciousness as against his open accuser.

"That has nothing to do with it. I never heard of anything so unkind," repeated Louie Ingram. "Why, think of what she must have endured all this time! Perhaps the suspense may have killed her."

Richard Blake suddenly and swiftly turned his head away. In all his thoughts of his wife—and they had been many and varied—that had never occurred to him.

"She never cared enough for me to fret for me. I question if even my death would have occasioned her much pain," he said in a low voice.

"Oh, hush! I am a woman, Mr. Blake; and I know what a wife's feelings are. She may not have loved you when you were married, but I am sure her heart has wakened to you now. There is nothing like separation from those we love for teaching us all we feel about them. Marriage is not like any other thing, Mr. Blake. There is a bond, a strange clinging of the heart which does not enter into any of the other relationships of life. I know just as well as if I had been told that your wife at home in England loves you now, whatever she may have done in the past. You will write to her this very night before you sleep. You will ask her to forgive you, for you need her forgiveness,

and you will beg her to come to you now. You should have asked her long ago."

The pleading, tremulous voice ceased, and there was no sound in the quiet room but the ticking of the clock and the solemn sighing of the night wind among the leaves of the creepers about the verandah.

"Though you may not love her as a man should love his wife, Richard Blake, you are none the less bound in duty to her; and though you devoted a lifetime in care and tenderness for her it would not atone for what she must have suffered during the years you have left her in such cruel suspense."

"I have suffered, too," said Richard Blake, "for she probed very deep."

"You deserved to suffer. You inflicted the pain with your own hand," said Louie Ingram fearlessly.

"Your poor, poor wife; my heart bleeds for her. O Mr. Blake! don't allow the fact that you no longer care for her to prevent you from fulfilling your sacred duty to her. God requires it of you. The marriage bond cannot be snapped so easily and lightly. Her sins seem to have been those of heedlessness and waywardness, and, as you said, she was very beautiful and very young. Perhaps you did not take the right way with her just at first."

Again there was a silence, and still Richard Blake kept his face hidden from the clear searching eyes of the woman who had told him the truth about himself. At length he turned to her and took her slender hand in a grip of iron.

"I will do as you say. I will not write; I will go to my wife and ask her to forgive me. My very

soul cleaves to her. I never loved her as I do at this moment. You have opened my eyes. May God forgive me for my pride and hardness of heart! May God bless *you* my friend."

A week later a homeward bound vessel set sail from the African shore. Strangely enough her name was the *Pembroke Castle*, and she numbered among her list of passengers the name of Richard Blake.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MOTHER AND CHILD.

"A cup of cold water to a thirsty soul."

COME, Harry, it is time we were away home, my pet. It is past your dinner time."

"Comin', ma," answered back the sweet, ringing tones of a childish voice; but the little one lingered a moment yet by the river's brim to watch the dog swim after the stick he had gleefully thrown in for him to catch. It was a picture a painter might have loved to study. It was a clear and beautiful day; somewhat wintry in its aspect, perhaps, for the year was very near its close. But the air was sharp and bracing, the woodland paths crisp and pleasant to the feet, and on the bare boughs and the ever-green branches the hoar-frost sparkled like diamonds in the sun. It was the first frost of the year, and at the edge of the lake there were thin cakes of ice which the sun's rays had not been powerful enough to dissolve.

Leaning against the door of the boathouse was a lady, young and very fair, with a sweet, patient, tender face, which to look at was to love. She was dressed with the utmost simplicity—a dark, close-fitting tweed dress and jacket, with trimmings of fur, and a hat of the same material. She was watching with tenderest interest the gambols of a little child not very long able to toddle alone—a sturdy fellow, with his mother's eyes and bright golden hair.

Obedient to her repeated request he toddled towards her and slipped his tiny hand in hers. She clasped it very closely, and a sudden change swept across her face. Well might the little hand cling confidingly to hers; it was the one link which bound her to earth, the solace of her desolation, the ray of sunshine which relieved the sombre gloom of her life. They walked slowly along the moss-grown path, the child chattering all the while, the mother answering at random, for her thoughts were far away.

"There's gan'pa, ma!" cried the little one when they emerged from the trees out upon the wide avenue. "Gan'pa!"

Grandpapa was on horseback, and but for his mother's firm grasp the fearless child would have run at once among the animal's hoofs.

"Hulloa, young man! are you for a ride with granddad to-day, eh?" said the Squire, reining in his spirited steed and looking with loving eyes on the bright, eager baby-face uplifted to his.

"Es, gan'pa. Let me, ma," he answered, struggling to free himself from his mother's hold.

"Don't tempt him, papa," said she; "you know he can't get on King Harold's back. Are you going into Sutton?"

"Yes. I heard your mother asking for you. Something about the folks she is to have for Christmas. Try and cut down the list, Frances. A crowded house doesn't suit me. It bores a man, you know, to make himself agreeable to people he doesn't care a fig for. Hulloa, Harry! what a long face! Going to cry, eh? Never mind, you shall have a ride when I come home, as sure as I'm your granddad." So saying the Squire rode away, and the mother and child went on towards the house.

Little Harry Blake was spoiled and petted by everybody in Kendal Hall except his grandmother. He was rather afraid of her; she never took him on her knee and kissed and fondled him as his mother and other ladies did; and she scolded him for very small offences, such as carrying flowers into the house or building castles with grandpa's books in the library. Poor wee Harry, he could not know, of course, what an eyesore he was to those proud eyes; he was too young yet to realise that he had no home in the world (for Kendal Hall was no home to him nor to his mother); that he had no heritage, like other children, nothing in the world, indeed, that he could call his own except his fair, young mother, the joy and solace of whose heart he was.

A nursery had been fitted up in the upper regions of the house, and Mrs. Kendal required that Frances should keep her baby there, out of sight or

hearing. It had been no difficult matter so long as he was in arms, but directly the small feet found their way to the floor the nursery walls could not keep him in. And now the mischief-loving and mischief-making elf was in every corner of the house. Even grandma's own boudoir was not sacred in his eyes; and a severe whipping she administered to cure him of his propensity for taking forbidden articles as playthings failed to have any effect. The child was as wild as the wind, as daring and frolicsome as a colt, and nothing would tame him. His dinner hour was one o'clock, and thereafter he would compose himself to sleep for an hour, when his mother had leisure to read or work. After he was asleep that afternoon she went away down to her mother's sitting-room to see what was required of her. Mrs. Kendal was at her davenport busy writing, and only slightly turned her head at her daughter's entrance.

"Papa told me you wanted me," said Frances, quietly. "Can I help you with your writing?"

"Yes, in a minute. I was going to talk to you about the people I expect next week," replied Mrs. Kendal, folding up the dainty epistle she had just finished and slipping it into an envelope.

"The Earl and Countess have accepted, Frances, and they will be here on the twenty-third."

"Yes, mamma," was all that Frances said.

What did it matter to her who came or went to Kendal Hall since the one for whom she had so long endured the heart-sickness of hope deferred would never come again?

"It is five years since they spent Christmas with us before," continued Mrs. Kendal, rapidly addressing her letter. "Things were very different with you then."

"Yes, mamma, they were. That was the first Christmas of my married life, and Richard and I were here," replied Frances, very quietly still, yet with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Yes, you are right. Well, Frances, I don't want to hurt you, but I really wish you would consider the advisability of wearing a widow's dress now. It would make your position more—more—respectable, shall I call it? At present it is neither one thing nor another; and surely, after the lapse of two years and a-half, there cannot be the slightest hope that your husband still lives. It is evidently beyond a doubt that he never returned from that expedition about which he wrote to you."

Mrs. Kendal spoke rapidly and wrote while she was speaking, for she knew very well that she was saying a very cruel and unnecessary thing.

There was a brief silence.

When Mrs. Kendal at length ventured to look at her daughter's face she saw that it had grown paler, and that the beautiful eyes, looking away through the window, had a strange expression in their depths. But that was all. Whatever Frances may have felt she hid it well. Those weary years had taught her absolute control of herself and her emotions.

"Would it please you very much, mamma, to see me going about in a widow's dress?" she asked.

"What an absurd question!" said Mrs. Kendal,

impatiently. "You ought to know very well I am only thinking and speaking for your good. Richard Blake has done you sufficient injury already. There is no need why you should waste the prime of your life in mourning for him. And beautiful as I have seen you look, Frances, I never saw you so beautiful as you are just now."

Very slowly Frances Blake brought her eyes to bear upon her mother's face. Was there any hidden meaning underlying these smooth words? she wondered. Could it be that her mother could be contemplating another settlement in life for her? She rose, shivering slightly, and shook her head.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, mamma; but so long as I have no proof of my husband's death I will continue to hope that he is alive, and that he will come back to me. In these circumstances it would be a folly and a crime in me to appear in the garb of widowhood before the world, and it might bring upon me a righteous punishment."

"Please yourself, of course," retorted the mother, rather angrily. "Really it is most unpleasant for me to require to answer the inevitable questions which will be showered upon me next week by my guests."

Frances hesitated a moment on the threshold of the door.

"I may as well tell you, mamma, that I had a letter from Miss Osborne this morning asking me to spend Christmas with her at Merlin. Her pupils leave on the twenty-third, and she could receive me the following day. As I shall only be out of place among the gay company assembled here next

week, I would rather, if you would allow me, write an acceptance at once."

"I have no objections, of course," said Mrs. Kendal, inwardly rather relieved. "Though I cannot for the life of me think what you find to amuse or interest you in the society of an old maid like Miss Osborne."

"She has proved herself my truest friend on earth, mamma; that is what makes her society so sweet," replied Frances, and stole away up to her lonely watching by her baby's cot. If her eyes grew dim, and her heart ached with an added bitterness when she bowed her head above him, who could blame her? Life was very hard for her, and likely to be harder still.

On the twenty-third Mrs. Kendal's most distinguished guests, the Earl and Countess of Ellesmere, arrived at the Hall. They were an elderly and childless couple, kindly and unostentatious in their ways, although their wealth was boundless, and their name and lineage among the most ancient and honoured in the kingdom.

At the select dinner-party Mrs. Kendal gave in their honour Frances did not appear. In answer to Lord Ellesmere's inquiry for her he was told that she was not very well, and that her little son engrossed all her attention. He said nothing, but he missed his favourite very much, and meant to see her before the night was over. He had his way. Leaving the gentlemen in the billiard-room he stole away upstairs and, meeting a maid on the way, asked her to take him to Mrs. Blake. Somewhat astonished, the girl took him to the upper

storey, and showed him the nursery door. He pushed it ajar very softly and looked in. It was a large, wide, low-ceiled room, comfortably furnished and lighted by a cheerful fire and a reading lamp on the centre table. By that table sat Frances, busily plying her needle and thread for her darling. He slept soundly in his cot, with one dimpled hand outside the coverlet and his golden hair lying about him like a halo. The first step the intruder took into the room caused the young mother to look round. She started to her feet then, her sewing falling from her hand in her surprise.

"Lord Ellesmere!" she exclaimed, and her face flushed deep crimson.

"It used to be Uncle Ellesmere in the old days, my dear," said the old man, and he took the trembling hand in his and raised it to his lips. "I missed you downstairs and came to seek you. I want to see your boy."

"He is here, uncle," answered Frances softly, and they went together to look at the sleeping child.

"He has your hair but he is his father's living image," said the Earl. "My dear, I am very sorry for you. You have had a hard life of it since you married. How did it all come about? I thought your husband a fine manly fellow the only time I ever met him. How did he make such a wreck of his fortunes?"

"It was my blame, Uncle Ellesmere; all my blame," said Frances. "But I have had my sore punishment."

"Ay, ay; so you have. But you might have come to me for help before you let him away to

that foreign land. You were always my favourite, my dear, and I would have gladly helped your husband too, for I liked him—I did indeed."

Frances said nothing. The proffered kindness had come too late.

"And you have never heard of him, I suppose? Do you think it possible he can still be alive?"

"I don't know. I hope against hope, else I could not live," said Frances, her eyes full of tears.

"That's right, that's right. Keep up your heart, and it'll all come right somehow—if not here, yonder," said the old man, pointing upward.

"You must come to Ellesmere with the boy. Your aunt would like it, I am sure. She will be up to see you to-morrow; but I couldn't wait, so I found the way for myself."

Frances smiled. The kindly sympathy of the Earl did her good. How little her mother, acting the graceful hostess in the drawing-room, dreamed of what was going on in Harry's nursery! Perhaps it was as well she did not know.

"You look younger and prettier, but your face isn't the same as it used to be. It minds me of my Madonna at Ellesmere," said the Earl. "Well, good-night, my dear. Keep up your heart, and it'll all come right. God knows all about it. Your aunt would tell you so, too. Good-night! Good-night!"

So saying, the old man, lest his feelings should overcome him, hastily kissed his favourite niece and withdrew. But he left a ray of light behind. His visit was indeed like a cup of cold water to the thirsty soul of Frances Blake.

On the morrow the mother and child went away from the Hall to visit once more the little sea-side town where Harry first opened his eyes upon the world.

How little either of them dreamed that it was their last parting from Kendal Hall, and that ere many days were over they would be no longer homeless in the wide world; for where love is there is home.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE EXILE'S RETURN.

"Change, change, the lot of poor humanity!"

ON the morning of the twenty-fourth of December the *Pembroke Castle* landed her passengers safely in London Dock. It was a raw and foggy day, with a cold, easterly breeze tossing the river into miniature billows, and causing the vessels to sway uneasily at their anchorage. A number of people awaited the arrival of the steamer, some of whom, anxiously expecting the loved and longed for, had kept a patient vigil for many hours. It was a pleasant, heart-stirring sight when the passengers got ashore, and to some at least the cold and disagreeable morning mattered not at all, for the very sunshine of the summer time was in their hearts. There were some sad sights also amid these joyful meetings, for some had come home in haste ere death claimed some dear one in old England, and arrived but to find themselves too late. Others

were like strangers in a strange land, forlorn and lonely beings, to whom none stretched out the hand of friendship or spoke a kindly word. These hurried away to their respective destinations, glad to turn aside from the glad babel of welcomings in which they had no part.

Among the passengers who had no friends awaiting his arrival, and who hailed the first cab in sight and immediately drove away, was a handsome and gentlemanly man, who would at once have been recognised in the commercial centres of the city as Blake, of Devonshire & Blake. He drove to Anderton's Hotel, where he breakfasted and exchanged his travelling garb for a well-made suit of English tweeds, which he had last worn on the day he had gone to Sutton to bid his wife farewell. What had been necessary to keep out the cold of the raw English climate he had found useless in the land of his adoption.

When he stepped from the hotel door into the busy thoroughfare of Fleet Street the bell of St. Paul's pealed the hour of noon. That solemn and musical chime, familiar to him since his boyhood, stirred his heart with a thousand memories of the past. He walked on like a man in a dream, with his brows knit and his eyes bent upon the ground, but his feet, knowing whither the spirit desired to go, led him by way of Oxford Street to Bingham Street. Cool, self-possessed man though he was, Richard Blake's heart throbbed violently as he neared the old and well-remembered home. How would they receive him? how reward for the wrong he had done to them? Would a mother's heart be

large enough and tender enough to forgive such long neglect? The cruelty of his silence was the uppermost thought in his mind as he stood for a moment on the steps before ringing the bell. To all outward appearance the house was unaltered. The windows were adorned with their neat Venetians and shaded by curtains of a warm crimson hue bordered with an edge of lace. There were flowers and ferns, too, in the oriel window of the dining-room. But what was that beyond the fern case? The figure of a man attired in a dressing-gown? An old man, evidently, for there was a thin fringe of white hair visible below a richly-embroidered smoking cap. With trembling fingers Richard Blake hurriedly pulled the bell and a neat maid-servant at once answered the summons. His heart sank, for the girl's face was strange to him, and he could scarcely frame the words his lips would utter.

"Is Mrs. Blake at home, or Miss Osborne?" he asked; "can I see either of them?"

The girl looked surprised.

"I am afraid you have made a mistake, sir," she replied courteously. "No ladies of that name live here. My master's name is Mr. Ellis? you can see him, sir. He has just come in from his walk."

"Ah! thank you; it does not matter," said Richard Blake unsteadily. "Ah! well, if you please, I will have a word with Mr. Ellis," he added on second thoughts, for the tenant of the house would probably be able to give him some information concerning his predecessors. He was shown to a small ante-room opposite the dining-room, which

in old days had been his own private sanctum, but which the new tenant had converted into a small library. After one hurried glance round Richard Blake sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands. What was the meaning of this great and woful change? whither had the dear ones gone? had he but come home to find himself a stranger alone and uncared-for in the great wilderness of London? If he had erred, surely this moment of bitter pain, of agonising suspense, was punishment heavy enough?

The library door opened and the old gentleman entered.

Richard Blake rose to his feet, himself again, and made a brief apology for his intrusion upon one who was a stranger to him.

"I have just returned from abroad, sir, and not having heard of any changes I expected to find my friends, Mrs. Blake and Miss Osborne, where I left them two and a-half years ago."

"No apology is necessary, sir," replied the old gentleman kindly. "I shall be happy to give you any information I can, though it may grieve you, I fear. The elder lady, Mrs. Blake, died here"——

"Died!"

The abrupt monosyllable, uttered in tones of anguish, interrupted the old gentleman's speech and caused him to look keenly into the face of the stranger.

"You seem overwhelmed, sir; pray sit down," he said kindly. "May I ask if you are any near relative of Mrs. Blake?"

"I am her son," was the brief reply, and Richard

Blake turned his face away. In the darkest hours of his home-sickness in that far-off land he had never dreamed of this.

"If I do not trouble you too much, sir, would you kindly give me what particulars you possess concerning her death and the subsequent proceedings of the younger lady, Miss Osborne?" he said at length, striving to speak calmly.

"I regret that I know nothing whatever about the circumstances of the lady's death, Mr. Blake. The house was advertised to let at Whitsuntide, and when we called about it we found the younger lady you mention sole tenant and proprietrix. She told us her aunt had died a few months previously, and that the house was too large for her; also, that she desired to remove into the country—to the seaside, if possible."

"You know where she has gone, I hope?" interrupted Richard Blake impatiently.

"She is our landlady, sir, and we are frequently in correspondence with her," said the old gentleman with a slight smile. "Miss Osborne's address is Sunset House, Merlin-on-Sea, on the Sussex coast, I think; but I am not sure."

Richard Blake took out his pocket-book and carefully noted down the address. Then warmly thanking Mr. Ellis for his courtesy he withdrew. His destination now was the station at Charing Cross, where he had to wait half-an-hour for the afternoon train to Sutton-le-Willows. We need not wonder that that half-hour seemed interminable to him, for his mind was full of forebodings dark as night. What if Frances also had crossed the

bourne! What if he had come too late to clasp his wife once more to his hungry heart! Remembering her fragile look, the sharp outline of the beautiful face, the purple rims about the eyes, as he had seen them last in the arbour at Kendal Hall, his heart almost died within him. As the train sped rapidly across the wintry landscape he buried his face in his hands and prayed. It was the passionate outpouring of a human heart to its Creator in its sorest need, and brought at least a semblance of peace with it. But it could not still nor drive away the agony of suspense and apprehension.

He was recognised by the station-master at Sutton, and that individual, after a prolonged stare, respectfully touched his hat. But Richard Blake did not return the salutation, but strode off through the fields to the Hall. The station-master, after carefully watching which way Mr. Blake took, went into his office and discussed the arrival with his assistant with infinite relish. It was dusk when the train arrived, and dark when Richard Blake entered the park. It was a moonless and starless night, and had he not known every foot of the way he might easily have gone astray in the dense woods for which the Squire's place was famous. At length there glimmered through the trees the lights of the great house. They were many and brilliant, for as you know Mrs. Kendal's most distinguished Christmas guests had arrived at the Hall. Richard Blake did not hesitate here as he had done at the London house, because he dared not. Only he wondered as he stepped from the turf upon the wide sweep of gravel in front of the

house which of all these gaily-lighted rooms held his darling. He knocked at the door, not caring to send the echoes of the great bell sounding through the house. He wanted to enter quietly and almost unobserved, if that were possible. The men-servants were all engaged in the dining-room, but a maid passing up to the bed-rooms heard the knock and ran back to the door, thinking it would be an expected messenger from the town. She had been some years in service at the Squire's, and had risen from the kitchen to the post of upper housemaid, so she had frequently seen Mr. Blake at the Hall. But when her eyes fell upon him standing where the light from the lamp struck full upon him, she started back and nearly screamed.

"Don't be afraid, Jessie," said Richard, smiling to reassure her. "It is not a ghost but myself, real flesh and blood, just arrived from Africa this very day."

Then to his amazement the girl burst into tears.

"My wife, Jessie?" he said in his eagerness, and laid his hand upon her arm. "She is alive, I hope, and well?"

"Oh, yes, sir," and a sunny smile broke through the girl's tears. "Only she is away from home just now. Forgive me crying, sir, it was for joy, for dear Mrs. Blake's sake, and for——"

Whatever Jessie had been about to add she was interrupted by the messenger she had been expecting appearing at the door. While she spoke to him Richard Blake stepped into a small room which was used by the Squire for keeping his guns and fishing tackle, and where he was in the habit of transact-

ing business with his steward. In a moment Jessie looked in.

"Shall I tell the Squire, sir? They are at dinner. It is an hour earlier to-night, as they are going to a ball at Lady Humphrey's. The Earl and Countess of Ellesmere are here."

"And where is Mrs. Blake, Jessie?"

"Away to Merlin, sir, to spend Christmas with Miss Osborne. But I will go for the Squire, Mr. Blake."

"No, Jessie. I shall just go back to the station; I shall be in time for the last up-train. Tell your master I have been here, and that I will be back again whenever I have seen my wife. Good-night, my girl, and a merry Christmas to you to-morrow, when it comes."

So saying, he slipped a sovereign into the girl's hand, and before she could recover from her astonishment he was gone. She could scarcely convince herself that she had not dreamed it all; only there was the bright coin glittering on her palm. Half-an-hour later, when the gentlemen were coming out of the dining-room to join the ladies upstairs, the housemaid requested a word with her master. A few minutes later he burst into the drawing-room in a state of great excitement.

"Why, my dear, what do you think?" he said, addressing his wife. "Blake has actually come back! He has been here, and is away again, one of the girls tells me, so that he can catch an early train for Merlin. I can hardly believe it!"

The guests looked much interested, the hostess confused and a trifle uncomfortable. But Dr.

Harry, who had come from Scotland for his usual Christmas holiday, uttered a very hearty "Hurrah!" thereby showing his disregard for the conventionalities of his mother's drawing-room.

And the old Earl, turning aside, said to his wife in low tones, but with unmistakable earnestness, "Thank God!"

CHAPTER XXV.

REUNION.

"'Tis a solemn, almost terrible joy when one we have given up as dead is miraculously restored to us. Such joy is as difficult to bear as sorrow, but it seldom kills."

HATEVER it may have been in colder, more northerly regions, the old-fashioned Christmas weather was lacking at Merlin-on-Sea. The dawning was fair and lovely, and seemed fraught with the promise of an early spring. Great masses of soft, dove-coloured clouds, capped with rose and yellow, undulated above the horizon, and when the sun burst his golden chains, sea and shore lay bathed in a warm, mellow glow, and the air was genial enough to make one dream of summer. As usual, the little town was in the height or depth of its winter dulness, with tenantless houses, deserted beach and promenade, quiet streets, where few pedestrians walked abroad. Only two trains from the centres of civilisation stopped at Merlin railway station daily during the winter months. The first

arrived shortly before noon, the second between seven and eight in the evening. By the first train on Christmas Day one passenger came to Merlin, and walked rapidly away from the station, as if in haste to accomplish some important end. The line of rails did not run close to the town, and some visitors complained of the mile walk which lay between. It led by two ways, one along a wide, well-wooded road, and the other by the beach. The stranger chose the latter, as many did, because it was the pleasanter of the two. The sea was as smooth as a mill-pond, save only where it broke with low and restful cadence on the sandy shore. Merlin was famous for its sands—they stretched right along in smooth unbroken sweep to Wildermouth, the most fashionable watering-place on that much-frequented coast. The tide was coming in, and each succeeding wave seemed to lessen the space betwixt sea and shore. It was a fair, heart-soothing picture, but the stranger saw it not. He walked with his head bent and his eyes upon the ground; and if his step was hurried and nervous it need not be wondered at, for a great crisis of his life was at hand. A few minutes would bring him to the fulfilment or the dispelling of his greatest earthly hope. He had seen no living thing since he left the station, and almost started when, suddenly rounding a ledge of rock which jutted out from the base of the cliffs, he saw a little child, with pail and spade beside him, intently examining the depths of a shining little pool left in a hollow of the rock. There was no one in sight; probably his nurse or guardian would be round the further

ledge, which shut in the little bay. In spite of his haste, the stranger paused a moment beside the child, and looked down upon him with that rare, kindly smile which had stolen away little Walter Ingram's heart in far-off Kimberley. The child looked up into the stranger's face without fear or hesitation, and then gave a little prance of delight.

"He's there—I saw 'im," he said, in a kind of solemn ecstasy. "'E has four legs, and he runs fast!"

"What runs fast, my little man?" inquired the stranger, strangely fascinated by the eager, uplifted face, with its big, earnest, blue eyes and fringe of golden hair.

"Dunno. See 'im run," exclaimed the child, and pranced again in the purest delight. The stranger looked into the pool and saw therein a huge crab enjoying himself immensely in its clear depths. He thrust his hand into the ice-cold water and brought up the struggling creature for the closer inspection of the child.

"Did you never see a crab before, little man?" he asked, smiling.

"No," said the child, doubtfully, and slightly drew back, preferring to behold the creature at a safe distance. "Let 'im go; he'll bite."

"Where's your nurse?" asked the stranger, letting the crab fall into the pool with a great splash.

"Ma an' auntie's round there. I runned away," said the child with great glee, and pointed backward in the direction of the further ledge. "They's sittin' and didn't see me runnin'."

"That was clever. What's your name?" asked the stranger, still drawn to the child by a deep, yearning tenderness for which he could not account.

The child took up his pail and spade and looked very inquiringly and rather doubtfully into the stranger's face before he made answer slowly in his sweet, imperfect baby tongue.

"Richard Harry Blake. What's yours?"

What change was that which swept across the stranger's face? and why did he tremble as if he had received a sudden shock? The child looked at him wonderingly, and then turned away, as if in fear, to run back to his mother.

"Where do you live, child?" the stranger asked in a deep, husky voice, so unlike his former pleasant tones that the child shrank still further away.

"We live at g'anpa's, ma and me, but we've come to see Aunt Mary. I like Aunt Mary; so does ma—good-bye, man," he answered, and was about to run off, but the stranger suddenly and swiftly clasped him in his arms, holding him with a grip which hurt.

"And your papa— where is he?"

A slight shade crossed the child's face, and he pointed with his spade across the shining sea. "Papa away—away in a big ship! Ma says he 'll come some day to Harry. *Will* he come, man? Do you know papa?"

Great beads of perspiration stood out upon the stranger's brow, and his eyes were wet with tears. Closer, closer still, he pressed the child to his heaving breast.

"Yes, yes, Harry; some day papa *will* come," he

said, and looked long and hungrily into the child's face, knowing it was the face of his firstborn son. Oh, he might have known ere this, for these eyes were his darling's own, that smile but the reflection of that which had been his own some time long ago!

"Let me go to ma, I'se afraid," said the child, his red lip drooping. "Good-bye, man; let me down."

The stranger pressed a close, passionate kiss upon the child's blue-veined brow, set him to the ground, and turned away. He could not meet her yet; he must needs be alone for a little with the strange, deep, unlooked-for joy—alone with himself and his God, to pour out his soul in thanksgiving to calm himself before the crowning moment came.

He rapidly retraced his steps, and when the child looked back ere he turned the ledge on the other side, he was out of sight.

The two ladies met the little one, and his mother shook her finger in gentle reproach. "Where did you run to, Harry?" she asked. "Come, auntie and I are going home now; it is dinner time."

"I saw a crab, ma, runnin' in the water, an' a funny man took 'im out and hanged him up; such a big, funny one, ma!"

"What was big and funny, Harry, the man or the crab?" asked Aunt Mary, smiling down into the flushed and eager face.

"The crab, auntie; an', ma, the man asked where papa was, an' lifted me up an' kissed me till I cried to get down," continued Harry, eager to tell all his adventures.

A slight shade crossed the sweet face of the fair, young mother, and she pressed the little hand very closely in her own.

"You must not run away from mamma and auntie again, dear, and annoy strange gentlemen," she said gently.

"I didn't 'noy him, ma; he kissed me like g'anpa does, an' letted me see the crab!" said the child in such an aggrieved voice that both the ladies laughed.

"How lovely the sunshine is upon the sea to-day!" said Mary. "It seems like a promise of beauty for all the year."

"Yes; what good you do me, Mary," replied the other. "I came to you so wearied and sad. Life seemed so purposeless, the world so full of shadows without sunshine, and though this is my first morning at Merlin, I feel like a new creature."

"It is our lovely sea air," replied Mary, with her sweet and happy smile. "Life can never be purposeless to you, dear Frances, while Harry is spared to you."

"You are right; only at times there comes upon me a sense of such weakness, such powerlessness, that I feel as if the responsibility of his upbringing would be too much for me. It is a terrible thing to be a mother, Mary; doubly so to be a *desolate* one like me, without one to turn to for help and guidance."

"You are not alone, dearest; you know who is the Father of the fatherless, as well as the Husband of the widow."

"Without that assurance, Mary, believe me,

I should be in despair. God has indeed been to me a help in time of trouble."

"He is and will be to all who ask Him; blessed be His name!" was Mary's low and reverent answer, and they walked on for a little in silence.

"Some day very soon, my darling, you will be able to lean on your son's strong arm," she said, with a sunny smile, when they paused for a moment at the garden gate; "and in his love and care all the weariness of these days will be forgotten."

"Yes, and when I have lived to see my boy grown to manhood and he no longer needs me, I will close my eyes on earth some night and open them in heaven. And then I shall tell his father there how I have striven to do my duty by our son, and what a joy that will be!" said Frances dreamily; and then she added very softly, as they turned to go in, "There will be no divided houses there; only unity and love for evermore." Later in the afternoon, while his mother was lying down to rest for a little and Aunt Mary was writing letters in her own sanctum, little Harry contentedly played alone in auntie's pleasant garden where the mild and genial weather had tempted some sturdy flowers into bloom. While he was busily engaged picking these precious blooms to p..ces the garden gate swung on its hinges, and to his surprise he saw the stranger whom he had encountered an hour or two ago upon the sands.

Not many minutes later the door of Aunt Mary's dining-room was unceremoniously thrown open, and Harry's shrill tones awoke his mother from her slumber.

"Ma, ma, here's papa! The ship's comed from 'way over the seas! an' he's the funny man that showed me the crab this morning, ma. Here he is!"

Frances Blake flung aside the rug which covered her and started to her feet. Her face was deadly pale, her eyes dilated with surprise and dread. Could it be? Ay, thank God, her husband stood upon the threshold of the door with Harry's arms about his neck, his cheek pressed close to his father's bronzed and bearded face; and there was room for her! Aunt Mary, hearing the unusual noise, hurried downstairs. She only looked into the dining-room, then softly closed the door, turned away and burst into tears. For Richard Blake was there in the flesh, with his strong arms about his wife and child; the brown curls, now sadly streaked with grey, mingling with the golden ones; and there was that strange, solemn sound, the sobbing of a strong man to be heard in the room. They had no need of her—and she thanked God that it was so. Truest, most faithful, tenderest friend though she had been and was to them all, they had no need of Mary Osborne now. And she stole away weeping, yet thanking God that it was so. It was a blessed sight. Father, mother, and child, one in heart and love, to be parted nevermore until death claims one or other, and the river rolls between for a little while—at the longest only for a little while—and then the blessedness of that heavenly house which is eternal as God Himself.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BLESSED HOURS.

Life is only bright when it proceedeth
Towards a deeper, truer life above:
Human love is sweetest when it leadeth
To a more Divine and perfect love.
Adelaide Proctor.

TO keep herself calm Mary bustled about the house, saw that a fire was lighted in the drawing-room, and when the tea-tray was carried in she stole softly to the dining-room door and sought admittance. Harry opened it; and she stepped somewhat hesitatingly into the room.

"I thought I might come now, Cousin Richard," she said in tones which her great joy made very tremulous.

Then Richard Blake stepped from his wife's side and took his cousin in his arms.

"May God bless you, Cousin Mary, for your goodness to me and to my darling!" he said, very

huskily. "I—I cannot say any more; but I think you know——"

Mary nodded, smiling sunnily through her tears, and then turned to kiss Frances. Oh the change upon that lovely face! the glow and radiance which shone upon it! The light in the beautiful eyes was wonderful to see. Surely Frances Blake had never been so beautiful as now.

"I don't want to ask any questions, Cousin Richard; you are here, that is enough," said Mary. "But come away into the drawing-room, where tea has been carried in and where the lamps have been lighted, so that we may look at you, for the fire is out here and the room is very cold."

"We don't need no fires now papa's come Aunt Mary," quoth Harry philosophically; and his father took him in his arms again, and Frances rose and came close to him, and her fingers touched his arm. Those of us who have been long parted from those dear to us know something of her feelings. It required touch to reassure her that her husband was indeed with her once more.

It was a beautiful picture in the drawing-room a little later—Richard and his wife sitting side by side on an ottoman and Harry on his father's knee, while Aunt Mary sat behind the tea-tray beaming upon them with all the love of her happy heart.

"You are a little changed, Richard," she said, as she handed him his cup; and if her hand still trembled a little it was only natural. "Do you find any difference in us?"

"I have grown old and grey, as my wife told me not many minutes ago," smiled Richard Blake.

"You are not changed, Mary; only you look younger; but Frances is not the same."

"No, I have grown old too," whispered Frances. "See my hair, Richard, is greyer than yours."

"So we are quits, my darling," said Richard in the lightness of his heart. "I did not mean that you had changed in that way, but something very different." He did not say then what she would hear often by-and-by, that she was ten thousand times fairer in his eyes than she had ever been before.

"You would go to Bingham Street, Richard?" said Mary at length in quieter tones.

He nodded.

"The changes there well-nigh overwhelmed me, Mary. Tell me of my mother."

Mary leaned her head on her hand for a little, and then began to speak in low, full tones which told of deep emotion.

"After you went away, Richard, Aunt Sara began to droop. There seemed nothing seriously wrong, only a lack of heart, a kind of listlessness, which grieved and troubled me very much. Your letters did her good, but after they ceased she seemed to lose all interest in life."

Richard Blake winced and slightly shaded his eyes with his hand. His wife's fingers stole about the other hand as if to comfort him in his sorrow of self-reproach.

"I would spare you, dear Richard, if I could," continued Mary very gently; "but oh! Aunt Sara *did* feel your silence, and concluded at once that you were dead. I did my best to cheer her,

and tried to make her hope with me that it was only circumstances which prevented you from writing regularly; but it was no good. You remember of yore how easily she was cast down, and how prone to look always at the darkest side. We tried everything for her. We came down here, Frances and baby and I, hoping that the Merlin air would infuse new life into her; but though she revived for a little she sank again when we returned to town. It was very early in the year when the end came. It was a gentle and happy end," continued Mary after a brief pause. "I never saw anything so beautiful as the way in which the mists of doubt and unsatisfied longings were cleared away from Aunt Sara's soul. It was just as if a bright light from heaven shone down and dispelled them all. When it came very near the end, the idea of your death seemed to pass away from her, and one of the last sentences she spoke was a message for you. 'Tell my boy when he comes home, Mary, that though I found his silence hard to understand and hard to bear here, I will know all about it there; and that my last thoughts were all of love for him, and his wife, and little son.' So she died, and we buried her beside Uncle Christopher at Highgate Cemetery. It was very lonely for a time (and now there was a half-sob in the gentle voice), and the loneliness grew upon me so that I could not bear it. I was lost in the big house in Bingham Street, so after long thought I let it and came down here, where I keep a little school, Richard, which has been a great pleasure to me, and which has been quite a success—has it not, Frances? But I have

all Aunt Sara's things about me, Richard, as you must see. I have kept everything safe for you, always hoping you would come back; and here you are at last."

There was a brief silence, and still Richard Blake kept his face shaded with his hand. There was an alloy in the happiness of his home-coming, but are not our keenest joys ofttimes touched with pain? Well that it should be, else we should find contentment of soul on earth instead of in heaven, where only true contentment dwells.

"I am not worthy to be forgiven for the wrong I have done," he said in a low voice. "I do not deserve any welcome home; but——"

He said no more, for his wife's hand was on his lips.

"No more, Richard," she whispered. "We are waiting to hear of your life across the sea. Remember how little we know about it, and how we must wonder over the mystery of your coming."

So Richard told his story, dwelling much upon the kindness he had received from the Ingrams, and frankly admitting the part John Ingram's wife had played in the chain of circumstances which had led to this blessed re-union.

"God bless her!" fell low and gratefully from the lips of Frances Blake. "Some day I shall be able to thank her, but not yet."

"Some day very soon, my darling; she is waiting for your coming," said Richard. "Although new friends can never match the old, they can be very dear; and we can never forget that but for them I might never have come back."

The little Harry, who had been looking most intently into his father's face while he was speaking, now grown tired of what had seemed to him a long and solemn talk, slipped to the floor and requested to be tossed up in the air, which changed the current of conversation to a lighter groove.

"It is time you were in bed, Harry. Come, auntie will take you upstairs," said Mary at length, when the silver chimes proclaimed the hour of seven. The child, trained to immediate and unquestioning obedience, turned to kiss his mother good-night.

"Papa, will you be there in the mornin'?" he queried wistfully, when his father took him again in his arms.

"Yes, my boy; papa has come home to be always beside mamma and Harry—never to go away any more," whispered his father back.

"Dood-night!" said Harry, in a voice of infinite content. "Harry loves papa."

Then the sweet baby-lips kissed papa very lovingly, and Aunt Mary took him away. She knew—oh, very well—what a joy it would be for husband and wife to be left alone a little while, so she lingered long upstairs. When the drawing-room door closed upon them Richard Blake turned again and took his wife to his heart.

"I cannot help it, my darling—my dear, my precious wife," he said, hungrily. "Let me see your face again. Let me read in those eyes that I am forgiven."

Her arm stole about his neck. Her face, uplifted to his, was lit by the rare and exquisite tenderness

of a perfect love. The face was changed indeed. The delicate rounded loveliness was gone from the fair cheek; the mouth had a sad and pitiful droop, which told that not many smiles had played about it; the eyes had that strange, deep, pathetic look in them which only suffering brings. Though the flush of its early beauty was gone there was a wider, deeper charm in the face of Richard Blake's wife, born of the peace which only God's love can implant in a human heart.

"I am so blessed, Richard; my heart is overcharged," she faltered. "My husband, have you really forgiven *me* for all the miserable past? Am I taken to your heart again never to be cast out?"

"Hush, hush! That is not what I would hear. Only tell me my wife, what I can read in your eyes, but what I am hungering to hear, that you do love me a little, and that there is a new life opening up before us which we will walk together, pleasing God till he takes us to Himself."

"Nothing I could ever say, Richard, could express a tithe of what I feel. Only I would tell you here that as I always loved you I love you now. It was pride that came between us. Ay, that very day you went away it crushed back my entreaty that you would take me with you; and I spoke cold words to you even when my heart was breaking for love of you, and you never guessed."

Richard Blake shook his head sadly.

"No; and I would not have believed it until I saw your face to-day. O Frances! what joys

God permits His creatures here. Surely such are a foretaste of heaven."

The golden head drooped upon his protecting arm and the deep eyes had a far-away expression in their depths.

"I want to tell you, dear, that it was craving for your love which led me to that higher love, without which I should have lost heart altogether during these weary years," she said, dreamily. "Just when hope was at its lowest ebb, during these trying and painful days before baby came, I found the Great Comforter, and Mary led me to Him. O Richard, what she has been to me! I cannot speak about it calmly."

"Nor I," said Richard huskily. "If God's angels do visit us here below—and it is not difficult to believe it—she is one."

"How different this peace to which Mary pointed me has made life to me. It has even made me love you more, and it will help me to be a better wife to you, and to make a home for you who have been homeless so long. O my husband! God has been good."

"He has," answered Richard in tones of deep emotion. "Please God, we will live together for Him, and bring up our boy to live and labour for Him too."

A long silence ensued. There was no need of many words between those two now, for each understood and was sufficient to the other. It is such love which makes a heaven of earth to many human hearts. Blessed be His name that it will have its crowning bliss in that happier home of

which the happiest on earth is but a feeble and shadowy type!

"You will cross the sea with me, my darling, this time? It will not be a solitary voyager, setting sail from English shores," said Richard, smiling slightly.

The uplifted face, the clinging touch of the white fingers about his neck, were answer sufficient without the words which followed.

"To the ends of the earth, if need be, with and for you, my husband. I thank God that so much happiness is within my reach!"

"I shall be able to give my wife a home something like that to which she has been accustomed, but——"

Again his wife's hand was on his lips.

"Hush, hush! tell me nothing. I would show you my implicit trust in you, Richard. Take me away with you without telling me to what I am going. I would have you know that the less you have the greater will be my joy to share it with you. Anything, anything to show you *how* I regret the past. So do not tell me any more, my darling, if you please."

"Can I kiss papa again, ma?" queried a shrill voice in the doorway, and a white-robed figure came boldly into the room. "I got out of bed all by myself just to kiss papa."

"O you rogue," Aunt Mary called out laughingly from the stairs; but nobody was angry with the little elf, and he got a great deal of hugging which possibly he did not deserve.

He went away quietly to bed at last, after being

solemnly assured that papa would be there in the morning to take him in search of animals with four legs which could run very fast though they lived under water all the time.

Then the three drew their chairs about the fire and talked till far on in the morning. There was much to be said, many plans to be discussed, and the future was bright with promise for them all; for Mary gave her promise that henceforth her home would be with them. There would be room in heart and home for ever for Aunt Mary now.

But God had need of Aunt Mary in another way, and she was destined yet to bless many other lives in a wider, larger, and happier sphere.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AUNT MARY'S SPHERE.

"'Tis love which makes the world go round."—*Old Song.*

ICK, old fellow, give me your hand. Oh, I say, it 's more than jolly to see you again."

Needless to say the words were Harry Kendal's; needless to add, perhaps, that the voice which uttered them was tremulous with emotion, the eyes which looked into Richard Blake's dim with tears. We know of yore that warm heart. Regardless of his mother's sternly expressed displeasure, careless of the seeming disrespect to her aristocratic guests, Dr. Harry had set off for Merlin on the second morning after Richard's visit to the Hall. He carried his father's approval with him, however, and a word of kindly greeting from him to Richard, which Harry did not fail to deliver. The friends were at the garden gate of Sunset House, just when Richard was on his way with his little son to hunt for crabs among

the rocks. In spite of small Harry's delight at seeing his much-loved uncle, he would not let go his father's hand, nor leave his side, even when the new-comer tempted him with a real genuine toss in the air. Richard Blake's eyes were suspiciously dim also as he returned the grip of his old friend's hand, and for a moment he did not speak. At such times words are difficult to come, and they are not always needed. Silence *is* golden when we understand and feel its hidden meaning.

"I can hardly believe it is you, Dick, in the flesh," said Harry joyously, and with all the old boyish heartiness. "And how is Fan? All right now, eh? Well, young man, what do you think of your new relative, eh?" he added to his small nephew, for he saw that Richard had no words wherewith to answer his jesting speech about Frances.

"Papa's never goin' away no more, Uncle Harry," said young Harry Blake with confidence. "Ma an' me's goin' 'way in a big ship with him."

"That'll suit you, eh? Well, Dick, wasn't the existence of the son and heir rather a surprise to you, and is not he a noble little chap?"

"Ay, I have more blessings than I deserve, Harry," answered Richard Blake, and his fingers tightened over the baby-hand clinging so confidingly to his.

"Well, shall we go in and see the ladies?" asked Harry in his gay and pleasant way. "And remember I have all your adventures to hear, and I am charged with a message from my father that we are all to return to the Hall as fast as we can; and Uncle Ellesmere sent a special message to you

and Frances that if he was away before you came (they leave to-morrow, I believe) you were to come to Ellesmere. He 's a good sort the Earl, Dick, and he was always jolly fond of our Fan."

"Ay, they are all too good to me, Harry," said Richard Blake in low, earnest tones, for his heart was stirred yet to its very depths. "You will be glad to hear, my boy, that all the mists are cleared away now, and that my wife loves me still. You always knew *I* loved *her*, Harry, although I have given so little proof of it these last few years! She has forgiven me; will you?"

"Oh, I say, Dick, that 'll do! There can't be any of that kind of thing between you and me, you know. I can't stand it," said Harry, and then they began to move towards the house. The door was open, so they walked into the drawing-room, and there were more happy greetings, which were rather irksome to Master Harry, whose soul was yearning to watch the gambols of the crab in the shining little pool among the rocks. "This has renewed your youth, Fan," said Harry teasingly as he fondly kissed his sister; then he turned to greet the woman whose sweet face was still the dearest on earth to him.

"I think this was all we needed to-day, Mr. Kendal; we thought you would come," she said, and her gentle eyes were brimming welcome. "Need I say how glad I am to see you?"

When they had seated themselves, and the first excitement was over, he had time to note the change in Mary Osborne, for there was a change. It was not even that she had aged in appearance since he

saw her last, it was the expression of care, the weariness which seemed to dwell in the sweet pathetic eyes, telling of a lonely, toilsome life—that expression seen only in the faces of the burden-bearers of this life. Yet she did not look unhappy, nor did she feel unhappy. She had many claims upon her love in the young lives entrusted to her care, her busy hands were ever full of labours for others, and yet at times there did steal over her an overwhelming sense of loneliness, for while she cared for many few cared for her. We get tired of constant giving, and the human heart, especially the heart of a woman, hungers for love to meet its own. It is that which makes many single lives so beautifully pathetic, because of necessity they must be lonely. We cannot entrust the secrets and the yearnings of our innermost being to any save God and one other.

Mary, looking at the face of Harry Blake, fancied him changed also. He had grown manlier, more dignified and noble-looking, as befitted his honourable profession. But the kind, merry smile was as of yore; the true, quick, yet earnest eye unchanged. It dwelt so constantly, so yearningly on her face that, growing embarrassed a little at last, she rose smilingly and bade them entertain each other while she looked after her household duties.

It was like old times come back to these reunited hearts; but the new was sweeter and brighter than the old, for the star of love shone above them unmarred by even a passing cloud. It was easy to persuade Doctor Harry to remain at Merlin till the morrow; and there was no happier dinner table

in all England than that in the dining-room at Sunset House.

After Harry the younger was in bed, they stole out for a peep at the sea by the light of the Christmas moon and stars, which shone in a cloudless sky. The night was one of rare beauty and peace. There was no wintry chill in the pleasant air, and upon the sandy shore the waves played with a murmuring cadence gently as in the golden eventide of summer. A wondrous light rippled upon the bosom of the waters—that radiance whose sheen cannot be pictured, for what brush or pen can reproduce the glory of moonlight on the sea? They grew silent as they walked slowly by the edge of the receding tide, and it seemed quite natural at last that they should walk in pairs, Richard in front with his wife upon his arm, her hands clasped closely in his, the hearts of both too full of happiness for speech—a word at a time, an upward or downward glance, a closer pressure of the hand was sufficient. The other two coming leisurely behind talked much and on many topics. Mary seemed to dread even a moment's silence. She was not herself to-night. Doubtless the events of the last two days, exciting and heart-stirring as they had been, had crowded in upon her, ruffling slightly her usual serenity of repose. But was there not something else—a flutter of the heart and pulse, a restlessness, a vague something difficult to describe, which had stolen upon her only to-day?

"So Frances and the little chap are to desert us all," said Harry, striving to speak lightly; "they will be missed at home."

"Yes; but they would be more sorely missed over the seas," said Mary, "and whose is the best right?"

"Dick's, of course, dear old fellow. I'm jolly glad it's all right for him at last! Frances has turned over a new leaf with a vengeance. She is a daily wonder to me now. She was so different in the old days. She is a beautiful character now! Isn't it Shakespeare, wise old fellow, who says, 'Sweet are the uses of adversity'?"

"Yes; seeing them now, their perfect happiness and trust in each other, Harry," said Mary, the old name slipping out in her earnestness, "we cannot regret even the sorrow which went before. Nothing could have brought all this blessedness about but this long separation."

"You are right. But I say, Mary, what are you going to do after they're away? You'll have nobody, as it were," asked Doctor Harry suddenly.

"Richard and Frances have asked, nay pleaded with me, out of their love for me, to make my home with them," said Mary, with a half sob in her voice.

"My work here seems to be done now, and I could not refuse, even had I wished."

"You don't mean to say you're going to Africa?"

Mary nodded.

"Where they go I go; I have promised," she answered simply.

Then followed an awkward silence, and Doctor Kendal's handsome head was turned away. Perhaps it was the shadow of the cliffs which lay so darkly on his face, and quenched the light in his sunny eyes.

"How do you like your Edinburgh life?" his companion asked.

"Not at all," he answered, in a voice which sounded harsh. "I love my work, of course, and I have plenty of it; but there it ends. I think I'll emigrate, too, and teach the rudiments of medicine to the natives of some unexplored region."

"You talk nonsense. I hear you spoken of as one who will make his mark in his profession. Why can't——"

"Oh, hang it, what's the use of all that, you know, when nobody cares?" cried Doctor Harry with more force than elegance. "No women folk to take any interest in what a fellow's doing. When Fan's away, goodness only knows what I'll do—lose interest in it myself probably."

"You will not do that, Harry; you are made of better stuff," said Mary, and now her face was turned away. It was a study at that moment, and —but we will not pry into the secrets of that gentle heart.

"I say, Mary, what are you going to do in Kimberley? Don't you know you'll just turn into the old maid aunt, useful for everything."

"It is a great thing to be useful or necessary to anybody," said Mary, with a little laugh.

"Is it? Well, you are very necessary to me, only you won't see it. I say, Mary, I must speak again. Just let me lay it before you. Here am I alone in Edinburgh, a miserable neglected bachelor with nobody to take an interest in. You are alone in the world, and though Dick and Fan want you, and well they may, they don't really want you as

I do. I 'm growing to be a rich man, Mary, and I love you a thousand times better now than I did then, because I am a man now and I was only a boy then. Take pity on me, Mary. Let me take care of you. Let me try to make you happy. You have been caring for people all your life, and you look as if you wanted looking after now. My darling (I often call you so in my own mind, though I have no right), let me do it. I will try very hard to make you happy."

Again there was a silence, and involuntarily both stood still. Mary's face was turned away still towards the sea. Its expression had changed again, but it was unreadable now.

"If I have hurt or pained you, my darling, forgive me. I was always a blundering creature, saying the wrong thing in the wrong place," said Harry, with humble earnestness. Then the slender figure moved nearer to him, nearer still until the brown head dropped upon his arm. It was characteristic of the woman, who had allowed her actions rather than her lips to speak all her life. He knew the meaning of that mute caress, knew that she had given herself to him, though it seemed a thing almost impossible to believe. "Mary, is it possible, my darling, are you mine?"

She moved nearer still to him till he took her to his heart. No more loneliness nor heartache, no more emptiness of life or purpose; only the blessedness, and beauty, and glory of a pure, noble, unselfish love.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IT IS WELL!

THE Earl and Countess changed their plans, and remained at Kendal Hall to welcome the happy party from Merlin-on-Sea. But they were the only strangers, for Mrs. Kendal, not wishing to have any prying eyes upon such a family gathering, did not press her other guests to prolong their stay on Christmas week. At her husband's request she wrote to Mary Osborne and asked her to accompany Frances and her husband to Sutton, but when she did so she had no idea that she was addressing her son's promised wife. On the last day of the old year the party from Merlin arrived at the Kentish village. Harry made one of them, for he had put up at the Merlin Hotel, and insisted on remaining until they could all return together. A carriage met them at the station, and as they drove rapidly along the bare, shelterless roads, a silence fell upon them only broken by little Harry's chatter and exclamations of delight at the near prospect of

seeing grandpa and all the horses and cows and poultry which were his soul's delight. His father was quick to note how seldom the child mentioned his grandmother's name, his loving prattle was all of the dear, kind, indulgent Squire, who only showed the depth of his love for his little grandson when his wife was not there to see. There is no keener sifter of human nature, no more correct judge of character than the heart of a little child. Richard Blake, though quiet, was perfectly at his ease as they neared the gates of Kendal Hall. If the meeting just at hand was anything of an ordeal he was made fearless to face it by the look of perfect trust on the sweet face by his side. Had this love and trust been his before, as truly and indisputably it was his now, what trouble might have been spared them both? But, after all, is not the clearer air of the heights more soul-satisfying after the shadows in the vale? Oftentimes in this life of ours happiness has to be washed pure by tears.

The Squire, restlessly watching from the library window, saw the carriage sweep round the bend in the avenue, and came out to the door to welcome them. In his heart of hearts there had dwelt continually a feeling of remorse for those bitter words he had spoken to his daughter's husband before he left England. He had tried to atone for it by his tenderness to his daughter, by heaping kindnesses upon the little lad, and there were documents safe in the hands of his London lawyers, and of which his wife knew nothing, which, in the event of his death, left mother and child amply provided for. There were tears in his eyes when the carriage

stopped and he saw his daughter's face. Richard sprang out, assisted his wife, and then turned to the Squire. The eyes of the two men looked straight into each other, and their hands met.

"Richard, I'm glad to see you safe and sound; you are welcome home," said the old man huskily.

"Thank you, sir," was all that Richard replied; but it was enough. The emotion of the greeting was somewhat dispelled by little Harry springing unceremoniously into the Squire's arms and deluging him with hugs and kisses and innumerable questions concerning the live stock at the farm. With the little one in his arms the Squire turned to utter a word of kindly welcome to the slight graceful figure standing rather timidly by Harry's side.

"God bless you, my dear, for all your goodness to the boy and his mother," he said, and kissed her as if she had been a daughter of his own. Then they entered the house, and Mary was somewhat startled by the magnificence of her friend's paternal home, and she no longer marvelled that Frances had not found it easy to fit herself to her homelier position as Richard's wife.

"Your mother is in the drawing-room, my dear," said the Squire. "Frances, we had better just go in. There's only your Uncle and Aunt Ellesmere besides ourselves, so we needn't stand on ceremony."

They entered the room and the stately figure of Mrs. Kendal came slowly to meet them. Her eyes travelled over her son-in-law's face and figure before she offered him her hand. As she did so, her

face visibly softened, and it was no icy finger tips which touched his this time, but a warm and kindly clasp, which told that she was genuinely glad to see him.

"Welcome back to England, Richard," she said, heartily, and, moved by a sudden impulse, Richard stooped from his tall height and touched with his lips the brow of Frances' mother. Then he turned to receive the true welcome of the kind-hearted pair who had withdrawn over to the window recess, not caring to intrude till the first greetings were over. In her new kindliness Mrs. Kendal had a warm and pleasant welcome too for Mary Osborne, and she looked at her approvingly, thinking her not only an exceedingly graceful and lady-like, but a very pretty woman.

The dinner that evening was a very pleasant meal, because the spirit of loving-kindness presided at the board. The old Earl would nod, in a very satisfied manner, every time his eyes rested on the face of his favourite niece, and that was very often indeed. It was all right with her now. She wore grey, an exquisite combination of silk and lace, and a great bunch of Christmas roses resting among the glossy leaves at her throat. She wore no ornament; no article of jewellery but her wedding-ring.

Richard, in his faultless evening attire, looked every inch a gentleman, and they were a handsome well-matched pair. Mary, too, looked rarely well. Her dress was a mourning silk, with delicate lace at throat and wrists; her ornaments a necklace of jet, set with pearls. Harry found it difficult to

conceal his fond admiration for her, and yet he did not wish to draw any attention to her until his parents were made aware that she was his future wife. After the ladies went upstairs the Squire broached the subject nearest his heart.

"Of course you are not going abroad again, Richard. You 've come back to the old country for good," he said, peering rather anxiously over his wine glass into his son-in-law's face.

Richard smiled, but slightly shook his head. "I only got leave of absence from my partner for four months, sir. I hope and expect to be back to business in April at the latest."

The Squire looked annoyed.

"Tut, tut! But you can write saying you prefer to settle here; or you could even go out and settle with your partner, leaving your wife here," he said quickly. Richard again shook his head very decidedly.

"I shall never leave my wife behind again, Squire Kendal," he said very gravely.

"But I say, look here, Richard,—you can't, you know, take Frances away to a place where there 's no society—hardly a white woman. It wouldn't be right."

"Mrs. Ingram, the wife of my partner, is a gentlewoman, sir, the very friend I would choose for my wife. And there are others in Kimberley as suitable. There is no lack of society for those who care for it," replied Richard, quietly.

"What kind of business are you engaged in?" inquired the Earl with interest. Richard smiled.

"It would be difficult to specify, Lord Ellesmere,

we trade in so many different things. General merchants would perhaps be the most applicable term. Business in Africa and business in England are very different things."

"Does the thing pay?" asked the Squire.

"Yes, my partner's income last year was three thousand pounds—mine about half of that. But I am on a different footing this year, and we share exactly alike. I believe I am safe in saying the entire profits of the business are not under five thousand."

"That's something like the thing, Dick!" said Doctor Harry, cracking his walnuts with real enjoyment.

"Fortunes can be quickly amassed in Kimberley surely," said the Squire a trifle drily.

"Sometimes. For one who hits the mark, fifty miss, and more do not get beyond making a decent livelihood. My partner has been a singularly fortunate man, and when my experience was coupled with his, we made a good thing of it, that is all, sir," said Richard.

"Then you are bent on not staying in England," repeated the Squire.

"Yes, even if it were doing a fair and just thing to my partner who befriended me in my need, I have no inclination to remain at present. My intention is to settle in Kimberley for a few years, that is if my wife's health and my own does not fail, until I have made a handsome competence. Then I shall return to the old country and perhaps embark in English commerce again, or perhaps begin the life of a country gentleman."

He spoke quietly, but with the perfect confidence of a man who knew what he was talking about. The Squire heaved a resigned sigh.

"What does Frances say to all this?"

A sunny smile shone through the gravity of Richard's face.

"Ask her," he said. "We both discovered when it was too late that it is best for a husband and wife to be together whatever betide. We shall not likely make the same mistake again."

"Right, quite right," said the Earl's deep bass voice heartily. "You are a manly fellow! I like you, Blake. I have always liked you, and I told your dear wife that just the other day, when it was the darkest hour with her. Your hand—you must come with your wife and that fine little lad of yours to Ellesmere and spend a week before you go."

The Squire had no more to say. Perhaps he remembered only too well how he had stood aloof from his son-in-law when the crash came; how he had almost closed his door against him. And he could not but admire the manliness which Richard displayed now. He had been weak and erring once, but that time was passed. Henceforth, honour would be his watchword, love his beacon light, and he was independent of all the world. Another interesting and momentous conversation took place that night at Kendal Hall in the drawing-room when all the guests had retired to rest and Doctor Harry was alone with his father and mother. He asked them to remain, for he could not bear that Mary Osborne should continue in his father's

house under false pretences. In a brief and manly fashion he told his love. It was his mother's anger he feared, but for once he was agreeably disappointed. Perhaps she had long since suspected it, and made up her mind to the inevitable, or perhaps the atmosphere of love and peace about her that night had awakened all the kindest impulses of her heart.

"She is a sweet, pretty girl, Harry, and I am quite pleased," she said; and if there was a tinge of condescension in her graciousness, he could not resent it in his gratitude that she conceded so much.

Mary was awakened next morning by some one drawing up the blinds, and presently she was amazed to see standing by her bed the figure of her hostess.

"Have I disturbed you, my dear?" she said very pleasantly. "But it is time you were up. I just came in because I wished a quiet word with you before you came downstairs. Harry has told us; and the Squire and I are very pleased to welcome you as our daughter. I wish you a Happy New Year!" So saying, she stooped and kissed the sweet face on the pillow, and Mary put her arms about her neck and laid her cheek to hers, but could speak no word. The last cloud had vanished from her heart, and it was a happy new year indeed. Fain would I linger longer in that happy home, but my task is almost done. Only one thing more, and I must leave these friends who have grown doubly dear to me since I began the record of their lives. Richard and Frances, eager to see Harry

and Mary husband and wife before they set sail for that far shore, were urgent for an early marriage. There was no reason why their desire should not be fulfilled.

So one morning in the latter days of February, when the earth was awakening to the touch of spring, there was a quiet wedding in Sutton Church, which created a great deal of interest in the small and rather gossipy town. The busybodies concluded that the bride looked lovely though she *was* nobody, also that they did not know which was the handsomest pair, for it seemed to Richard and his wife that this was almost a second wedding-day to them.

They travelled north to receive the bride and bridegroom in their own home, and there abode a little while, rejoicing in the happiness which equalled their own. The promised week was spent at Ellesmere, and then during the last days of their English sojourn the Squire and his wife claimed them.

In the last week of March the same ship which had carried Richard across the seas and brought him back again numbered their names upon its list of passengers. Little Harry was highly delighted at the prospect of sailing away in the big ship with papa and mamma, but he cried lustily when the little boat with grandpapa and grandmamma and Uncle Harry and Aunt Mary was rowed away back to the shore. His were not the only tears. And though the husband and wife were sufficient now each to the other, there was room in their hearts for other loves. We can

always love more; often we love too little. We will not follow them to their new home. We can imagine their voyage, picture the welcomes accorded by true friends on the other side. We can even picture their future life. It was well with them, for God was with them.